

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

SYBIL BARTEL

KILO

THE ALPHA ELITE SERIES

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Warning: This book contains offensive language, alpha males and sexual situations. Mature audiences only. 18+

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The Alpha Elite Series

SEAL

ALPHA

VICTOR

ROMEO

ZULU

NOVEMBER

ECHO

WHISKEY

DELTA

KILO

GHOST

BLADE

The Alpha Bodyguard Series

SCANDALOUS

MERCILESS

RECKLESS

RUTHLESS

FEARLESS

CALLOUS

RELENTLESS

SHAMELESS

HEARTLESS

The Uncompromising Alphas Series

TALON

NEIL

ANDRÉ

BENNETT

CALLAN

The Alpha Antihero Series

HARD LIMIT

HARD JUSTICE

HARD SIN

HARD TRUTH

The Alpha Escort Series

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GRIND

The Unchecked Series

IMPOSSIBLE PROMISE

IMPOSSIBLE CHOICE

IMPOSSIBLE END

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KILO

Breacher.

Navy SEAL.

Mercenary.

Being a breacher on the Teams wasn't a job, it was my drug of choice. Detonating charges, the blast waves going through me, I lived for the rush of tactical explosive breaching. As long as I kept my brothers safe and didn't eat a piece of frag, I never looked past my next mission... until I screwed up.

Miscalculating a blast zone, I took a hit. Then I was benched from active duty, told I'd taken one too many subconcussive blows, and forced into medical retirement.

Except the Navy wasn't the only home for an explosives expert. Alpha Elite Security took me in, and I got to keep my addiction—right until a mysterious redhead walked into my blast zone, and suddenly, I needed a new fix.

Code name: Kilo.

Mission: Detonate.

DEDICATION

For my only child, my beloved son, Oliver.
You were my greatest gift. The world was a better place with
you in it.

Everything in my life was better because of you.
Thank you for teaching me unconditional love, perseverance,
and compassion.

You are and will *always* be my entire world.
I love you, Sweet Boy, and I miss you beyond measure.

[Oliver Shane Bartel 2004–2020](#)

For my readers, thank you so very much for all of your love
and support.

Gratefully yours, XOXO

PROLOGUE

Five Years Ago.

Humming with excitement, I stepped onto the old lift and pulled the grate door shut.

This was it.

It was finally happening. My own show.

My own show.

Smiling wide, I shoved the heavy metal doors open when the rusted elevator stopped on the sixth floor and practically bounced into the cavernous loft. “Ben!”

Met with only street sounds that leaked through the drafty single-pane windows, the familiar scents of turpentine, oil paint and processing chemicals, along with a hint of garlic from the pasta sauce I’d made last night, surrounded me.

I called again. “Ben?”

No answer.

Untwisting my scarf and shrugging out of my coat, I dumped them on the threadbare couch as I scanned from one end of the ten-thousand-square-foot Greenwich Village loft to the other. “Are you home?” Ben knew what today was. He’d said he’d be waiting for me when I got back. Reaching into my tote bag to search for my cell, I was about to call out one more time when he finally replied.

“Over here, Liese.”

Turning toward the short end of the L-shaped loft where the darkroom and storage for our supplies were, I rounded the

only corner we had in the space besides the enclosed bathroom.

Then I stopped short.

On his knees, arms spread wide, with dozens of his prints on the floor behind him in a semicircle, Ben held his unremittingly sullen expression. “Marry me.”

Every ounce of excitement and accomplishment I’d had only moments ago swept away as resentment hit me like an electrostatic discharge striking a lightning rod. “What are you doing?”

He indicated the photos behind him. “You’re my muse. I need you.” He held his palms up dramatically. “You need me.”

“Today,” I barely managed to say. Of all days. “You’re doing this now?” Doing it at all? “With all those pictures you told me you would never show anyone?” I should’ve seen this coming.

“You know what I mean to you, and you’re lucky to have gotten behind my lens.”

What *he* meant to *me*? *Lucky*? “Do I?” Did I? Because luck was never a word I used. It wasn’t even a color on my palette. I didn’t even see colors right now. Not the bright ones I used to paint a version of life. All I saw was ugliness and my own stupidity. How had I been so willfully blind? How had I never seen the breadth of his manipulation before this very moment? Was I that desperate?

His severe features turned dangerously close to the incensed expression that came right before his petulant temper exploded—explosions he always blamed on me, telling me if it weren’t for my neediness, he wouldn’t have to be so forcible, so dominant. “You’re questioning everything I’ve done for you? What I’m doing for you *now*?” Grabbing the silver initial L pendant that he’d bought for himself that hung from a long chain around his neck, he held it toward me. “You think I wear this letter for *myself*?”

Bravery I’d never had with him before today came with the heavy price of clarity. “Yes, I do. And yes, I’m questioning

it now.” Today. This very moment. The day I’d finally gotten my own show. The day all the years of my hard work, dedication, and perseverance had finally, *finally* come to fruition. A day he was making about himself.

Like he did every day.

Like he always had.

And like I’d always put up with.

Calculated and slow for intimidation, the man who’d preyed on my vulnerabilities under the guise of love rose as he kept his warning glare on me. “Do you actually think the weak little pathetic submissive we both know you are would be *anything* without me?” He took a step toward me as the metamorphosis from sullen arrogance to irrational, unpredictable anger unfolded before my eyes. “Do you think you would even *have* a show without me?”

Fear and insecurity he’d carefully cultivated gripped my throat as I tried to swallow down a flare of the steady diet of choking doubt he’d fed me since the day we met. Doubt I’d allowed him to foster with one horribly passive decision after another because deep down a part of me thought he was right.

I’d always had this... need.

I didn’t want it. I didn’t think it was normal. I didn’t think I deserved to feed it.

But he had.

In what I was now realizing was my single weakest moment, I’d whispered my greatest desire. Then he’d taken the deepest, most private part of me, and he’d fed it with cruelty.

Now I was here.

In an untenable situation I’d put myself in, and had been putting myself in for so long that I hadn’t seen it until this very moment. Now the proverbial curtain had been yanked back, and the reality of my poor choices were crashing down around me, but they weren’t alone. The bloom of defiance, sprouted from the seed of anger, rose, and for once, I didn’t back down.

I pushed.

“Yes, I would have my own show.” One way or another, I would’ve made it happen. Because that was who I was, or who I had been before I’d allowed this man, with his abuse and erratic behavior, to belittle me into nothing more than a shell of a being who kowtowed to his every whim of insanity. Not that he’d ever see himself as insane, because he thought absolutely everything about him.

His derisive sound of arrogance that only confirmed my thoughts was the same one I’d encountered the first time we’d met. The great Professor Montgomery. Feared and revered by every young, pretty, single artist desperate to *make it*.

Benjamin Arden Montgomery.

The *famous* photographer.

The Parsons professor of photography.

Benjamin Arden Montgomery, the manipulative, conniving has-been who hadn’t had a show of his own in over a decade.

Superior and threatening, his tall, malnourished frame fueled by coffee, drugs and alcohol, he slowly strode toward me and stopped inches from my boots. Towering over me, he looked down past his overgrown beard and gave me his washed-out, blue-eyed, condescending gaze. “Who the hell do you think got you into Parsons?”

My stomach bottomed out.

Two years ago, in a last-minute switch, I’d had my MFA admission interview reassigned. Instead of the faculty member who was a brilliant painter that I’d been scheduled to interview with, I’d gotten Ben, and now I wondered. I wondered if our entire relationship had been one big manipulation on his part this whole time.

Staring at me now as he had in that interview, he looked at me the same way he had when he’d ordered me to take off my clothes and pose for his pictures. His self-proclaimed avant-garde art.

Except it wasn't avant-garde.

It was boudoir portraiture at best, a twisted game at worst, and one hundred percent exploitation.

And two years ago, I'd stupidly, naively misread his intense focus as the dominant, consuming attention I'd so desperately, secretly desired. A desire I'd kept locked up tight until I was naked on this same concrete floor, legs spread, as he stood over me with his camera and told me to *open up*.

The memory assaulted me, and bile rose.

"Good, good." The flash on his camera went off twice. "Spread your legs wider. Lift one knee."

Gnawing unease churned. "Who are you going to show these to?" He'd said he would blur my face out, that it'd only interfere with his vision anyway.

"No one if you can't get the pose right. Lift that knee closer to your chest." Shirtless, his jeans barely hanging on his hips, the lines of his ribs showed more than mine. "That's it. Better."

Inhaling, I inched my thigh closer to my chest. "You didn't answer my question."

Lowering his camera, he gave me a stern expression. "Do you want to be beautiful?"

All humans were beautiful. But not like this. I said nothing.

He nodded slowly. "I see." He took a picture without looking through the lens. "I think you do want to be beautiful. I think you want men to desire you. You wanted me to desire you. But you don't know how to be sexual. You don't know how to entice."

Embarrassment flamed my cheeks, and I crossed my arms protectively over my breasts as I closed my legs. Remembering every uncomfortable second of last night as he'd told me to ride him like I meant it, I suddenly wanted my clothes back.

"That's what I'm talking about." He snapped another picture. "You're inexperienced." He frowned. "I could possibly work with this, but you're going to have to stop

wasting my time and feigning this shy act. You want me? You need to work for it.”

My throat burned. “How?”

“Open up.” He kicked my feet apart. “Spread those legs.”

Nausea burned, and I let my knees fall open.

“Wider,” he demanded, bringing the camera back up to his face. “Grab your breasts and tell me your darkest sexual fantasy. Whisper it like I’m fucking you.”

The burn turned into a fire in my chest, and the deepest part of me that I’d kept hidden my entire life rasped past my lips in a humiliating rush. “I want to be dominated.”

The camera flashed.

The past became the present, and same as I had back then, I misread everything.

Every glaring red flag, every self-serving coercive tactic, every cruel adjective he’d called me, everything I’d idiotically overlooked was staring down at me with nothing more than narcissism.

Gathering the surging storm of anger and focusing it into a pinpoint, I looked up at the weak excuse of a man I’d given two years of my life to. The man I had been living with for the past year after he’d begged me to move in. Begging that I’d stupidly mistaken for love and affection.

Then it’d been twelve long months of being used, gaslit, controlled, and verbally abused with threats to keep our relationship a secret, all the while demanding I fuck him, suck him and make him come multiple times a day without ever reciprocating. If I asked, he’d call me desperate, weak or needy. Then he’d mutter threats about kicking me out, saying I didn’t deserve to be in the master’s program, that my art was as weak as I was.

And now he thought he could get down on his knees and demand I marry him?

On the very day I’d gotten a prestigious showing of my own.

No.

Non.

Silently taking back every wasted ego-stroking word I'd so freely given, I cut to the core of what this was really about. "You know I got the show." I wasn't naïve. I knew how the art world worked. He would've known the gallery was looking at my work long before they'd approached me. He may have even tried to stop it. Or encourage it if he thought he could make money off me. Either way, it didn't matter. I knew he knew. He'd known long before I'd left for the meeting this morning. "You can't stand the fact that I'm going to be in the one gallery you could never get into." My anger aimed with the precision of a single, fatal strike. "You're jealous."

The slap was so shockingly swift, I didn't see it coming.

Pain exploded on my right cheek and temple, then radiated.

"Jealous?" he seethed as his spittle landed on my face. "*Of what?* Your overcompensating *cartoon* portraits?" His sneer was an entire painting. "Those hideous, large heads with globs of garish color you're stupid enough to call abstract? You're not only worthless in bed, you're a pathetic excuse of an artist with less than zero talent."

"A pathetic excuse of an artist *with* an exhibition at Pace Gallery," I corrected, sealing my own fate.

He gripped my throat and drove me backwards.

My shoulders and head slammed into the wall, but it wasn't the acute pain that stole my breath. A sudden, intolerable, all-consuming revulsion blistered across every nerve ending. "Get. Your hands. *Off me.*"

He erupted. "Who the fuck do you think you are? You're nobody. A fucking *student*. No one gives a shit about you, but they do me. I'm in such high demand, I'm opening my own goddamn gallery. That's right, *my gallery*. Something you would've found out when you walked in if you hadn't been so fucking selfish, making it all about your pathetic little show. You're *lucky* I got down on my knees for you." Digging his

fingers into my neck and pulling me forward, he slammed me right back against the exposed brick. “LUCKY, you dirty fucking whore!”

Pinpricks of light burst, pain exploded, and my head spun. But everything became crystal clear. “You’re right,” I rasped, my skin crawling. “I am a whore.” Especially if it was true about him getting his own gallery.

Venom and stench spilled from his mouth. “I fucking knew it.” With surprising strength in his grip that was in direct contrast to his usual limp touch when he demanded I pleasure him, he choked me harder. “Who did you fuck to get your show, you worthless slut?”

“No one,” I choked, my vision starting to dim. “But only a worthless whore would fuck you.”

The second slap was harder than the first.

Blood pooled in my mouth, he ripped open my blouse, then he and yanked down my pants. “I’ll show you what a worthless fucking whore you are!”

Anger strangled out fear. “Do it.” *Go ahead, you bastard.* “Give me evidence.” I’d crawl to the nearest hospital for a rape kit if I had to. “I’ll ruin you.” I’d tell the administration. I’d tell the dean. I’d tell the entire college and sink my own career. I no longer cared. I was done, and he was *never* going to touch me again.

A roar echoed through the loft.

Vise grips tightened on my throat.

My vision tunneled.

My body slammed to the floor.

He was never touching me again.

Everything went dark.

A panicked, rattling gasp jolted me awake.

Rolling to my side, sucking in through a painful wheeze, I tried and failed to get air into my lungs.

Sheer terror needled across my skin, and I sucked again.

And again and again as I shoved up on shaking hands, but no air came. My mouth full of blood, my pants halfway down my thighs, my face was on fire, my head pounded, and I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't breathe.

But I could crawl.

Gasping for oxygen, scanning the now empty loft, I fucking crawled.

Then my hands landed on a print. Me. Naked. Legs spread. Face not blurred.

I ripped it in half.

Spitting blood onto the cold concrete, I half crawled, half dragged myself to the next one.

Me. Naked. Arms above my head.

I ripped it into thirds.

Sucking in a wet, rattling breath, I crawled to the next. Then the next and the next and the next until all that was left were hundreds of pieces of photo-paper confetti.

Rolling to my sore back, looking up at a tall ceiling and dusty open ductwork, I pulled my pants up, thankful my underwear was still in place.

The thought hit me harder than his choking me out and dropping me to the concrete floor.

I was thankful my underwear was still in place.

Thankful.

A single molecule of pure, uncut rage popped, and a tiny bubble of fire burst under the surface of my skin.

Then it bred.

Erupting bubbles of fire spread across my entire body like goose bumps. The rage grew into intent, and I was moving. Wheezing, my throat on fire, I rolled again and got my knees under me before staggering to my feet and aiming for all the paintings that I hadn't submitted for the exhibition.

One by one, I pulled the canvases from the vertical storage racks I'd built by myself because he'd refused to help, and I threw them on the floor. Finished paintings, works in progress, sketches waiting for color—I grabbed them all except for one.

Then I picked up my gallon can of turpentine, unscrewed the top, and without hesitation, I poured the noxious liquid destroyer over my hard work.

Turning my head away from the fumes, I used every last drop before unceremoniously dropping the can and heading for my supplies. I had to rummage, but I found it. My large tube of Ivory Black oil paint. Struggling to crack the seal, I finally got the cap off.

Staring at the last two years, I squeezed paint onto every one of my canvases, especially over the signatures—*Liese*—the stupid shortened version of my name that son of a bitch had insisted I use.

Then I grabbed a cleaning rag and viciously smeared.

I smeared the thick black color.

I smeared the turpentine.

I smeared out the last two years of my life, and I destroyed every single damn piece.

Shaking, my hands stinking, the knees of my best pants soaked in the solvent, I stood back up and surveyed the mess.

Not mess.

Rage.

Silent, internal, impotent, and shameful.

I took it all in, and I made a vow.

I would never be this again.

I would never be here again.

I would never be blind again.

“Fuck you, Benjamin Arden Montgomery.”

Grabbing my one remaining painting, I aimed for the piece-of-shit couch but stopped short when I spied the padded diploma cover on one of the oversized windowsills. Leaning against a pane of cracked glass, it was proof. I wasn't a student. Not anymore. Less than two weeks ago, I'd gotten my MFA. I'd told myself my life was finally starting.

Except it wasn't.

It'd been on a downward spiral, and there was nothing more pathetic than the willfully blind fool I'd allowed myself to become. But I didn't have time for internal berating.

I wasn't going to be here when Ben came back.

I would never be here again.

Silently chanting the new mantra, I picked up the degree and shoved it into my oversized tote, right next to my passport and the leather roll of paint brushes that I carried everywhere. Ignoring all my belongings—clothes, books, knickknacks, the expensive Le Creuset cookware I'd accumulated over the past couple of years—I grabbed only my coat because things were replaceable. I was not.

Gingerly threading my arms through the sleeves, tying the ripped sides of my shirt together, I buttoned my coat and gently draped my scarf around my bruised neck. Picking up the leather portfolio case I kept behind the couch, I tucked the single painting inside and zipped it shut.

Shouldering my tote and the portfolio, I bypassed the old elevator because I knew he wouldn't stay away long. He never did. Benjamin Arden Montgomery wasn't only a narcissist, he was entitled. This was *his* loft, and he'd be back soon to tell me how I made him choke me. How I made him mad. How I —

Stopping myself, I shoved down the intrusive thoughts and pushed through the emergency exit door.

Six flights later, I walked out of the old building's back stairwell and into the cold New York air right as a taxi came down the street.

Stepping toward the curb, I held up my arm.

The yellow cab pulled over.

I got in the back and felt a twinge in my shoulder as I shut the door. "JFK, please."

The driver glanced at me in his rearview mirror. "You, ah—you okay, miss?"

"Pardon?"

He made a circular motion around his face with his index finger. "Your lip's split, and it looks like you walked into a two-by-four." He cleared his throat. "Recently."

My tongue darted out, and I tasted blood.

Shit. *Shit.*

I would not cry. I would *not* cry.

Rummaging in my tote for my oversized sunglasses, I grabbed them and put them on. Then I looked back up. "Better?"

The driver turned in his seat. "Not for nothing, but if you were my daughter—"

"Better?" I asked again.

"Ah, yeah. Sure."

"JFK, please."

The driver turned back around, started the meter and pulled into traffic. "Your dime, lady."

ONE

Anneliese

“Anneliese, where are you?”

Juggling the horribly bitter coffee from a street cart, my cell phone, and the large, wrapped canvas, I silently cursed my four-inch Prada ankle-strap sandals in a soft shade of nude that was too delicate for the city as I dodged midmorning Manhattan pedestrian traffic. “I’m almost there.” If seven more blocks was considered almost.

“What’s all that noise? Are you walking?” Ami asked with incredulous scorn. “The buyer’s going to be here in ten minutes.”

Potential buyer. “I know.” Twisting to protect my painting, I dodged a jerk in a suit on his cell that didn’t budge from his path. “I’ll be there.” Eventually. “Besides, aren’t artists supposed to be fashionably late?” Shouldered by another jerk, I held the coffee away from one of only two designer dresses I owned. This one was my favorite, though. A sleeveless Prada stretch natté sheath in cream that I’d picked up in Milan for way too much.

“No, you are not supposed to be late, Anneliese,” Ami chided. “Get in a taxi. You can’t afford to miss this meeting. Mr. Carlos was interested in your entire collection. I know I don’t need to tell you what that would do for your career.”

I refrained from sighing, just barely, because I knew the drill. Buyers never demanded to meet the artist before committing to a purchase unless it was a man, and they’d looked me up online. Whoever this Mr. Carlos was, he wasn’t

interested in my art, and he certainly wasn't going to buy my entire show out. Maybe a few pieces, but that was it. I reminded myself I couldn't afford to care.

I couldn't afford anything.

That was the problem.

And why I was late.

I was staying in a more-than-questionable midtown hotel that smelled like mold and was only paid for through tomorrow. I'd used the last of my funds to get to New York, and if I didn't sell a painting, I wasn't going to have any coffee tomorrow, let alone a meal.

And I needed coffee.

Which meant I needed to sell some work. Even one piece would more than cover what I'd spent to get here. It'd also cover a plane ticket to get out of here and go... somewhere.

"I'll be there soon." Ignoring the nauseating churning in my empty stomach that wasn't completely from lack of food, I upped my already heart-pounding pace.

"Good, because this is the second time Mr. Carlos has requested to meet with you."

More than irritation flaring, my legitimate excuse rushed out in a puff of short breath. "I couldn't very well have flown all the way from Italy on a whim, Ami. I had to make arrangements and book my flights." And wait for a fare I'd had enough money in my account to pay for. Just barely. I'd also had to summon my courage, but I didn't mention that part.

Dismissing my justification, the Gagosian curator, albeit politely, chided me anyway. "Unfortunately, I can't guarantee there'll be a third time with Mr. Carlos."

"Message received." Meet the buyer or else. "Ten minutes, Ami. I promise." I hung up before she could regret giving me a show.

Tucking my cell into my designer tote that doubled as a purse and carry-on, I downed the rest of the now tepid coffee

and dumped the cheap paper cup in a trash can. Fishing out breath mints as I dodged a dog walker, I told myself this would all be worth it.

It had to be.

I was out of options.

Officially homeless, broke and jobless, this coveted exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery was my last chance to make this work. Otherwise, I'd have to give up my dream of being a full-time artist and find gainful employment.

Something I'd promised my much younger self that I'd never do.

Fighting the sudden rush of self-pity, I sucked in a deep breath of smog and soot-filled Manhattan air and rushed the last few blocks.

By the time I pushed through the front door of the gallery, I was out of breath, lightheaded and shaking from nerves.

Not a good combination.

One that was made worse as Ami Ilan, a woman I had only met via phone and video conference calls, took in my appearance while she came toward me with a deep frown. "Anneliese, hello." She nodded once in greeting. "What did you bring?"

"Just something personal." It wasn't simply something personal. It was my best work—or rather, my favorite. Art was subjective, and this particular piece wasn't like anything I had ever done before or since.

Regardless, it was a painting that I never intended to sell, but also one I couldn't bring myself to leave with the rest of my work that was sitting in a very expensive temperature-controlled storage unit outside Milan.

So here I was, carting it with me because desperate times called for desperate measures. But in my haste to leave Italy, and given my financial situation, I hadn't had the funds to properly have the piece packed for travel and pay for the storage unit and airfare. Forgoing packing materials in favor of

paying for the storage unit that had eighteen more pieces of my work, I'd instead wrapped the painting myself and carried it onto the plane. But not before I'd taken two dozen pictures of it, in every light, at every angle, with my late-model cell phone so I'd have them just in case something catastrophic happened.

But I wasn't going to think about catastrophes or worse-case scenarios.

I was here. I had a show. I would sell something.

I hoped.

Ami held out her hands. "Let me see what you've brought while you go freshen up." She tipped her chin over her shoulder. "The restroom's down the hall, past the offices."

Hating excuses as much as stereotypes, I played the universally accepted fervent-artist card. "It's not finished. I'm not ready to show it." An artist's process was sacrosanct. "I'll be right back." Rushing past her before she could offer to hold the canvas, I barely glanced at my pieces that were taking up the entire front half of the coveted gallery space as a bloom of conflicting emotions unfurled.

Surety was something I only exercised in my work.

Every brushstroke, every seemingly out-of-place vibrant swash of color, every luscious hue of brightness, I never thought twice about.

I embraced it.

But having my pieces all prominently displayed for sale still wasn't something I was comfortable with, not even as my stomach grumbled, and not even here, at Gagosian, with a coveted showing and representation that most artists only ever dreamed of.

I should've felt grateful, ecstatic actually. And very, very proud. A part of me did.

But as I pushed through the restroom door and locked it behind me, I also felt as if I were losing parts of myself I would never get back.

Exhaling through emotions I didn't have the time or luxury for, I dumped my tote on the counter and carefully set the painting behind it. After quickly washing my hands, I grabbed a paper towel and touched the damp material to my face and neck and pushed every useless feeling down before I looked in the mirror.

My cheeks flushed from rushing, my straight hair disheveled, I saw what I always did when I looked at myself. The pale complexion and red hair of an Irish father I'd barely known and the suspicious tawny eyes of a French mother who'd put her career and reputation above all else.

As if she were still alive, I imagined my mother's accented English and what she would say as she chastised me to smooth my hair and fix my makeup. Then a memory of her correcting my posture when I was barely nine years old surfaced.

"A French woman never slouches, Anneliese. Straighten your spine. You were not given height to bend away from it. Can I not leave you for one weekend?"

As fast as the memory came, it was followed by one of the few I had of my father as he put his heavy arm around my shoulders and gently chided my mother.

"Leave her be, Collette," his Irish brogue lilted. "She's doin' just well." He smiled down at me. "Don't ye listen, mo leanbh. Come back in summer, aye?"

"Okay, Papa."

Except my mother had been too busy to take me in the summer, and the next time we went to Ireland, it was for my father's funeral.

Shoving down the memories, I searched my tote for my hairbrush and quickly ran it through my hair. Then I reapplied some powder to my cheeks, swiped a nude shade over my lips and thanked whoever invented waterproof mascara and eyeliner. With one last glance in the mirror, I shouldered my oversized Louis Vuitton OnTheGo Monogram Empreinte leather tote and carefully picked up the brown-paper-wrapped canvas.

The moment I stepped out of the restroom, I heard the effusive male voice carry down the hall, and my skin crawled.

Stealing myself, I walked toward the gallery, but before I rounded the corner that would take me to the very front of the space, I took a moment to glance at my work as if it were not my own.

A study in color.

Brilliant, vibrant colors. I was drawn to them. I always had been.

Life was unforgiving. Art didn't have to be. It could be bright and unapologetic and steal you away.

I stared at the large canvases.

The tropical turquoise hues of the Caribbean Sea shimmered. The white-washed pastels of the Amalfi coastline soothed. The cerulean blues of the Gulf of Salerno were a cool slip into gentle swells on a hot day. The blood-orange and guava-pink sunsets over Barcelona tasted of sweet sangria. And the bright rose and ethereal violets that faded into the Aegean every night from the ragged cliffs in Santorini wrapped me in a fragrant, salty breeze.

For a moment, I lived in my openly interpretational abstract landscapes, ones I'd been capturing for years. Paintings that bled color and grief and turned them into beauty. Or tried to.

Narrowing my eyes, I quickly scanned them. Warmth and vibrancy exploded.

Maybe I had succeeded.

Maybe they were beautiful.

The man's voice carried down the hall. "Speaking of striking art, where is the lovely Miss Laurent?"

A sudden chill washed over me.

Ignoring it, I painted another shade, this one in the hue of a smile.

Then I walked into the gallery proper.

TWO

Kilo

The contact glanced from me to Alpha as we let ourselves into the forty-fourth-floor hotel suite with the card key that'd been anonymously couriered to Alpha Elite Security headquarters in Miami last night. "Thanks for coming."

Adam "Alpha" Trefor scanned the two hundred square feet overlooking Manhattan and bypassed the furniture in favor of standing. "You said you had more intel."

"I do." Standing up from the couch, the older agent made his way to the small dining table that was littered with the remnants of room service and picked up a file before holding it out. "We still don't have any recent images of the target, but these came in last night."

Alpha opened the folder and quickly glanced through the contents.

Not giving a fuck about the file or anything else this suit was trying to peddle as intel, I did the same shit I always did in a New York City high-rise.

I counted.

Number of stories.

Steps to the elevator.

Distance to the stairwell.

Speed of descent times number of floors.

"Kilo," Alpha stated. "Parameters?"

It'd take five minutes and thirty seconds to get down to the ground floor if the stairwell was crowded. But that wasn't what Alpha was asking.

I glanced at the folder of grainy, nondescript images he was still holding. A flash of red caught my eye, and I read a line of text under it. "I'm not seeing any valid intel." This was the same type of bullshit this asshole had called us about over a week ago.

"It's more than valid. I already told you at our first meet that they cleared out the furniture from the upper deck cabins before loading hundreds of crates. We've since intercepted communications and run analyses. This is a nine-figure arms sale." The agent moved closer and flipped a couple pages. "We think the target's in the city under the guise of consorting with a new mistress while he brokers the deal." He stopped and pointed at a photocopy of a headshot. "Her."

The red. It was hair. Female. "And?" For two seconds, I fucking stared. Haunted eyes, no smile. My headspace momentarily spun up. Then I shut it down.

"And that's what we have," the asshole defended. "The second the target steps out with the woman, we'll grab a clean image of him, run facial rec and get you a positive ID. Not that I need confirmation, my sources are solid, but I know you boys like verification. Regardless, this deal is happening, it's going down soon, and it's big."

No ID on the target, at least not one the suit fuck was sharing. No intel on the type of munitions. No timeline for the transaction, and no verification of where it was taking place. We'd worked with far less on the Teams. That wasn't the issue.

This asshole's definition of intel was.

I didn't say shit.

Neither did Alpha.

The suit kept talking. "The mistress flew into JFK from Naples last night."

I glanced at Alpha, then focused on the cost of the view that was being wasted on this government fuck who couldn't put two and ten together to make a dozen. "Florida or Italy?" I didn't care. I was making a point.

The suit fuck looked at me like I was the one who was stupid. "Italy. Why the hell would she have flown in from Florida? The target's yacht is in the Tyrrhenian Sea."

So he'd said at the first meet. In fact, it was all he'd said. Large private yacht, military arms, directional heading—Amalfi Coast. Arms he still had no fucking clue about, which mattered a whole hell of a lot if you were intending to detonate them in one of the rich and famous's favorite superyacht playgrounds.

I didn't bother sparing this asshole a glance of disdain.

Alpha closed the folder and dropped it on the table. "We'll get back to you." He turned toward the door.

I followed.

The agent begged. "We're out of options." Then he aimed a direct hit at Alpha's Achilles' heel. "Unless I go after the mistress."

Alpha paused for only a fraction of a second. Then he amended his promise. "You'll hear back by end of business today."

"Arms aren't the only thing on that three-hundred-foot-yacht," the suit warned. "That's why I asked you to bring your explosives guy."

Alpha stopped and turned. "You're right. There'll be crew and potential civilians aboard as well as private and commercial vessels within a blast zone you have no parameters on. The collateral casualties will cause an international event. You're not telling us who the target actually is. You're not showing any evidence of a prior connection between the female and the target, and Kilo is not 'my guy.' He's my associate. If you'd simply wanted detonation disposal or arms retrieval, we both know who you would've contacted." Done with the fuck, Alpha about-faced.

I already had the door open.

THREE

Anneliese

I immediately regretted everything as I walked toward Ami and the sinister man in the custom suit. Slicked-back black hair, disturbing smile, creepy eyes, he leisurely scanned the length of me like he was buying me instead of my work.

Stepping forward, hand out, he leered. “Miss Laurent. It is a pleasure.”

Taking in his slight accent and, reluctantly, his hand, I fought both a wave of nausea and the urge to recoil from his touch as I let him bring my knuckles to his mouth and plant a kiss that made me want to dip my entire arm in turpentine. “Mr. Carlos, I presume.”

“There is no presumption, Miss Laurent, and it’s just Carlos.” Gripping my hand too tightly, he rubbed his thumb over my already sexually assaulted knuckles. “May I humbly suggest we dispense with the formalities, Anneliese?”

There was nothing remotely humble about this man. Having enough of my mother’s cynicism instilled in me from an early age but ever my father’s daughter, I deflected Carlos’s question without acknowledging his offensiveness as I pulled my hand back. “I understand you may be interested in some of my work?” I didn’t want to sell him a single piece.

“Maybe more than some.” Ami gave a perfectly bland smile.

Carlos’s gaze dropped and lingered on my breasts for a beat too long before he met my eyes and dispensed with the smile. His expression morphing into something alarmingly

close to petulance, he tilted his head and studied me like I was prey. “I noticed your work spans across Italy.”

Italy, Greece, Spain, France, the Caribbean and anywhere else I found myself in the quest for the perfect sunset. “It does.” Every sunset was the death of a day. A fatality that had to happen before a new dawn arose. I’d developed an affinity for sunsets. But I was still searching for the perfect drift of night as day escaped. Same as I kept hoping I would wake to a bright, colorful sunrise and be a new version of myself, but it hadn’t happened yet.

Carlos raised an eyebrow. “Are you Italian?”

My instincts flared into alarm, and I had to work to keep my expression neutral. “My bio is listed on the gallery’s website.” As well as on my own website, which I was now making a mental note to change to be more vague.

“Of course.” A slippery smile spread back into place before he instantly dropped it, like it was too much to hold on to. “I’ll cut to the chase, Anneliese. I’m a very busy man, and my art expertise is limited to what I see and like. Since you fit into those categories, and I’m looking for pieces to complement my residences abroad as well as my yacht, I think we can come to an understanding. However, I’m already past due at a prior commitment.” With practiced movements, he reached into his suit pocket and held out not a business card but a plastic card key. “Pick out your favorite pieces from your show, say ten to twelve of them, and my driver will escort you to the Four Seasons. After my meeting, we’ll reconvene in my suite, and you can help me decide which pieces should go where.”

I didn’t take the card. “That’s more than an unusual request, Mr. Carlos.” One I wasn’t even remotely comfortable with. But showing any form of weakness in front of a man like him seemed like a sentence worse than death.

“I think perhaps you’ve mistaken ‘request’ for ‘terms of sale’.” The sinister smile came back in full force, but this time it had a side of salaciousness.

Ami plucked the card out of his hand with a carefully cultivated smile of her own. “We’re delighted to work with you, Mr. Carlos. As you can imagine, safely crating Miss Laurent’s work for transport will take some time. By tomorrow noon, we can deliver the works to your hotel suite. Or if you prefer, we can ship direct. Either way, we’re happy to accommodate their transport tomorrow. How would you like to pay for the paintings?”

Taking his dark eyes off me, the jerk looked at Ami. “My driver has the cash, but I do believe I made myself clear. I want the paintings and Miss Laurent’s input today.”

I didn’t have to do the math. I already knew exactly how much ten of my paintings would gross, but I was doing it anyway. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Half of which would be mine.

To her credit, Ami didn’t so much as blink at the mention of how much cash that would be or why the hell this man would be driving around New York City with that kind of stash. “With all due respect, Mr. Carlos, Gagosian makes every accommodation possible for both our clients and our artists. Unfortunately, in this instance, Miss Laurent’s time is occupied for the rest of the day with preparations for a gallery event this evening. With a substantial number of pieces from her show already sold, Miss Laurent is currently in high demand.”

Stunned by the lie and her attempt to deflect this jerk, but no less appreciative, I said nothing. My pieces were hung, and we were only two days into a three-day soft launch that was open for investors and collectors, but so far, nothing had sold.

“Ah. This is where our communication breakdown has happened.” Carlos directed his gaze at me as he addressed Ami. “There’s no need for Anneliese to attend a gallery event when all of her pieces have been sold.” He looked back at the curator in challenge. “Is there?”

My heart dropped into the churning bile in my stomach.

Before I could open my mouth or get my feet to walk away from the creep, Ami stepped in with a subtle new tone to her

voice.

“Even if you are implying that you will purchase the remainder of her works, I’m afraid all gallery events are moving ahead as planned. I’m sure you can understand the months of preparation that go into every showcased artist we represent. Not just for their current showings, but also to ensure a prosperous career for our talent as well as sustaining the very high standards and reputation of Gagosian. Miss Laurent’s work is no exception. But I’m happy to arrange for the safe transport of whichever pieces are still available that you wish to purchase. With shipping or delivery included, of course.”

Carlos again looked at me as he addressed Ami. “Exactly how long does it take to pack paintings, Miss Ilan?”

Ami held her ground. “I can have them ready by tomorrow.”

Carlos inhaled deeply as if contemplating world politics. “I’m afraid that’s not going to work for me.” He looked at Ami. “I’m flying to Italy tonight.” The gaze that was making my skin crawl landed back on me. “So, unless Anneliese can be in my suite with the paintings before I finish my next meeting, then I’m afraid we don’t have a deal.”

An overly muscled man in a black suit stepped into the gallery with a briefcase in hand and nodded once at Carlos.

Ami looked from what I could only assume was a bodyguard to the very reason I was standing in a gallery in New York instead of perched on a cliff in Italy with my easel. Then she threw me at this predator’s mercy.

“All right, Mr. Carlos. I’ll make an exception if you make a compromise. While I reallocate my staff from their current duties and have them pack the paintings for transport, Miss Laurent will meet you in the bar in the Four Seasons lobby. She can be there in an hour with the Gagosian promotional prints of her work. Any we do not have prints of, I’ll personally make sure Miss Laurent has digital photos of before she meets with you. You can discuss placement using the prints or photos before she needs to be back at the gallery, and

I'll have the paintings you've purchased crated by this evening. Good?"

The churning in my stomach became a riotous storm of utter dismay and alarm. "I don't think—"

"The paintings packaged for transport in the next hour. Anneliese at the hotel as promised, and the prints waiting before I return," Carlos countered, plucking the card key back from Ami and forcing it between my clasped hands. "The artist herself will arrange the prints in my suite."

My right hand automatically, traitorously closed around the small rectangle of plastic.

"I would need double that amount of time to properly crate the pieces." Ami threw me a glance and a barely-there nod that looked like it was meant to be reassuring. "And I'm sure one of your capable drivers can courier the prints to your suite."

For a suspended moment, Carlos studied Ami. Then he nodded as if we'd all come to a resolution. "My driver can escort Anneliese to the hotel, and she will arrange the prints in my suite in four groupings for three homes and my yacht. We'll use photos to confer with in the bar. The rest shall be sufficient." His lips closed but spread with a disturbing tilt as he shamelessly dragged his gaze along the length of me one more time. "I'm sure Anneliese and I will need at least an hour to discuss her paintings while you finish crating them." He grabbed the hand that wasn't holding the card key and forcibly took it, rag-dolling my arm out to reach his disgusting mouth. "See you in the hotel bar in one hour, *Miss Laurent*." After kissing my knuckles and releasing me from his too-tight grip, he turned toward his bodyguard. "Andros, pay Miss Ilan, oversee the transfer of the paintings, and escort Miss Laurent to the hotel." He walked out of the gallery and got into one of the two black SUVs that were double-parked out front.

As the vehicle aggressively shoved its way into traffic, Andros looked at Ami. "Two hundred and fifty grand?"

Seemingly unfazed, Ami glanced at the case in the bodyguard's beefy hand. "Is that how much you have in cash?"

“No. I’ve got three large.” His head turned toward me with stiff but calculated movement. “Pick out twelve paintings for the boss.”

Ami stepped in front of me. “Unfortunately, for a sale of this size, company policy mandates that I need a cashier’s check made out to Gagosian. There’s a bank just a few doors down. While you procure the check, Miss Laurent and I will get to work sorting which paintings we think will best suit Mr. Carlos.”

The bodyguard looked her way for a long moment. Then he walked out of the gallery without comment.

I turned on Ami.

She held up a hand. “I know what you’re going to say.”

No, she didn’t. “I’m not for sale, and neither are my paintings, not to whoever the hell that was.”

“I absolutely understand, and I support you with whatever decision you make. I’ll sell your work either way. The only variant out of my control is the timeline. Since you mentioned in a prior conversation that money was an issue, hear me out.” She held my gaze with her dark, intelligent eyes. “Your commission, Anneliese. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

“So I can be sold into sex slavery?” I may not have much experience with men, but I wasn’t naïve. Carlos, or whoever he was, was trying to buy more than art.

“No, so you can do the obligatory hand-holding for one hour over drinks at a bar in a hotel where I happen to know the general manager. Talk up your work. Explain those sexy, nuanced distortions of perspective. Gush about the divine experience of a Mediterranean sunset. Give him art speak, then smile once and leave. You can do that.”

I didn’t know if I could. That last part, the leaving, that was the part that was jumping out and grabbing my anxiety as it pinged around in my head like warning bells. “Frankly, I don’t care if you know the entire hotel staff.” Or that her version of the scenario hardly constituted sex slavery.

Something about this was off. And it felt very, very bad. “I also don’t do art speak.”

She gave me a small and genuine, albeit sympathetic, smile. “You have a BFA from RISD, an MFA from Parsons and a second master’s from the Royal College of Art, London, not to mention your Guggenheim Fellowship and two residencies in Rome and France. You’ll be just fine with art speak.” Taking my arm, she turned toward my paintings. “Now, show me which ones are your least favorite.”

“They’re all my favorite.” Each one was a memory turned into oil on canvas and stretchers. It was why I hadn’t sold any of them until I’d been forced to after the last of my small inheritance from my mother’s estate that I’d managed to stretch for five years had run out.

Then I’d gone into the Gagosian in Rome with a portfolio of prints of my paintings and left them with a curator I’d met years before. A week later, Ami had called from their Manhattan location with an offer of representation and a dedicated show.

Now I had the distinct feeling I was selling more than my work.

“Okay, look.” Ami grasped both of my shoulders, and it took everything I had not to flinch because I hated to be touched. “Normally I vet larger buyers like this, and I admit, I couldn’t find anything about this Carlos character online. But if his henchman comes back with the cashier’s check, I don’t need to tell you how this will launch your sales into the stratosphere. Your multilayered surrealism with the fluidity of your near precision brushstrokes, that tantalizingly intimate delicacy of juxtaposed natural landscapes that are already sublime with an explosive palette of tropical hues so lush, I can taste them—it’s like you’ve deconstructed every sunset and reinvented them into this staggeringly perfect affair of realism and fantasy. I didn’t even know that was possible until I saw your work. You’ve forever ruined me with your oeuvre of reimagined beauty. And if I’m saying that, all you need is a push to get others to see it.”

“Don’t tell me—Carlos is the push.”

She nodded solemnly. “He’s the push.”

Closing my eyes, I inhaled deeply.

Then I did what any broke artist would do. “Let’s start with the Antigua series.”

FOUR

Anneliese

The distinct smell of a late summer evening in New York—burnt coffee, exhaust fumes, food carts and garbage—permeated my nostrils and rapidly declining mood. “You packed all the paintings in record time.”

“Tricks of the trade,” Ami quipped, not a single shiny strand of black hair out of place as the gallery staff loaded the wood-crated paintings into a large panel van double-parked next to Andros’s SUV while Andros stood by like a menacing sentry.

I glanced at her.

She smiled conspiratorially before lowering her voice. “I saved all the shipping crates they came over in.”

I nodded. “When does my car arrive?”

Ami glanced at her watch. “The service should be here any minute.” She nodded at the leather portfolio she’d put the prints in that I noticed was also large enough to fit my paper-wrapped painting. “Are you all set?”

“Yes, thank you. I’ll return the portfolio this evening.”

“Keep it. But I’d still love to see that mysterious latecomer you’re holding close to your chest.” It was the third time she’d mentioned it.

For the third time, I deflected. “It’s not for sale.” I would never part with it. “I just didn’t want to leave it in the hotel.”

“Or in Italy?” she asked knowingly.

“Or there.” Where I no longer had a place to lay my head, not that the nomad life bothered me, but nomadic and broke did.

“I understand. Oh, the car’s here.” She started to step toward the sidewalk.

Andros literally put a hand up to stop her. “I will drive the artist.”

Ami let out an uncharacteristic sigh. “Mr. Andros, transportation of Miss Laurent was not a part of the deal with Mr. Carlos that I agreed to.”

“I drive the artist,” he repeated, opening the front passenger door of his SUV.

“One moment, please.” Ami turned to face me. “Your call.”

“You alerted the manager at the Four Seasons?”

“Yes. Jonathan Dahlgren. He’s six-four, gorgeous, and walking sex. But don’t let his custom suit, chiseled jaw and dirty-blond hair fool you.” She lowered her voice. “He’s newly minted as the hotel manager, but he carries himself like former military and will make a mockery of Carlos and this henchman if they try anything. Not that I think they will. Going back to Jonathan, I’d say you can’t miss him, but he’ll see you first. I’ve already texted him to look out for you.”

I wasn’t sure if that made me feel better or worse. “Thank you, I think.” This entire transaction made me feel dirty.

She smiled. “Thank you is appropriate in this instance. Have a drink with Jonathan when you’re finished with Carlos.” She winked. “You won’t regret it.”

Yeah, no. “You can keep your walking-sex general manager.”

She laughed. “Oh, trust me, I would if I were his type, which I’m not, but you *definitely* are.”

I didn’t dare touch what that could possibly mean. “I don’t need a matchmaker.” I just needed to sell my art and get out of New York. I needed to be an ocean away from this place and

back in my carefully cultivated, anonymous life where I could disappear into my work.

Ami gave me a conspiratorial look. “Miss Laurent, is there something you’re not telling me? Or rather, someone you’re not telling me about?”

Only that I never wanted to be in this city again for reasons I would never divulge to anyone. “No.” Resisting the urge to fidget, I shoved down old memories and thought about taking the gallery’s car versus riding with Andros. “But I am torn,” I admitted. “If I don’t get into that SUV, it’ll leave an impression.”

Ami dropped the pretense of friendship and went back to all business. “Possibly. But the money is already deposited, and I’ve transferred your half to your account. You can take the car to JFK and fly back to Italy if that’s what you want to do.”

After trying for two weeks to convince me to fly here, her answer was too casual. “That directly counters your push theory. And I’d miss the opening next week.”

She breathed in and darted a furtive glance at Andros before focusing back on me. “Okay, full disclosure. I’ve already let it leak that your show is almost sold out. I’ve been fielding texts and sending calls to voice mail for the past forty-five minutes. As far as the opening?” Her half shrug was as cool and elegant as she was. “An elusive, mysterious artist, an undisclosed buyer snapping up a dozen of the pieces—this isn’t a bad thing. That’s how this world works. You know this.”

I did, but that didn’t mean I liked it. “Art should be valuable no matter who purchases it or what price it sells for.”

“And men should lie at women’s feet the moment they walk into a room, but that’s never going to happen either.” She made a come-here gesture. “Give me your phone.”

I fished it out of my tote, unlocked it, and handed it over. “I don’t need a man to lie at my feet.” The thought alone was... much more than uncomfortable.

Ami smirked as she quickly swiped. “Spoken like a woman who’s never had to fight to be loved.” She handed my phone back. “All right. You have my personal cell number as well my work one, and the former is always on. I feel better.”

“I’m glad you do.” I didn’t touch her fighting-to-be-loved comment.

“Mr. Carlos is finishing his meeting,” Andros warned. “Let’s go.”

“We’re almost ready,” Ami called to Andros before looking at me and quieting her voice so only I could hear. “You good?”

One hundred and fifty thousand, I silently chanted. “So tell me again why I have to go to Carlos’s suite?” I’d asked her this more than a few times over the past hour as we’d plucked my pieces off the wall and she’d handed them over to her staff.

She gave me the same vague answer as before. “You know how rich, entitled men are.”

Unfortunately, I knew how entitled men were. “Like they own everything and everyone.” She was right. I’d never fought to be loved because that concept was as foreign to me as life without a paintbrush in my hand. But I did have to fight for something much more basic. Something that I never should’ve had to fight for in the first place, but I’d been weak, and that was a different life. A different version of me. One I didn’t want to think about any more than the abhorrent notion of a man prostrating at a woman’s feet that Ami had unknowingly painted in my mind with the ugly memory of turpentine and Black Ivory smears. A memory I quickly shoved down deep.

Ami cocked her head, and her perfectly cut chin-length bob tilted in a pretty sheen of obsidian black.

Absently, I thought the color would make a good backdrop for a moonless night over an inky ocean.

“Men just want to make you think they own us. But as far as Carlos?” She glanced at the SUV before looking back at me. “My best guess is that you’re his push.”

His... wait. “What?”

Her dark-eyed gaze met mine again. “Just don’t be surprised if you see the henchman ushering out the old flame as you walk your beautiful self into Carlos’s suite.” She folded her long arms.

“Please tell me you’re joking.” That was the very definition of insanity. “You think that jerk is using me to break up with some woman?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me.”

“By spending three hundred thousand on paintings?” Was she insane?

She shrugged. “It’d definitely send a message.”

A very horrible one. “You do realize I’m out of that bar the second my hour is up, right?” I had absolutely no intention of ever being anywhere near that creep again after tonight.

Ami’s expression sparked with ironic humor as her lips tipped up. “Oh, I know.”

I didn’t find anything about this remotely amusing, but then again, I wasn’t a curator. “Your smile is giving away your cynicism.”

“I’m a New Yorker fully immersed in the world of contemporary art.” Her smile widened. “What can I say?”

That I’d be safe, Carlos was just eccentric, his money wasn’t dirty and I wouldn’t live to regret this moment for the rest of my life. “Nothing.” I glanced over my shoulder.

The henchman was staring me down.

I looked back at Ami and had a passing thought to tell her to alert the police if she didn’t hear from me later. But then what? No family, no siblings, it was just me. “All right.” I tried to shake away the invading moroseness. “I’m leaving now.” Before I lost my nerve or asked for my paintings back. “Thank you for the opportunity to work with Gagosian. I’ll play nice with Carlos, but please understand, I’m never doing this again.” I was an artist, not some rich jerk’s accessory or toy of the week. I’d paint doors, sweep floors or beg on the street before I ever became a man’s toy again.

“Understood,” Ami placated. “Should I send the car away?”

“Yes.” I could handle Carlos. I just didn’t want to. I didn’t want to play this game to sell my work. I didn’t want to be a part of the art scene either. Not after my last time in New York and the.... I pushed the thought down before it consumed me.

Ami dismissed the car service with a wave of her hand. “Text or call me after the meet.”

“Time,” Andros ordered.

I glanced up and down Madison Avenue.

Traffic, lights, concrete, Ami, Andros, the two retreating staff from Gagosian, the bright space of the gallery behind me, the darkening sky that would be starless—it was all a landscape. One I’d never paint.

With a last glance at Ami, I got into the SUV.

Andros closed the door, and the busy city muted to cologne-scented momentary darkness before he rounded the front of the vehicle and got behind the wheel. “You got the suite key?”

“I do.”

He started the engine. “Tight schedule. I’ll drop you off in front of the hotel. Go upstairs. Twenty-sixth floor. The suite at the end of the hall. Put the prints on the table in the living area, then meet Mr. Carlos downstairs.”

I had to ask. “Who’s in the suite?”

“No one.” He glanced over his left shoulder.

Praying he was right, I took the card key from my tote, my stomach churned, and we lurched into traffic.

FIVE

Kilo

Alpha stepped onto the elevator and hit the Lobby button before glancing at his cell. “Thoughts?”

“You don’t pay me to think.” I’d been the Teams’ breacher. My skill set was specific. I wasn’t interested in anything else. “You’re the owner of Alpha Elite Security, not me.” He could keep these fucking client meet and greets.

Alpha turned and looked at me. “Since you’ve chosen your own path at AES, I know that’s not a dig at me.”

The redhead’s image flashed in my head. I watched the numbers descend.

Alpha did what he’d always done when he’d been Team Leader. He broke it down. “You didn’t say anything after the first meet, but you also weren’t pissed off. Now you are. What was different about this meet?”

The redhead had fear in her eyes. “Both meetings were bullshit.”

“Intel is crucial for any op,” Alpha stated.

I focused up and glanced at him. “Not the point.” He couldn’t be that fucking far gone. I was the one with Breacher Syndrome. His head was intact.

“You don’t think we should take this assignment.”

I threw him a look. “Since when do we clean up SAC’s fuckups?” We weren’t on the Teams anymore. The CIA had their own paramilitary team of Tier Ones. That was the whole fucking point of Ground Branch.

Keeping it tight, Alpha held his SEAL expression. “No one said this was a Special Activities Center op.”

I stared at him for one more floor, then looked back at the numbers. “It wasn’t a SEAL Team that let a terrorist load a three-hundred-foot boat with a shipment of arms. DEVGRU and SOCOM aren’t that fucking sloppy.”

Alpha didn’t get a chance to reply.

The elevator stopped on the twenty-sixth floor of the fifty-two-story hotel, and the doors opened.

Mother.

Fucker.

I didn’t look at Trefor.

I didn’t need to.

We were both staring at the redhead as she barely glanced up and stepped onto the elevator.

Now I knew why the suit fuck wanted to meet at the Four Seasons in Manhattan.

The target’s mistress. In the flesh.

I recalled that one line of intel I’d read.

Anneliese Laurent, artist, depleted bank account, no recent address, born with dual citizenship, third acquired.

The elevator doors closed, and I did what that suit fuck was incapable of.

I got real intel.

The smooth sheet of red hair was recently brushed. Her four-inch heels that were nothing more than a couple straps of thin leather were hurting her feet as she shifted from one foot to the other. The beige-colored dress, tight over her ass, was designer. The brand-name bag on her shoulder was more carry-all than purse, and she was fucking nervous.

Starving artists didn’t wear designer.

They also didn’t have perfect posture, smell like expensive perfume and look like they’d just walked off the runway of a

fucking fashion show.

This woman was well-bred.

Too well-bred to be mixed up with an HVT arms dealer.

The doors opened. The noise of the lobby hit, and she slipped out, heading toward the restaurant.

I glanced at Alpha. We didn't need to speak. My gaze quickly cut to the redhead. His chin tipped toward the opposite direction.

In a coordinated move we'd done countless fucking times, we flanked out.

Alpha went right.

I moved left.

Heading away from the front entrance of the hotel, striding deeper into the crowd, my gaze was locked on her.

Everyone's gaze was fucking locked on her.

The crowd parted. Men stared. Women glared.

She looked past every one of them.

Head held high, back straight, shoulders proud, her hips and that fucking sheet of silk hair swayed with every step in those high heels.

I closed the distance and hit her six.

Then I scanned the lobby one more time before I made my move.

She reached for the glass door of the restaurant.

I reached around her.

Covering her hand with mine, caging her in, I leaned down to her ear and issued an order. "Remember my voice."

She flinched, her lush lips parted with a sharp inhale, and she lifted her head.

Amber eyes met mine in the reflection of the glass, and time fucking stopped.

Then she hit me with a soft, sexy voice. “Pardon?”

“You heard me.” Pulling the door open, I scanned the patrons in the restaurant before giving her the push she needed to start moving. “Walk inside.”

Slow, as if she was afraid to look, she started to glance over her shoulder.

I was already gone.

But not before I’d registered who was sitting at a table in the back while one of his bodyguards took up position on the other side of the door.

SIX

Anneliese

Shaken from going into that suite, but glad it'd been empty of anyone, I glanced around the lobby.

Still no manager, let alone a man who resembled walking sex—unless I counted the two very tall dark-haired men on the elevator.

One had been in an impeccable suit, the other in a black bomber-type jacket with his head tilted and his hair partially covering his eyes. Even though they both had light eyes, similar features, and incredibly muscular bodies that were studies unto themselves, they couldn't have been more different. I'd wanted to stare, especially at the one who'd looked more... rough, almost as if he were untamed. Except their presence had been so dangerously lethal, and I was already rattled, so I'd immediately averted my gaze when I'd stepped onto the lift.

But that one in the black jacket....

I was still thinking about him as I walked toward the restaurant at the far end of the lobby. There'd been the scent of an expensive cologne in the elevator, but there'd also been something else that'd caught my attention. Metallic, dark, masculine—I couldn't put a name to it, but the artist in me was already seeing the colors on canvas. I was seeing *him* on canvas.

The mysterious stranger—a cliché, trite and pedestrian notion, except nothing about that man had been even remotely close to commonplace.

Mentally shaking my head, I should've been ashamed of my thoughts, but I foolishly wasn't.

One second's worth of a glance, and I already knew that man was a storm.

A storm that was nothing like the man I was on my way to meet. Not that it mattered, because I didn't engage with storms or men. I hadn't in years, and I wasn't....

The ghost of the scent from the elevator chased past me.

Goose bumps scrambled across the back of my neck, and all of a sudden, I was fighting the urge to look behind me. Worse, I was inhaling and hoping for another glimpse of that man, for another chance to breathe near him, for another—*oh God*. What was I doing?

Maybe I had been alone too long.

Or maybe I just needed to get out of New York as soon as possible.

This place, this city—I couldn't be here. Not if I wanted to retain my sanity. The memories I'd been shoving down, the meeting with Carlos, this dip of my foot back into the scene, into this corner of the art world, I didn't know what I was thinking. I couldn't do this and come out unscathed.

Ami's words tracked back across the path they'd already embedded in my subconscious, tamping down my resistance like a worn trail.

You can take the car to JFK and fly back to Italy if that's what you want to do.

Italy.

A modicum of hope filled my lungs with a brief reprieve. Ami had been wrong about me being mysterious, but I was elusive. Or I tried to be. I avoided the contemporary art scene. I preferred to be as hard to get a hold of as possible. I hid in plain sight behind a canvas, and I never stayed anywhere for more than a couple months.

I knew I was changing my mind about staying for the opening before I'd even finished my last thought.

As soon as I was done here, I was going to take a cab back to my shitty midtown hotel, grab my carry-on, then head to JFK. I didn't care what it cost or how long I had to wait. I'd sit in the airport until I was back on a plane, putting an ocean between me and this city.

Distracted, but feeling marginally better with my new plan, I was reaching for the glass door of the famous restaurant when a hand suddenly came from behind me and covered mine.

"Remember my voice," a deep, dark tenor ordered as intoxicating musk and minty breath fluttered past my senses.

My body reacted with fear, and I flinched, but the electrical current that struck my hand and shocked every single one of my nerves as it made my mouth open with an unladylike gasp was anything but fear.

Involuntarily, I looked up.

Piercing slate eyes met my reflection in the glass of the restaurant door, and the noise of the busy hotel lobby instantly fell away.

I fell away.

The man from the elevator.

I was staring at the man in the leather jacket from the elevator, and even with the distortion from the reflection, I saw every chiseled angle of his face. But this time, his hair wasn't hanging halfway over his eyes, and God help me, he was the most devastatingly, unapproachably, impossibly attractive man I had ever seen.

He was also the most dangerous-looking man I had ever made eye contact with as he stared me down with a warning so cold, my entire body turned to ice.

I couldn't have heard him right. "Pardon?"

"You heard me." He opened the door, then his hand landed on the small of my back. "Walk inside." Gently but firmly, he pushed me into the Michelin-starred restaurant.

I stepped over the threshold.

His heat and the dark, metallic, masculine scent from the elevator retreated, and I looked back.

He was gone.

As if he'd melted into the crowd, or as if I'd imagined him, not even his unruly jet-black hair or his height was visible.

Another muscled man wearing all black approached me before I could reach the hostess. "This way, Miss Laurent." Without waiting to see if I acknowledged him, he turned toward the restaurant, bypassing the dark motif of the bar with red neon lighting.

"I thought I was meeting Mr. Carlos in the bar."

The man didn't comment as he walked into the depths of an already dark restaurant. Stopping two meters away from the very last table, he tipped his chin toward a waiting Carlos.

My nerves ratcheted up as I approached the four-top, and the man himself stood.

"Anneliese." He smiled, and wrinkles appeared in the corners of his eyes. "Have a seat." He pulled a chair out.

I briefly wondered how old he was, but his skin was tanned, his suit was custom and his teeth were perfectly white. He could have said he was thirty-five or fifty, and I would've believed either.

Careful not to thank him, I nodded in acknowledgment as I sat.

He pushed my chair in with the strength of someone closer to thirty than fifty. Or someone just used to manhandling women.

Taking his seat again, he raked his gaze over my chest before looking at my eyes. "I hope you're hungry. I've taken the liberty of ordering."

I was starving before I'd met him. Now I was just nauseous. "Unfortunately, I won't have time for a meal." I pulled my phone out. "I have images of the paintings, and the prints are on the dining table in your suite, arranged in four groupings with three paintings in each grouping."

“Ah. Twelve paintings, then.” He looked at me as if waiting for me to comment on the additional money he’d spent.

I didn’t.

He looked over my shoulder and nodded. “What do you drink, Anneliese?”

“Water’s fine.”

A waiter appeared. “Sir?”

“The lady will have a glass of Prosecco.” Carlos smiled at me. “To remind you of Italy.”

I lied. “I don’t drink.”

Carlos raised his eyebrows. “No? You’re living in Italy and you don’t drink?” He didn’t wait for an answer I wouldn’t have given, and something more than concern crawled across my nerves as I wondered how he knew I’d been in Italy.

I’d specifically not said anything in my bio or social media accounts about where I traveled or lived, either previously or currently. Minus my geo locations associated with my groupings of paintings for the show, I kept my exact whereabouts private.

Not addressing his Italy comment, I made a mental note to ask Ami if she had said anything to him, and then I lied again. “That’s correct. I don’t drink.”

“Then how about a cappuccino? Espresso? Sparkling water? You must have something,” he insisted.

Cappuccinos were my kryptonite, and even with the horrible roll of anxiety surging in my stomach like a tidal wave, my mouth watered for one, but I wasn’t going to indulge. Having any kind of a drink with this man would send the wrong message, and I didn’t plan on being in his presence for a second longer than I had to. “Still water is fine.”

Carlos glanced at the waiter. “She’ll have sparkling water.”

“Right away, sir.” The waiter hastily retreated.

Carlos picked up the drink he already had. It looked and smelled like tequila. “So, Anneliese from Italy, tell me how you became an artist.”

“You’ve purchased three hundred thousand dollars’ worth of paintings, and you know nothing about me?” With the second mention of Italy, my instincts were telling me he was lying. He knew more about me than I was comfortable with, but those same instincts were telling me it had nothing to do with my art. This sit-down, the meeting at the gallery—neither felt random. Mr. Carlos had homed in on me for a reason. I just didn’t want to know or deal with whatever the reasons were because none that came to mind were even remotely acceptable. I’d keep my promise to Ami to follow this through, then I was gone.

“Like I said, I’m not an expert.” He took a healthy swallow of his drink.

“Then why purchase any art at all?” I shouldn’t have baited him. I shouldn’t do anything except nod or give agreeable responses, considering the money he’d spent, but every minute that ticked by, the more upset I became that my work was going to be in his possession.

He chuckled arrogantly as if I were nothing more than a child. “I knew you would not be as reticent once I got you out of the gallery.” He tipped his glass at my hair. “Redheads have tempers.”

The waiter reappeared. “Ma’am.” He set sparkling water with lime next to me. “Can I get you anything else before your order arrives?”

“No, thank you, and I won’t be staying to eat.”

The waiter looked from me to Carlos.

“She’s staying. You may leave.”

Taking the out Carlos gave him, the waiter rushed off.

Carlos amped up his smile. “Like I said, temper.”

I refrained from getting up and walking out. “I can assure you, I’m not temperamental. But I am on a schedule.” I swiped

to open my cell and brought up an image of the first grouping of paintings. Then I turned the screen to face him and set the phone on the table in front of him. “These are from the Antigua series.”

“Excellent.” Not taking his eyes off mine, he didn’t even look at the picture.

Ignoring his blatant disrespect, I reached and swiped to the next image. “This grouping is from Aruba.” I took a sip of the water.

“Even better.” Still staring at me, he took another swallow of his drink.

I drank and swiped again. “These are from Spain—Madrid and two vistas overlooking the Balearic Sea.”

“Mm-hmm.” He focused on my mouth.

Sicker by the moment that my art was being wasted on this swine, I swiped one last time and lied. “The final grouping is from Marseille.” The sparkling water was wet, I was thirsty and the bubbles were diluting the acid in my stomach, or so I told myself.

“None from Italy or Greece?”

“No.” Yes, three that Ami had insisted I include because she’d said he’d mentioned an interest in the countries. Two from Italy—Sorrento and Crotona. One from Corfu. But I’d told him they were from France because I could. Maintaining eye contact, challenging him to call me on my lie, I finished my water.

“Shame.” He finished his drink. “Or perhaps fortuitous.” His eyes narrowed, and his expression morphed into an intended threat. “My yacht is waiting for us in Italy.” He leaned forward. “You can paint for me from there.”

That was when I first felt it.

Dizzy.

His head blurred.

My tongue got thick.

“Should I keep up the charade and ask if you would like to go on my yacht, Anneliese?”

I tried to speak. “Whaa?” The restaurant obscured into an abstract landscape.

One ugly smile distorted into two. “That’s what I thought.” His head moved in slow motion. “Andros, we’re ready.”

I had the sensation of standing up without moving my body.

Silverware clanked.

Voices muted.

I faded into the negative space of the canvas.

SEVEN

Kilo

I slid into the passenger side of the company Range Rover idling in front of the hotel and shut my door. “We’ve got a problem.”

Alpha pulled into evening Manhattan traffic. “I saw.” He spared me a glance. “Carlos.”

“Carlos,” I confirmed.

“He’s a long way from his territory.” Taking a corner, Alpha headed toward our Manhattan offices.

“Cartel meets ISIS.” A fucking problem was an understatement. “I should blow his yacht on principle.”

“We don’t know that Carlos is selling to ISIS, and the last intel I saw on him, he didn’t own his own yacht.”

“Carlos has the cash and an army of foot soldiers to do whatever the hell he wants, including buying or commandeering a hundred fucking yachts. Unless that intel you saw was only hours old, we don’t know what he currently has.” No wonder that suit fuck was being so goddamn cagey. “And who else besides terrorists would Carlos be meeting in the Mediterranean?”

Alpha changed lanes. “Italians. One of the three families.”

This wasn’t mafia. “The Vincenzo and Arcuri families have their own suppliers, and your friend Massimo Vincenzo financially crippled the Mantovanis.”

“Vincenzo’s a contact, not a friend, and where did you hear that intel?”

Contact or friend, I didn't care. It didn't change facts. Massimo Vincenzo was mafia, he was the head of his family, and the Sicilians didn't play nice with Carlos. "Despite what my medical discharge paperwork says, I can fucking hear." And I listened. More than I spoke. "Chatter's everywhere. You know that better than I do. Regardless, whatever the fuck Carlos is up to, that redhead is walking into a hornet's nest, and she looked nervous as hell."

"I saw." Alpha pulled into the underground parking of our Manhattan location. "What did you say to her?"

The woman already taking up room in my headspace, I replayed the way she'd looked at me in the reflection of that glass. "I told her to remember my voice."

Alpha pulled into a parking spot and cut the engine before he looked at me. "Because?"

"We both know you decided to take the assignment the second that suit fuck mentioned a woman was in the crosshairs." I knew Alpha. I knew how he operated.

Santiago Carlos had been a problem since before I'd joined the Teams. My entire military career, he'd been a high-value target, still was. The caveat was that the brass wanted Carlos brought in alive so they could interrogate him. So far, no one had ever gotten close enough to do it. Carlos traveled with a pack of suicide soldiers and had pulled a gun on himself enough times for everyone to get the message. If he was going down, it wasn't gonna be while he was breathing. But Alpha was no longer a SEAL, the brass could fuck off, and Carlos was a top-five contender on every agency's terrorist list.

"You told her to remember your voice because you don't like to be seen." Not denying that he was going to take the assignment, Alpha glanced at me. "One problem. She already got a visual when you opened the door for her."

"She also caught us in the elevator." Didn't matter. Neither were enough to peg me or him. "Not the point. You're going to send me in to take out that shipment. If the redhead's on board, all she'll need to remember is my voice because I'll be going in dark."

“The redhead,” Alpha stated knowingly.

I didn’t comment. I knew what the hell he was implying. He thought I’d already personalized the mission by referring to the color of the woman’s hair, but unlike him and everyone else at AES, my MO wasn’t playing hero. I left the rescuing of civilians to the other Team guys. They assumed I didn’t give a fuck about casualties or collateral damage, and I let them. The truth was fucking worse.

“Pelorus,” Alpha added absently as he focused straight ahead.

Pelorus. *Pelorus*. Goddamn it. I knew that fucking name, but my brain wasn’t making the connection. “Pelorus,” I repeated.

Alpha tipped his chin as he scanned the garage. “Last I heard, she’s in the Mediterranean. The partial images in the contact’s folder could be a match.”

I made the connection. A one-hundred-and-fifteen-meter custom-built superyacht with a steel hull and aluminum superstructure. Two helipads, two tenders, and over fifty fucking crew and staff. The three-hundred-and-seventy-seven-foot motor yacht was a goddamn floating city. She was also owned by a Russian oligarch, and we’d breached her twice on the Teams for recon.

I put together what Alpha was throwing down. “Carlos is selling to the Russians?” If so, the redhead had really fucking stepped in it.

“Possibly. Let’s go upstairs and get a hold of November.” Alpha opened his door.

Nathan “November” Rhys was AES’s resident hacker, overwatch, and all-around tech whiz. He hacked, tracked, and desecrated everything digital. The defiling he left for women. Or so I’d heard. Didn’t care. Same as with everyone else at AES and on the Teams, I never got involved in their shit. Not unless it was mission critical.

Right now, as far as I was concerned, time-wise, reading in November wasn’t mission critical. “I don’t need to go

upstairs.” I needed to get on a plane.

Alpha threw me a glance with a raised eyebrow.

“You’re sending me to wherever the fuck Carlos’s shipment is. I don’t need to be in a command room, getting sitreps from sat images. I need to be on a plane. Then, depending on the location of the yacht, I’ll need a helo drop or a Zodiac.”

Alpha shut his door. “If we do this, you’re not going in solo.”

“You know how I work.” I’d explicitly laid out my terms when I’d started working for him. No other operatives within my blast zones. Full stop.

“We don’t know how many civilians will be on board.”

“It’s Carlos.” The crucial part of that statement I left unsaid. It didn’t matter who the fuck was on that damn boat. They all knew who they were getting in bed with when they’d boarded.

“There’ll be women,” Alpha warned.

The image of the redhead flashed in my head again. “You think there’s a single female in the northern fucking hemisphere who doesn’t know who Santiago Carlos is?” His name alone was synonymous with cartel. But even as I said it, believed it, and didn’t hold any particular sympathy for anyone who willingly got on a yacht owned, borrowed or inhabited by Carlos or his men, I couldn’t stop that goddamn image of the haunted redhead from hitting my brainwaves again.

Reading me like a damn book, Alpha called me on my shit. “I think you told Anneliese Laurent to remember your voice.”

“Because I’m going to infil after dark. Don’t pretend you don’t know the contingencies. If she’s caught in the crosshairs, if she’s on board before we get there, if I have to tell her to evac, then she knows my voice and hopefully won’t fucking give up my location.” Or scream. And I wouldn’t have to silence her.

The excuse was half shit, and Alpha knew it. “You’re hoping she’ll be on the yacht.”

I heard what he’d said. I was fully fucking cognizant of his word choice. I wasn’t hoping for shit. “She’s in Cut having dinner. I’m assuming she’ll be on the boat once Carlos gets his ass back there, which we both know will be soon and the reason why we need a head start.” Carlos rarely made public appearances. Showing his face in Manhattan, sitting at a Michelin-starred restaurant, he was either desperate or fucking with that CIA suit. Either way, he wasn’t going to be here long.

“The female walked into Cut,” Alpha corrected. “We have no idea where she is now.”

That.

Right there.

Fucking Alpha.

“Is that supposed to be a carrot?” Because it was. Which really pissed me off. I didn’t do redheads. I didn’t do attachments. I didn’t get involved. My head was fucked enough. No one needed to know my shit.

“No,” Alpha stated. “It’s factual. We also don’t know where Carlos is heading next or if he’s taking her with him.”

I glared at him.

Expression locked, he stared back.

“Don’t handle me,” I warned. “I don’t need a reality check.”

“I’ve never known you to operate in reality.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

Alpha held his stare like the Team Leader he’d been and still was, unyielding and resolute. “When are you coming in?”

“From?”

“Your self-imposed exile.”

“I’m not in exile.” That was exactly where I was. Since I was a kid. Since my second op on the Teams. The former I didn’t think about. The latter I didn’t excuse. I’d been too goddamn green, and I’d made a rookie mistake. I didn’t give a fuck what the after-action review concluded—it’d cost two SEALs their lives. That’s when I’d stopped attempting to be a teammate, stopped calling myself a brother, and became what I’d always been—fucking dispensable.

After that, I owned my reality. If anyone was going out, it’d be my ass, not theirs. That’d become my motto, and it’d fucking stuck. *Me over them*. I hadn’t lost any Team guys since, and I didn’t plan on doing so now. “I do my job.” However and whatever that entailed, as long as Alpha and everyone else at AES stayed alive. “End of.”

“You’re going to have to step off that ledge sometime.”

“What fucking ledge?” I didn’t do this bullshit. “Save your hyperboles for someone who gives a fuck.” We weren’t friends. “There’s already a timer on this op.” If the alphabet soup fuck was right, that yacht was Oscar Tango Mike with a shipment of arms pegged for terrorists, and now I really wanted to blow something up. I also wanted my head underwater where I didn’t have to think about anything other than muscle memory. “We doing this or not?”

“We need more intel. Not the least of which is what kind of vessel Carlos has.”

“You already said it was the Pelorus. Steel hull, aluminum superstructure.” Not that it mattered what type of fucking boat it was. I could breach, detonate and sink any craft. That’s what I did. A shipment of arms was only an added bonus. A few strategically placed charges, and the problem was solved.

“I only said where the Pelorus was and that it was a possible match. I didn’t say that was where Carlos was hiding the arms. We still need confirmation.” Alpha laid down the law. “And the female lives.”

“If you say so.” That was another thing I didn’t give a fuck about—who I killed. As long as it wasn’t a Teams guy or

another Tier One or service member, I was good to go. Anyone else I didn't give a fuck about.

I hadn't since that FUBAR op.

Who the fuck was I kidding? I hadn't since I was a kid.

I used to tell myself the kills were retribution. Eye for an eye, righting wrongs, avenging the deaths of those who went out fighting. Now I didn't fucking bother. It was what it was, and I was past redemption.

"I say so," Alpha confirmed before tipping his chin toward my six. "Heads up."

The rear passenger door of the SUV opened.

Reflexive and automatic, I drew as I pivoted.

The barrel of my Glock was aimed dead center on the chest of the only motherfucker more detached than me as he slid into the back seat. His deadlocked expression zeroed in on my glare before he glanced at Alpha. "You're gonna want to roll out STAT."

"Blade," Alpha stated in both greeting and acknowledgment as he started up the Range Rover. "Heading?"

"North." Staring through me, Blade addressed Alpha as he pulled his door shut. "You didn't tell him I was here."

"I wasn't sure if I'd need to." Alpha reversed out of the parking spot.

I holstered my 9mm. "Both of you can fuck off."

Blade asked the literal million-dollar question. "We taking the job?"

"Cleanup on Ground Branch's fuckup? What do you think?" I scanned the street as Alpha pulled out of the garage.

"I think I don't give a shit who fucked up. Carlos is in our sights, and it's past time for that motherfucker to go down, but you need to step on it."

Alpha stopped for a red light, and we both looked back at Blade.

“Yeah, I fucking saw Carlos. While you two were sitting on your asses, one of his bodyguards walked out of the back of Cut, carrying an unconscious redhead. Ten seconds later, Carlos followed. Both times the hotel manager, some fucker named Jonathan Dahlgren—already sent his pic to November for facial rec—held the door open to the service alley. Dahlgren also let Carlos’s men park back there.” Blade tipped his chin at the gridlock in front of us before checking the magazine on his piece. “Two black Escalades, six blocks ahead of us. Confirmed visual of five headcount on Carlos’s security detail, but who the fuck knows how many armed assholes are in those SUVs.” He rattled off the plate numbers.

“Goddamn it.” Blowing through the red light, Alpha maneuvered through cross traffic. “Kilo, get November on the line.”

I was already dialing.

EIGHT

Anneliese

Cold.

My body hummed....

No, something else hummed.

Not cold. Chilly. Goose bumps. I needed a blanket.

So tired.

My throat was parched.

So dry.

Dizzy.

Speak.

Too much effort.

Sleep.... *Sleep.*

NINE

Kilo

November answered on the first ring. “Command.”

“You know who it is.” Fucker knew my burner numbers. He supplied all of us with the damn phones. “We need a sitrep on a redhead that was removed from the rear exit of Cut at the Four Seasons and put into a black Escalade. The SUV has an identical escort. Plate numbers....” Not trusting my memory, the phone already on speaker, I held it back toward Blade.

He recited the intel.

“Copy,” November acknowledged. “Pulling up security and street cams now. Directional heading?”

“North on West Street. Most likely Teterboro,” Alpha answered. “But Santiago Carlos is in the second Escalade, and he rarely plays by the book. Ping our location. They’re six blocks ahead of us and slowing. What are we looking at besides the West 30th Street Heliport?”

“Hold,” November answered.

“This is fucking Manhattan,” Blade muttered. “If Carlos is going up in a bird, pick a high-rise. You could take off from practically anywhere.”

“Not since nineteen seventy-seven,” I corrected, pissed that my mind could remember useless shit like this and not the fucking Pelorus when Alpha first mentioned it. “No LZs on top of high-rises in New York City. It’s illegal.”

“Since when does Carlos do what’s fucking legal?” Blade asked.

“November?” Ignoring me and Blade, Alpha cut through traffic and closed in on one of the blocks between us and the Escalades.

“I’ve got the SUVs. Tracking their GPS now, but Blade’s technically correct.” November paused like he was typing. “You could land on any number of buildings.”

“Carlos won’t risk that. Switch to sat imagery and give me a sitrep on any helos parked at the West 30th Street Heliport.” Alpha blew through another traffic light.

“Keep it up, and you’re gonna draw Carlos’s driver’s attention,” Blade warned.

“Good,” Alpha clipped. “November?”

“Images loading now,” November answered. “Five helos currently parked at the heliport. Two are Bell 407s belonging to the airport transport service, BLADE. Tracing the tail numbers of the other three.”

“Start with anything medium-sized,” Alpha ordered. “Ten to twelve passenger capacity and up.”

I glanced at the Escalades that were stopped at a red light four blocks in front of us. “That heliport is public. What makes you think he’s heading there instead of the Hudson Parkway?” Carrying an unconscious woman across a flyway in NYC was bold, even for Carlos.

“Just a hunch. November?”

“There’s a Sikorsky and an Airbus,” November replied. “Both charters. Third helo’s a private Robinson R66. Air traffic chatter has one of BLADE’s fleet leaving and two more incoming.”

“I say call it.” Blade chambered a round. “The Escalades are slowing, they’ve got a hostage, and Carlos knows they would’ve been picked up on a hundred different security and street cams by now. He’s going for one of those birds. It’s the fastest way out of Manhattan.”

Alpha glanced at me and raised an eyebrow.

I knew what he was asking.

Location, exposure, timing—this was a three-man op, minimum. I didn't do ops. Not like this. Not anymore.

“Clock's ticking,” Blade warned as the traffic light four blocks ahead of us turned green. “We take the gamble now, or we don't take it at all.”

“Kilo,” Alpha stated.

The Escalades accelerated, and the image of the redhead flashed through my mind.

Fuck. “Go.”

Alpha floored the SUV and took the next left. “November, hack into those charters' flight logs and client bookings. Keep an eye on those two helos and find me somewhere to park, STAT. We'll be cutting this close.”

“Copy. Nearest parking is at 207 12th Avenue, but then you're on foot for two-tenths of a mile. Use BLADE's staging area at their lounge. Leave the Range Rover.”

“There,” Blade interrupted. “They turned toward the heliport.”

“Fuck.” Alpha scanned the traffic and piers. “November, we've got heavy pedestrian and vehicle traffic, no time to spot, and no sniper position. I need headcounts for those Escalades. Use heat signature sat imagery, traffic cams, whatever you have to.”

“Checking now,” November replied. “Eight upright headcount, one horizontal.”

Blade swore under his breath. “Seven fucking suicide soldiers, the cartel king, an unconscious hostage, and the middle of goddamn Manhattan. Whatever the fuck you think is gonna go wrong, will.”

Alpha threw Blade a warning look in the rearview mirror. “The female hostage is our priority.”

“Carlos is the HVT,” Blade argued. “He goes down first.”

Both Alpha and I said, “No,” at the same time.

“This isn’t the Teams.” Alpha blew through an intersection. “We’re not causing a shitstorm, jurisdictional or otherwise, and we are not—I repeat—*not* drawing any more attention than we have to. Female hostage, then Carlos. Capture only.”

Blade didn’t let it go. “Last I checked, Carlos is kill or capture.”

Before Alpha could reply, November cut in. “The Sikorsky is registered through a shell corporation, and its blades are running. Airspace queue pending.”

“Block that clearance,” Alpha ordered November as he pulled into the heliport’s staging area.

“Already working on it,” November replied.

“Won’t matter.” Blade tossed an extra magazine for my Glock onto my lap before handing me and Alpha comms. “The second Carlos sees us, he’ll make sure that pilot takes off, clearance or not.”

Alpha ignored Blade’s comment. “November, start scrubbing all security cams. Maintain overwatch. Switching to comms.”

“Copy.” November ended the call, and I pocketed my cell.

Fitting in his earpiece before scanning the heliport, Alpha unholstered his 9mm and issued orders. “Weapons down on approach. Flank north and south. Advance with caution. Smooth and fast. Hold to draw until we’re in position.”

“Christ,” Blade muttered. “Every one of those bodyguard fucks is armed. You think they won’t draw the second they see us?”

“Fifty-fifty, but it doesn’t matter.” Alpha checked his magazine. “We’re not taking the first shot. If they fire, then shoot to kill. Two bodyguards each, call your shots through comms, but Carlos and the man carrying the female remain breathing. Questions?”

“Too many to count. Taking north.” Blade got out of the SUV.

“Taking south.” Palming my Glock, my comm in, I shoved my door open.

“Flanking east,” Alpha called, casually getting out of the Range Rover before dropping his voice. “Go, go, go.”

Fanning out in a precision tactical maneuver on a busy Manhattan heliport, we were Oscar Tango Mike.

TEN

Anneliese

Something hard under me, pressure dug into my back and legs.

Nausea hit.

Oh no. *No, no, no.* Don't vomit. My dress, my bag, the painting—

Angry voices erupted.

Not English.

Not English.

Oh God.

Leave.

Move.

Get out. Legs. Arms. *Run.*

Can't move.

Men yelling.

Oh God.

Open your eyes. Yell. *Yell.* "Stoop."

"Shut the fuck up, bitch."

Bile.

Lurching.

"I swear to God, if you hurl on me, I will fucking kill you. You hear me, bitch?"

My body was shaken.

I heaved.

“*¡Para el coche! ¡Abre la puerta!* She’s gonna fucking hurl!”

Jerked forward.

Jostled back.

Cold slapped me in the face.

Engines roared.

Shouting.

Hair whipping.

Head spinning.

Running....

Running.

“Put the woman down!”

“You want her? Fucking shoot me.”

Shouting.

Not shouting—popping.

High whine.

Stomach dropping.

Swaying.

Swaying.

Nothing.

ELEVEN

Kilo

“Too many eyes on us, Alpha,” Blade warned through comms as he came up the north side of the Sikorsky.

Striding across the heliport, Alpha scanned the pier. “Stay mission focused. They haven’t noticed us yet.”

The asshole carrying the redhead and two of the other bodyguards walked right past Alpha.

“They fucking see us.” Blade disappeared from my line of sight. “They just don’t give a shit.”

Making like I was heading for the next helo over, I doubled back and hit the rear of the Sikorsky. “In position. Holding.”

“North position,” Blade replied. “Holding.”

“Waiting on Carlos to exit the vehicle.” Alpha made a wide arc across the front of the helipad. “Kilo, Blade, maintain positions. November, sitrep.”

November’s voice came through the comms. “Security cams on approach scrubbed. Hacking heliport’s feeds now. Chatter on ground control. Charter requested immediate liftoff. Ran radio interference once. Two BLADE helos incoming. BLADE employee approaching the Range Rover.”

One of the bodyguards opened a passenger door of the Sikorsky for the asshole holding the redhead.

My jaw fucking ticked.

Blade cursed. “We’re out of time, Alpha. The second they board that bird, we’ve lost them.”

“Maintain positions,” Alpha ordered, slowing his pace as the second Escalade’s rear door opened. “Hold.... *Hold.*”

Carlos got out of the SUV.

I fucking aimed. Right through the windscreen of the helo. “Target in my sights. I have control.” But the window was closing. Fast.

“Take the fucking shot,” Blade clipped. “I’ve got the two bodyguards on the southeast side. Let’s shut this shit down.”

Three things happened at once.

Carlos spotted Alpha. The asshole holding the redhead spotted me, and the bodyguard next to Carlos drew.

The rest of the fucks fell in line like dominos until seven guns were aimed at us.

Calculated and smooth, I repositioned two inches, and the asshole was in my sights. “Put the woman down!”

For half a second, it was a standoff.

“You want her? Fucking shoot me.” Then the asshole let go of the redhead’s legs, drew and fired.

The heliport pier erupted into a firestorm.

Shots went over my head. I took out one guard. The asshole pulled the redhead in front of him like a shield and dove for the helo. I dropped another bodyguard. Blade took out two more. Alpha fell in on Carlos’s six as he ran for the private helo surrounded by bodyguards laying down automatic fire, and the Sikorsky’s rotors spun faster.

Then one of the Escalades floored it across the flyway, aiming for Alpha.

Blade and I unloaded on the vehicle.

The SUV crashed into a parked helo.

The R66 pilot was pulled from the bird by one of the bodyguards and shot point-blank before Carlos and his men

got on.

The Sikorsky lifted off with the asshole and the redhead.

The R66 followed.

“*Airbus*,” Alpha barked through the comms.

We ran for the other charter.

Hitting the helo first, Blade wrenched the pilot’s door open, weapon aimed. “Get the fuck out. NOW.”

Hands up, the pilot stumbled onto the apron.

Alpha took his place. I took second chair. Blade got in back.

We lifted off.

TWELVE

Anneliese

There it was.

The sway.

Gentle, easy... nice.

Ocean.

Ocean.

Whirling. Fast.

That wasn't the sound of waves.

My stomach dipped.

Oh God. Nauseous.

Wait.

Was I safe?

Focus. Don't vomit.

Drifting.

Stay awake.

Do not vomit.

Stay awake.

Floating.

THIRTEEN

Kilo

“Anyone hit?” Alpha demanded as he banked east over the Hudson River.

“Negative,” both Blade and I replied.

Alpha swapped his comms for a headset, then rapidly communicated with ATC before throwing up his mic and issuing orders. “Blade, call our contact at Teterboro. Have him start prechecks on the Gulfstream. Kilo, get November on cleanup at the heliport STAT. Then have him patch in the CIA contact over open frequency.”

Blade beat me to the obvious. “You use the radio, and both of those birds ahead of us will know what the fuck is up.”

“Intentional,” Alpha clipped. “I want them to know we’re coming, and I want to hold our contact to the fire. The asshole didn’t give us an ID on the HVT when he knew damn well who we were dealing with. He can answer to us now over open lines.” The radio squawked, and Alpha flipped his mic down to answer ATC as we skirted restricted airspace.

Blade made his call.

I spoke into my comms as we climbed to a thousand feet. “November, copy?”

“Roger,” November replied as heavy static sounded. “You’re a go.”

“Full sweep at heliport. Alpha off comms. We need the CIA contact patched in over open frequency.”

Another burst of static sounded before I got confirmation. “Copy. Hold.”

“Holding,” I relayed to Alpha as he turned north and pushed the Airbus to full throttle.

“A fucking helo chase,” Blade ground out.

November came back through comms. “Standing by with Alpha’s request. Switch frequencies.” He rattled off the number.

Glancing at Alpha, I repeated the open air-to-air helicopter frequency, hoping like fuck he knew what he was doing. “One twenty-three oh-two-five?”

“Roger,” November confirmed.

Alpha nodded.

I adjusted the radio. “Confirmed.”

“Patching in,” November answered.

I threw on a headset, and the fucking suit’s voice came through the radio transmission. “Airbus November-two-one-one-four-Oscar-Bravo, Foxtrot-Sierra, do you copy?”

Foxtrot-Sierra. Four Seasons. What a fucking tool.

Alpha replied in semi-code. “Foxtrot-Sierra, November-two-one-one-four-Oscar-Bravo. Charlie in sights. Additional cargo on board. Advise.”

The asshole suit paused. “Airbus November-two-one-one-four-Oscar-Bravo, unauthorized cargo?”

My fucking jaw ground as the Sikorsky and the R66 approached Teterboro.

“Foxtrot-Sierra, affirmative,” Alpha replied before warning the fucking suit we were out of time. “On approach to Teterboro. Four minutes.”

November interrupted through comms. “A Learjet 60 charter on the apron at Teterboro just requested to up their slot time and taxi for takeoff. Italian crew, no passenger manifest. The Sikorsky is incoming to its location.”

“Copy,” Blade answered November.

Alpha outright asked the suit fuck. “Foxtrot-Sierra, ground support?”

The asshole didn’t pause this time. “Negative.”

“Copy, Foxtrot-Sierra,” Alpha replied. “We have control.”

The suit fuck lost his shit. “Negative, November-two-one-one-four-Oscar-Bravo! You do *not* have control. I repeat—”

Alpha flipped the radio to Teterboro’s frequency as the Sikorsky landed. “Teterboro approach, Airbus November-two-one-one-four-Oscar-Bravo requesting clearance for landing.”

I took off the headset and spoke into my comm. “November, what’s the flight plan for that Learjet?”

Static was my only response.

I glanced back at Blade. “You know the range on that Learjet?”

“About twenty-five hundred miles. Why?”

“Calculating.” The Learjet would need two refuels to get to southern Italy. Our Gulfstream would make it in one shot. That bought enough time for a helo transport to get me within range of the Pelorus but not enough time to get a Zodiac out there. Which meant underwater infil and exfil, and remote detonation. I fucking hated remote detonation, especially with an amphibious assault. Not that I was completely against technology—only the added variables that came with it.

Blade tipped his chin past me. “Second bird’s landing. Our options just shit the bed.”

“Only at Teterboro.” The airport was too busy to risk another repeat of the West 30th Street Heliport. Carlos had been ballsy enough to fire at us on the New York public flyway, but he wasn’t stupid. He wouldn’t engage at a heavily traveled airport on US soil if he didn’t have to. “You get a hold of Alpha’s guy who works ground control?” I knew the contact moonlighted for AES. He was on payroll for this exact type of scenario. Not that I’d ever paid attention to who it was

or bothered to program the number. I hated cell phones almost as much as detonations that weren't hardwired.

"Yeah," Blade replied. "He said it'd take him a minute to get to the G650. Not much of a head start on the precheck."

In my world, fractions of seconds counted. "It'll be enough. Alpha and I left the Gulfstream fueled up." I knew where the fuck Carlos was heading.

Blade put it together. "Take the fight to Carlos's turf?"

"Not his turf, but yeah."

"Italy?"

"Tyrrhenian sea. Remember the Pelorus?"

"Big fucking yacht owned by a Russian. What of it?"

"Carlos has a boat loaded with arms. Alpha thinks it's the Pelorus. Nine-figure sale. Going down soon according to the suit we met with earlier."

"*Jesus fucking Christ,*" Blade muttered. "Tell me he's not selling to the Russians."

"No intel on who the buyer is."

"In other words, the CIA dick didn't know. Shocker." Leaning back in his seat as Alpha descended, Blade's gaze cut to the west side of the helo. "How does the redhead tie in?"

"Don't know." I followed his glance.

Carlos and his remaining men were spilling out of the R66 like ants. The asshole carrying the redhead got out of the Sikorsky. As his feet touched the apron, his shoulder hit the frame, and he jerked left to compensate. The redhead's temple slammed into the open door.

I made a fucking vow. "I'm gonna kill that motherfucker."

"Get in line," Blade retorted.

We touched down twenty meters from the Sikorsky's position, but we were too late.

The Learjet was already taxiing with Carlos, his men, and the redhead on board as the crew pulled up the airstairs.

Alpha quickly shut down the helo's rotors, then tossed his headset as he scanned the apron for trouble. "Let's move before we have someone on us for this helo."

Blade glanced toward the row of parked planes where the Learjet had just been. "Where's the Gulfstream?"

"Across the apron. Brief-term parking was full. We're in overnight parking." Alpha flipped a few final switches on the Airbus.

"Fucking great. Oscar Tango Mike." Blade got out of the helo.

I glanced at Alpha. "Why'd you really use the radio to contact the suit?"

"Because November would record the conversation, and I was testing him."

I caught up. "You knew he was operating rogue."

"I suspected."

Now we had confirmation. "Protocol." The suit didn't follow it. "The time warning on our approach that you gave him." Four minutes or not, the fuck would've followed procedure and called it in if he was running this op on the books. There could've been a dozen airport security and local law enforcement on those two helos the second they'd landed. They would've held them until the CIA could get their asses over here.

"Protocol," Alpha confirmed. "He didn't follow it."

And November caught it on audio to cover our asses. "Cutting the suit out?"

"No need for him now. Let's retrieve the female and see what's on that yacht." Alpha opened his door, but then paused to give me his signature Team Leader look. "Disposal of a hundred million in munitions is no small task."

No shit. You'd see the explosion from space. But that wasn't what he was after. Alpha knew my deal. He had copies of my medical and discharge papers. I'd ask where the hell my headspace was at too if I were him right now, but I was getting

fucking tired of this tea party. “If I have anything to report, you’ll be the first to know. No need to check in.”

“I am anyway. Not just about the assignment, but also the target it’ll put on your back if we have to compromise taking down Carlos to prioritize the female and the arms.”

“I don’t plan to fucking miss Carlos a second time. Do you?”

“No.”

“Good. Then let’s get to that boat first so I can rig it.”

“Copy that.”

FOURTEEN

Anneliese

A sudden inhale, and everything was woozy.

My body swayed.

My head felt like it was floating, and my eyes wouldn't open.

I smelled... wind?

Light, breezy, soft air, not cold.

Not cold at all.

Relief.

I didn't care about my eyes. More air in my lungs.

Ah.

Summer breeze.

The side of my mouth almost tipped up.

Temperate. Perfect. Like an evening in Santorini. Lazy, distant, the lull of seagulls cawing their good nights, the gentle drift of swells, the scent of crisp linen. Oh, I missed that scent.

I missed this. I wanted to....

Wait.

What was this?

Where was this?

My mind reached.

Italy? Milan?

Yes, Milan. My storage facility.

Except...

No traffic noise. No scent of coffee and stonework and city and heat.

City.

New York.

Oh shit. New York.

The bad place.

I didn't like New York.

No, that wasn't right.

New York didn't like me.

Angry, cold, the city spit people out as fast as they arrived. It ate hopes and dreams. It regurgitated them into brokenness.

It broke me.

He broke me.

Don't go to New York.

Bad things happen there.

Stay away.

An ocean away.

Yes. Far, far away.

Oh!

Italy. Milan. Yes. Wait. No. Coastal? No. Ocean? No. Think.... *Think.* Sunsets. Vibrant. Amalfi Coast? Okay, yes. That was far. I'd made sure. Far away. An ocean away, away from....

So tired.

What was I thinking?

Ocean. Yes.

I inhaled to capture that blessed scent, but my ears popped.

“She's coming to.”

Popped?

“Fucking take care of it.”

Wait.

“I already gave her—”

Voices?

“Do I need to remind you what happens when you don’t do your job?”

“No.”

Fire stabbed into my arm. Pain radiated, and I swayed.

Wait.

The ocean faded to nothing.

FIFTEEN

Kilo

An hour over the Atlantic, Alpha engaged the Gulfstream's autopilot and checked his cell. "November texted a few updates."

"A storm's hitting the Amalfi Coast, and the Russian oligarch who owned the Pelorus is dead." The weather, I'd already checked. The latter was a calculated guess. One I'd been thinking about since takeoff.

Why a boat, and why a Russian when Carlos would never trust an oligarch to hold his shipment? The only angle that made sense was that the Russian was dead, and the boat was stolen. Where better to hide that large of a stash while he was in New York making the deal than a floating city halfway across the globe where no one in his world would think to look.

"Affirmative to both. The Russian was killed five weeks ago. Then four weeks ago, the Pelorus chartered into a shipyard in Lemwerder, Germany, for a supposed retrofit. Security footage shows furniture was removed from the upper deck cabins, then crates were loaded. Less than twenty-four hours later, the Pelorus was back underway. After sixteen days at sea, she chartered into the Gulf of Salerno. She's been there since, two kilometers off shore."

"Any intel on the crates? Size? Markings? Volume?"

"Different dimensions, military issue. Over a hundred crates."

“Ammo?” The weapons were useless to me on their own. I needed explosives to destroy all that firepower.

“November only sent three images, but it looks like plenty.” Alpha held out his cell.

Swiping through the pictures, I saw what I needed, then handed the phone back.

“Thoughts?”

Already doing the calculations, I had a lot of fucking thoughts. “Many.”

“Mainly?”

I knew explosives, but I also knew weapons. I rattled off what I saw in the images. “Fifty calcs, mortars, RPGs, rifles, XM25s.” The latter was called the Punisher for a reason, but that wasn’t the biggest issue. I looked at Alpha. “You see what was in that third image besides all the crates of ammo?”

Alpha tipped his chin. “Javelins.”

Fucking Javelins. Anti-tank warheads on a missile. “Two-thousand-meter range.” That was a problem. “I’m the last person to say this, but retrieval will be safer than detonation.” A controlled decommissioning was one thing. A quick and dirty explosion of a hundred crates of military weapons off the Amalfi Coast with who knows how many other boats within the blast zone was another.

“We don’t have time.”

I didn’t disagree. Carlos had already been sitting on the weapons for weeks. He wasn’t going to hold on to them much longer. “Did November get a flight plan for that Learjet?”

“Naples by way of two refuels. First in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Second at Knock in Ireland. We’ll land at Capodichino International two hours ahead of them.”

“That gives us enough time to reposition the Gulfstream out of Naples if we need to, and grab a helo.” A Zodiac was out. The distance between the yacht and shoreline wasn’t optimal for a stealth approach, and I didn’t have time. I could

also guarantee Carlos would already have boots on the ground in country. “Carlos will be looking for us.”

“He can try. We’re off the radar.”

I nodded. “Ghost flight.” We were on one, courtesy of November. He’d set up AES’s entire fleet with multiple tail numbers registered to each jet, all tracing back to different shell corporations. We could take off with one tail number and land with another. Add in decoy flight plans and hacked airport security cams, and we were as invisible in plain sight as possible. That left one nagging issue. “Those crates are military issue.”

“The other reason we should destroy them. Carlos found an in somehow, and that much volume points to multiple leaks in the supply chain. If we contain the shipment until the military can assume custody, or do the retrieval and return ourselves, it still runs the risk of those weapons landing right back on the open market. After they’re detonated, I’ll pass the intel to a source I trust. They can do their own internal investigation.”

“And the boat?”

“What’s going to be left of it once you detonate the ammo?”

“Not much.”

“Then sink it.”

“That’ll require two separate detonations.” Timed perfectly. “One for the munitions, a second on the hull.”

“Blast zone?”

“Large. Ideally, that boat would be a minimum of three kilometers off shore with no other vessels in a two-kilometer radius.”

Alpha’s gaze drifted for a second. “I have a contact in the Italian Coast Guard. I’ll ask him to send a patrol out to the Pelorus. Have them run between the yacht’s position and the shore. I’m betting once the captain spots the Guardia Costiera, he’ll push further out to avoid an encounter or inspection.”

“Have him do what he can to clear the area of any other boats.”

“Good copy.”

I ran it all down again quickly. Something wasn't sitting right. “What are we missing?”

Alpha scanned the primary flight display. “Eighteen contingencies I can think of so far.”

Christ. My list was only five. Wrong boat, no weapons, or right boat and that firepower's turned on us, Carlos beats our approach, or my remote detonations fail. “Eighteen is specific.”

“It's a specific mission.” Alpha's cell vibrated, and he checked the display. “I'll get November to pull up sat imagery and get a crew headcount using heat signatures, along with any other intel he can dig up.” He glanced at his watch. “We touch down in five hours thirty. I'll arrange for a helo and fly you out as far as I can without getting us detected. At a minimum, Carlos will have heavy security on that yacht. Potentially surrounding it.”

“I'll go under or around any security.” I vaguely remembered the Pelorus now from when we'd breached it on the Teams, at least enough to remember those five decks—bottom, lower, upper, top, and sun decks. The guest cabins that'd been cleared in the photos were in the middle. “Once I'm on board, I only need to clear two decks to get to those crates.” I'd already broken it down in my head. “If I breach aft deck, it's a short distance up two flights. Seven minutes in and out—ten, tops.” Explosives on the exterior of the hull at the front bulkhead of the engine room so the blast would compromise both the main vessel and engine room. Then charges in two separate cabins on opposite ends of the upper deck. The chain reaction from bow to stern would take everything out. “Then I'll clear the blast zone and detonate before I return to shore. Have November leave me a car at one of the marinas, and I'll meet you back at the G650 on the apron at Capodichino.”

“Affirmative on infil. Negative on exfil. I’ll stay in the air on standby. Once you clear the blast zone, we do a helo extraction. Then we’ll optimize timing on the detonation.”

“You said it yourself. We don’t have that kind of time.” Helo drop, amphibious approach, breaching the boat, underwater exfil—there went our two-hour lead time over the charter. “You need to be on the ground at NAP when that charter with Carlos lands. I’ll handle the detonation. You handle Carlos.”

“I will, but we’re not taking him down at the airport. It’s too public, and there’s too much potential for civilian casualties. Not to mention, it’s more than a two-man op, and I can’t get anyone else from AES on the ground before that Learjet lands. After Carlos clears the airport, he’ll be heading for the yacht. That’s when we’ll have our window. We hit his convoy while they’re en route to the heliport in Naples, or if the Pelorus comes in to one of the marinas, we’ll strike there. We’ll retrieve the female, strategically let Carlos and his men board, then once the yacht’s underway, we detonate.”

“That’s a lot of moving parts.” And a lot of ways for shit to go sideways. “Call your CIA contacts. Hell, call Malik.” I personally hated the former SEAL who’d joined the CIA, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t trained for this shit. “Call any alphabet soup fucks that are on the ground in Italy, and have that charter surrounded when Carlos deplanes.”

Alpha looked at me. “If we went that route, if we could guarantee there were no leaks, if we could prevent a tip-off, what do you think the first thing Carlos will do when he deplanes and sees agencies?”

Fuck. The one goddamn thing I was trying to prevent. “The redhead.” She’d be dead faster than a sniper round could take out Carlos. Then all hell would break loose.

Once I managed to see three fucking feet past the woman who was already clouding my judgment, I knew the score, but Alpha laid it out anyway.

“Carlos will kill the female, then himself, and we’ll have to explain why we’re in country with a hundred-million-dollar

shipment of destroyed arms and a sunken superyacht that belongs to a dead Russian oligarch.”

“That suit fuck could’ve blown our cover already.” I didn’t remind Alpha that he was the one who’d used an open channel.

“He’s being handled.”

I stared at Alpha for a beat, trying to get a read on him. Alpha was judicious. The plan he’d laid out was case in point. He thought shit through, and he didn’t take out agency fucks. He’d hand them over first. But the way he’d said “handled” had me thinking twice. “Who’d you send?”

“Whiskey.”

Christ. Whiskey was a twisted motherfucker. Recruited for the Teams, there was a reason we’d called him the Specialist behind his back. Immoral, remorseless, an uncanny ability to blend into any situation, and wetwork made his pretty boy smile come out. The CIA suit fuck was as good as dead if he wasn’t already. Which meant Alpha had no intention of letting Carlos walk.

Good.

Except I wanted the redhead out.

I said as much. “The redhead walks.”

“Count on it. Get the charges set, then we’ll intercept her before Carlos gets on the Pelorus.”

“That’s still a tight timeline.”

“We’ll make it work, but you’ll need a backup exfil plan.”

In other words, if shit went FUBAR, I was on my own. As long as the redhead was safe, I didn’t care about myself. “Then we go with the same plan I mentioned before. Have November leave a car. The Powerboat Italia marina works. We’ll rendezvous at Capodichino. If shit gets hot, exfil without me. I’ll make my own way back.” After I took out all those fucking crates.

Alpha thought it through for a half a beat before agreeing with a clipped nod. “All right. November will be on overwatch.” Then he tried to spoon-feed me a fucking stipulation. “Blade should go in with you.”

“Negative. Blade hates dives. Keep him on the helo in snipe position.”

“Blade hates everything. He’s also a better shot than both of us. Without knowing all the parameters and with all the variables, at a minimum, he’s a second pair of eyes for underwater navigation. With a weather system converging on the yacht’s location, you need him covering your six.”

I had Breacher Syndrome, not fucking dementia. I could read a nav board and use a dive computer. “Not repeating myself.”

“Kilo.”

“Alpha.”

Letting loose with a rare show of frustration, Alpha sighed. “All right. Besides dive gear, what else are you going to need munitions-wise?”

“Got it handled.”

“Explosives?”

“Everything I need is in my go bag.” Including the parts to make four remote detonation devices—three for use, one for backup—which I’d do before we landed.

Alpha turned to look at me. “You have explosives on the plane in your go bag?”

And in my pocket. “Yes.” C-4. Never leave home without it.

Alpha stared at me for a beat, then shook his head. “*Christ.*”

“I’m a breacher.” What the fuck did he expect? “That’s what you pay me for.”

“Clearly not enough.” Alpha got out of first chair. “Making some calls. Don’t blow up the plane.”

Sitting second chair, ignoring his last comment, I gave the obligatory response. “I have the controls.”

Alpha tipped his chin and left the cockpit.

A few seconds later, Blade climbed into first chair. Not strapping in, not saying shit, he sat for a minute.

Then he crossed his arms. “You were at the two meets.”

Blade didn’t do small talk, and he rarely crossed his arms. It cut down draw time by a tenth of a second. “And?”

“What else did the CIA dick say?”

“Not much.” That was the fucking problem. “HVT, boat full of arms, Tyrrhenian Sea. He wanted them detonated. Second meet, he mentioned the redhead.”

“Context?”

“For the redhead?”

“Yeah.”

“A conduit to the HVT.”

“Conduit,” Blade repeated, eyeing me. “You don’t think she’s involved.”

“Did she look fucking involved?”

“I only saw her unconscious.”

Ignoring his bullshit, I checked our heading.

Blade didn’t say shit for another minute. Then, “The CIA dick didn’t discuss fees?”

“Not at the two meets.”

“That should’ve been a red flag. Those government fucks always want to know how much shit is going to cost.”

I didn’t disagree. AES was all former Tier Ones, we all flew, and we’d never fucked a mission or lost a client. There was a reason we had a shit ton of military contracts. Not to mention, Alpha had more contacts than a small country’s worth of intelligence operatives. He also determined AES’s fees on a case-by-case basis dependent on scope, parameters,

and level of risk. No doubt about it, hiring AES would set you back.

Blade changed the subject. “You didn’t get out of the helo after me.”

I glanced at him to see if it was a question or an accusation because they always sounded the same coming from him. This time wasn’t any different. “I wanted to know why Alpha used an open channel.”

Blade nodded. “Alpha was testing the CIA dick.”

“Yes.”

“He didn’t pass.” Blade snorted. “That fucker’s off the books. Either has an ax to grind with Carlos or needs to cover his ass on a colossal screwup.”

“Or he’s on the take.”

“Then why call in Alpha to blow up the payday?”

Good question. “Don’t know. Don’t care.” An image of the redhead’s face hit me for the twentieth time.

Blade looked directly at me. “You’re going to blow the yacht.”

Blade wasn’t asking, but I confirmed anyway. “Yes.”

“And the redhead?”

I didn’t answer.

“You had Carlos in your sights. You had the shot.” Blade shook his head as he climbed out of first chair. “A goddamn woman over Santiago ‘the Butcher’ Carlos. That’s some fucking bullshit.”

I didn’t say a damn word as he exited the cockpit.

I couldn’t.

Blade wasn’t wrong.

SIXTEEN

Anneliese

The colors swirled wrong.

I frowned.

Dark, clouded, blurry. Chilled. This wasn't right.

Cold wasn't a color.

Wait.

I wasn't painting.

This wasn't—

“If you keep pretending to still be asleep, I'm going to take liberties.” Hot breath touched my cheek as something twirled my hair. “First, by finding out if this red hair is real. I think you're smart enough to understand what that means, yes?”

Shock forced my eyes open, merciless brightness blinded me, and a headache to rival all headaches struck like knives piercing my skull.

“There she is. The artist herself.”

Blinking, I fought to focus. Then wished I hadn't.

Carlos.

Before I could get my parched lips open and force words past my scratched throat, rough hands that did not belong to the monster in front of me gripped my shoulders, and I was jerked upright.

The whole room spun, and nausea hit.

Except it didn't just hit.

My body violently lurched, my neck snaked, my head whipped back, then forward, and I heaved.

“Boss!”

Carlos jumped up. “*Fuck.*”

With the hell of a Vesuvius eruption, I retched.

The vomit hadn’t even left my body when my hair was fisted and yanked. My head snapped back, pain exploded, and I was wrenched off whatever piece of furniture I was on as angry male voices exploded with guttural Spanish.

My scalp on fire with the sensation of ripping flesh, I was dragged by my hair across the floor and through an open slider doorway.

Stinging rain blasted my face, everything swayed, and I heaved again.

The voices got louder, the Spanish became angrier, and a staccato of infuriated foreign words filtered into their English counterparts as I subconsciously translated them between the forceful heaves wracking my body.

Hose. Clean. Stupid bitch. Crew. Mess. New shoes. Handle it. Before. Get back.

Steps retreated.

The Spanish turned to English, and I was ruthlessly yanked to my feet. “I don’t give a fuck what the boss wants. If you hurl again, I’ll shoot you before I throw you overboard.”

Fear knifed through my nausea, the voice registered, and a hand landed on my back before I was pushed forward.

The single touch overrode all reason, and my body reacted.

I arched away from his palm as the distinctive sound of rushing water and choppy swells grew louder and slapped angrily against a hull. “W-wait!” My useless legs scrambled for purchase.

The henchman didn’t wait.

Andros viciously shoved me over a cold metal bar.

The force hit my stomach like a heavyweight punch, and I couldn't control it.

I vomited again.

Bile exited my body from the dizzying height of the top deck of a huge yacht as the ocean wind threw the stench back in my face.

Spanish flew unchecked, a second pair of legs appeared in my peripheral, and a bucket of ice water was thrown in my face.

“Stop. FUCKING. *Vomiting.*”

Gasping, choking, my hands slipping on the slick railing, a sodden chunk of hair blew into my mouth and I heaved.

The second pair of legs retreated as cold metal shoved against my temple. “What'd I fucking say?”

I sucked in a wet, burning, labored breath. Then another.

“Get your shit under control, *puta.*”

Put a.

Control.

Control.

My hair gripped with punishing force, a gun to my head, a hand at my back shoving me over the railing—what the hell kind of control did he expect me to have?

Old trauma became new trauma, and I sucked in a breath.

The burning inhale held the fear, but this time, it was laced with fire. A fire I hadn't wanted or needed to feel for years. A fire I'd never wanted to own. But here I was again, with no control, because of a man.

This one with a loaded gun.

Fuck him.

“Pull the trigger,” I rasped.

Pain exploded on my temple.

Then everything went darker than the night.

SEVENTEEN

Kilo

Holding an MK 12 SPR, Blade shouted over the piece-of-shit helo's cabin noise. "Third and last fucking time I'm saying it. The weather's shit, we're already an hour behind schedule, they're sixteen tangos on board at last count, and you heard November's latest sitrep. Four helo flights have been out to that damn boat tonight alone, and we have no intel on who the hell got on or off because the storm fucked with the sat images. I should be coming with you."

"No." Adjusting my wetsuit, I pulled on my dive boots, then strapped on the chest-mount rebreather as I ran through a mental checklist. Mask, fins, my HK MP7 fitted with its suppressor, waterproof rucksack with my gear and extra magazines, dive computer with depth gauge, chronometer and compass.

"Not fucking smart going in solo," Blade warned, grabbing the top of my rucksack and unzipping it.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Backup tank." He shoved a small scuba tank into my sack.

I didn't need the emergency air. "I'm not carrying extra weight."

"It's five fucking pounds and twenty minutes of air. That's three hundred and forty breaths for your shit-for-brains breacher ass in case your suicide plan goes sideways. Carry the fucking tank, asshole." He zipped my waterproof rucksack back up with the extra weight.

No time to deal with it, I didn't take it out.

"Two minutes," Alpha called from the pilot's seat as a strong gust pitched the helo.

Fitting in the waterproof comm under my dive hood, I tested it before I put on my mask. "November, copy?"

"Loud and clear," he replied.

I fed an arm through the weapon sling of my MP7. "Latest sitrep?"

November rapidly downloaded. "Five-to-eight-foot swells. Water temp sixty-three degrees. Sixteen heat signatures on board, all inside. Twelve on top deck, two on the bridge, two on upper deck doing interior patrols. Sundeck empty. Lower and bottom decks empty. Tenders deployed and unmanned, shell doors closed."

"Why the fuck are the tenders out in this storm? Were they using them earlier?"

"Negative to the second question," November replied. "Short answer to the first question would be speculation. I'll keep watch with satellite, but the weather's intermittently interfering."

Christ. "Intel on any current security systems on the boat?"

"Motion detectors on all decks, but they were turned off a few hours ago when the storm came in."

"Copy. Going radio silent in sixty seconds for approach." I turned my head away from Blade and Alpha. "After I'm under, relay to Alpha to RTB. The helo shouldn't be out in these conditions. I'll use the DPV to get back to shore."

"Alpha won't agree," November warned.

"Make him." Alpha would listen to November. "Right now, I'm safer underwater than they are in the air, and we both know they need to be in position before that charter with Carlos lands at Capodichino. That's not going to happen if they're out here babysitting me." I wanted Carlos dead, but fuck, I wanted that redhead safe first.

November paused. Then he deviated from his typically detached demeanor. “Deteriorating weather, increasing swells and heavy current.” It was as close as you’d ever get to hearing November express concern.

“I’m good.”

“Then I’ll relay the message.” Reverting back to overwatch, November did what he did best. “You’re forty minutes out from the target using the DPV. Double tap the comm before you surface for an updated sitrep. Double tap again before you infil. I’ll send the status updates to your dive computer. Once you’re above water, voice communication via comms unless you’re compromised.”

“Copy.” For half a second, I thought about keeping the rest of the shit in my head on lockdown. Then the image of that asshole bodyguard carrying her flashed, and I was opening my fucking mouth. “One more favor.”

“Go.”

“Make sure they get the redhead out.”

November didn’t hesitate. “Roger that.”

Taking him at his word, I shut down thoughts of the redhead and focused up. “Going radio silent.”

“Radio silent,” November confirmed.

Alpha glanced back. “Fifteen seconds,” he called over the noise of the storm that’d delayed our takeoff from the heliport, and prevented Alpha’s contact with the Italian Coast Guard from attempting to push the boat further out. “Dropping to ten feet. Hover window narrow in these conditions. Ready?”

I gave Alpha a thumbs-up, then pulled my dive mask over my face, slid my fins over my left arm and hefted the DPV before nodding at Blade.

Reaching past me, Blade opened the helo’s door.

Alpha hovered over the choppy surface of the Tyrrhenian.

I jumped.

A five-foot swell slammed into me, then I was sinking.

Three meters. Five. Ten.

My headspace quieted, and for a single beat, I fucking breathed in the underwater quiet that was second to none.

Then I fired up the DPV, put on my fins, and checked my dive computer. Adjusting ten degrees east, I grabbed the diver-propelled vehicle with both hands and set off.

EIGHTEEN

Anneliese

My head pounding, my hair soaked, my shoes missing, chilled to the bone, I sat on a bed and watched a trembling young crew woman clean up my vomit.

I said nothing. I did nothing.

I didn't have a choice.

A gun was to my head.

Except this time, it was shoved against my left temple, the opposite side from where it'd slammed into my skull with the force of an angry henchman as he'd held me hostage over the yacht's railing.

I should've been afraid.

And angry.

But I was only disgusted. This man's version of pulling the trigger was weak. He was weak. Hitting a woman was a coward's way out. Life had taught me that, and this piece of garbage was no better than a narcissistic photographer with zero eye for composition.

"Fucking hurry up," Andros barked at the poor woman on her knees as she sprayed a cleaner for the fourth time. "Carlos doesn't have all goddamn night."

Not looking at me or the henchman, she scrubbed faster.

She shouldn't have bothered.

Her efforts netted her a shove to her shoulder from the boot of a henchman. "You're done. Get the fuck up and get

your shit.”

She scurried to gather up supplies and dump soiled rags into one bucket before stowing her spray bottle in another and pulling out one more can of something. Spraying an overpowering aerosol in a wide swath, she coated the carpet with an obscene amount of something that must have been designed to disguise the smell of dead bodies.

The henchman cursed in Spanish, then roared with anger as a scented plume that was remarkably similar to freshly laundered linens choked us with a barely translucent chemical cloud. “Enough! Get the fuck out of here.” He coughed. “NOW.”

Immune to the smell and spray, or simply terrified, the woman who’d brought the bucket of water that’d been thrown in my face kept her gaze religiously downcast as she grabbed both buckets and rushed out.

My eyes watered.

The henchman coughed again.

I hated him more. “You should have pulled the trigger.”

“Shut the fuck up, bitch.” Covering his nose and mouth with the crook of his arm, he left me for a moment to open the slider door to the now raging storm that was driving rain against the rocking yacht. When he returned, so did the gun to my head, persistent like the chemical cloud of shame.

My dress was still on, I could feel my underwear, and my head was still marginally in one piece. I should’ve kept my mouth shut, but I didn’t. “Do you even know what a bitch is?”

His arm swung back.

I braced.

The cabin door opened, and Carlos waltzed in, followed by three more armed guards.

“Andros.” Carlos smiled at me as he addressed his out-of-control henchman. “I told you you’re going to have to wait to play.” His lecherous gaze slid to my chest, then to my crossed legs. “I’m not done with her yet.”

A new color of fear coated every inch of my shivering body, but I refused to show it. “What do you want, Carlos?”

“Why, paintings, of course.” He looked back up at me and winked. “What else would I want an artist for?”

“You already got paintings.” At least, I thought so, but I didn’t know what happened to that van outside Gagosian. I didn’t know what the hell had happened, period. One moment I was in Cut, then the next I was vomiting on a yacht. I couldn’t remember anything in between, and I didn’t know where we were, let alone how I’d gotten here. All I knew was that I was in the same dress, my head was pounding, and if the yacht kept swaying, I didn’t know if I would be able to stop myself from vomiting again.

Carlos’s smile turned into a smirk. “I want more.”

“Then call Gagosian.”

“I need larger paintings. Besides, I prefer my methods.”

Fucking asshole. I bet he did. “Kidnapping, assault and manipulation?” I’d spent five years trying to train myself to heal from the latter. Assault I avoided because I didn’t let men touch me anymore, and the former I didn’t have a solution for—yet. “Quite the résumé of methodology.”

“How very dramatic.” He sighed as if he were the one who was put out, and I was a petty nuisance he had to deal with. “But then again, I would suspect nothing less from a woman such as yourself.”

“Such as myself?” I managed to ask dryly.

“Artistic, temperamental.” He dropped his gaze to the juncture of my crossed legs before looking back at me. “Red hair.”

“How original.”

“I am that, but unfortunately for you, I’m not the artist, of expressions or sentiments. I prefer something much more... tactile.” His gaze drifted, then he sighed wistfully before shaking his head and looking back at me. “Which leads us to

where we started. Paintings. I need them. You're going to supply them."

It was a long shot, but I took it anyway. "I don't have my brushes or supplies. But pull into the nearest marina or port, and I'll see what I can find on shore." Like the closest police station.

"I thought you might try that excuse." Carlos snapped his fingers.

One of the armed men behind him stepped forward and reached behind Carlos's chair before coming away with my tote.

Seeing it suddenly made me want to weep. "Good to know you kept my bag." My cell phone was in it... or it had been. "Where's my portfolio?"

Carlos took the tote from the silent, armed man. "Patience, Miss Laurent, patience."

"Now I'm Miss Laurent?" Asshole.

"Ah." Carlos smiled the same predatory smile. "Anneliese, I do believe you are right. We are way past formalities." He reached into my bag and took out the familiar leather roll. "Is this what you need?"

Biting the inside of my cheek, telling myself not to say a damn word, I watched as he unrolled the leather and ran a finger over the brushes.

Then he purposely, viciously bent the expensive sable bristles at hard right angles.

I couldn't hold my tongue. "Stop. What do you want painted?"

His smile grew. "I knew we would come to an understanding." He stood and threw the brushes at my feet. "Not what, how many. Ten paintings. I'll allow the subject matter to be your choice. You have three days."

"I can't paint that fast, and I have no supplies."

“Did you think I was asking?” He snapped his fingers again.

Another guard stepped forward, but he bypassed Carlos and opened what should’ve been the door to a walk-in closet, except this closet didn’t have clothes. It had giant canvases. At least ten of them. Four by five or six feet in size.

Dark, murky fear that I’d been trying to hold down began to crawl up my throat. “Those will need a lot of paint.”

The same guard was already moving to a recessed cupboard and opening the door.

Jars and jars of Liquitex Professional Heavy Body Acrylics were stacked to almost overflowing. One serious pitch of the yacht and they would all tumble out.

I looked at my kidnapper, who was more dangerous and more unhinged than I’d even suspected when I first laid eyes on him. “The curator was expecting me back at the gallery.”

Carlos’s face became plains of sinister yellows. “I already handled that. Her friend, the manager of the hotel, let her know how well we hit it off.”

Bile rose as my stomach dropped, and I lied. “I have people who will be expecting me.”

“Then you better get to work.”

“And if I don’t?” Even if I threw those cans of paint at the canvases, I couldn’t assemble the chaos into any sort of passable art on that many canvases in such a short amount of time. “I can’t create quality work in three days’ time, much less in volume.” What was he really doing with the canvases?

Soulless dark eyes stared into me without an ounce of remorse. “Seventy-two hours,” he reiterated in warning.

I didn’t know who this man was or what criminal activity he was into, but I wasn’t ignorant. I wasn’t getting out of this, and I didn’t have three days. “What’s my assurance that if I do what you’re asking, you’ll let me go?”

Carlos stood as a cruel smirk played across his thin lips. “I’ll be back in the morning to see your progress.”

I didn't even have a day.

Issuing orders to his henchmen in Spanish, Carlos turned and walked out. Two of the three bodyguards followed him while one stepped into the hall only to return with a tray of food he set on a table before retreating again.

That left me and Andros and a cupboard full of demise.

Glaring at me, the henchman purposely put his hand on the gun that was now holstered at his waist. Maintaining his sinister stare, he let his silent warning assault the cabin with more force than the gale winds thrashing the ocean and blowing in through the open slider.

Still sick from whatever drugs they'd given me, hyperaware of the pitch and roll of the yacht, unable to feign indifference, I clamped my arms around my lurching stomach.

Narrowing his eyes with disgust and threat before pivoting, Andros walked out and slammed the door behind him. A second later, I heard the distinctive slide and click of a bolt on the outside being locked into place.

I gave myself three breaths to fall apart.

Then I was moving.

Nausea threatening, anger radiating and fear choking my every breath, I rushed to where my Louis Vuitton tote had been dropped by Carlos and looked behind his chair.

Leaning against the back of the fixed-in-place lounge, right next to my Prada sandals, was my borrowed portfolio case.

Bypassing my tote, I quickly grabbed and unzipped the leather that felt like it'd come from a different reality that had played out a lifetime ago. Holding my breath, I looked inside.

Then I dropped to the ground.

Squeezing my eyes shut, uselessly praying to a God who'd never listened to me, I carefully pulled out the now unwrapped painting with a trembling hand.

Please, *please* let it be intact.

Holding the familiar shape in my hands, I repeated the silent chant and looked.

All the air left my lungs with a whoosh of relief as I stared at my work. Taking in every fine detail, allowing myself a single moment to soak in its familiarity, I then checked every inch for damage but found none.

Momentarily ignoring the storm that was relentlessly hammering the yacht with squalls of rain, I forced myself to gently put the painting down. Then I reached for my tote and prayed, *prayed*, that my cell phone was still inside.

Pulling the tote onto my lap, I looked inside.

Empty.

Of everything.

The relief that had come when I saw my painting fall away faster than the driving rain. “Shit.”

Another gust blew in through the open slider, the yacht swayed and the open cupboard door banged on the panel behind it.

Pushing to my feet, I made my way to the slider and grasped the handle to close the glass door. The boat tilted again, and I saw them.

Lights.

Far off in the distance, twinkling then dipping into darkness before shining again as the yacht pitched, I watched them appear, then disappear as the solution to my problem came to me.

Holding on to the slider door handle, I stared and waited through another swell.

As the lights shone again, I used everything I’d learned about depth perception.

A mile, maybe a little more.

Braving the rain, I stepped out onto the balcony, and this time, I purposely looked over the edge. Chills that had nothing

to do with the weather prickled across my flesh as I looked down at the angry ocean.

An ocean that was a very, very far drop from where I was.

I glanced around.

At the other end of the balcony, across a large deck, and around a set of built-in couches was a flight of outdoor stairs.

Gripping the railing tight, this time I leaned even further over the edge.

Below me was another balcony and another outdoor deck, much larger, with even more glass sliders and windows, but more importantly, it was an entire story closer to the surface of the water.

I looked back toward the lights on land.

Definitely a mile.

I'd swum a mile before. More than that. And I'd done it in Scotland with my father in the icy cold ocean in the middle of summer and survived.

This didn't feel that cold.

It didn't feel Scotland cold.

And those twinkling lights in haphazard rows of differing heights didn't look like the shoreline of New York or somewhere like the Hamptons. If anything, it looked like the cliffs off the Mediterranean, and the air, while thick with barometric pressure, wasn't the type of biting cold that the Northeastern United States could have this time of year.

My mind made up, I glanced once more at the lights, the expanse of deck and that single flight of steps.

Then I went back inside and aimed for the tray of food.

No utensils, only a sandwich, some fruit and a bottle of water.

It was all I needed.

Picking up the bottle, I untwisted the cap and sniffed the water. Thirstier than I'd ever been, I chanced it and took a few

long swallows. Then I went to the en suite and emptied the remaining water into the sink.

Rushing back out to the cabin proper, I set the bottle down and picked up my painting.

Turning it over, knowing what I had to do, knowing it was the only way, I still felt the pang of loss as I pulled the canvas from the first staple.

A small tear appeared where the metal prongs had taken hold, and I sucked in a breath.

Then I ripped the painting from the stretchers.

NINETEEN

Kilo

Thirty-two minutes later, the boat's navigation lights breached the pitch-black ocean. Her stabilizers working overtime in the rough seas, the tenders rolling like fucking crazy, I watched for any signs of activity as I cut the power on the DPV.

Seeing nothing unusual, I double tapped the comm, then looked at my dive computer.

A few seconds later, November's sitrep appeared.

Clear.

I surfaced and quickly scanned.

Then I went back under and kicked hard through the swells to the smaller tender that was furthest out from the boat and stowed the DPV at the stern. It was a risk, but the seas were too rough to tether it underwater, and I didn't want to lose time on exfil having to untie it.

Going back under, I swam portside to the midsection of the boat. Fighting the churning waves, I stuck three blocks of C-4 to the hull with pressure-sensitive adhesive. Making sure my charges were secure, I double tapped the comm again.

November's reply took ten seconds.

Patrol near aft deck. Hold.

Sinking two meters, I fucking held.

Forty-five seconds later, I double tapped the comm again.

November's reply was almost immediate.

Clear.

I swam to the stern and yanked my fins off before sliding them over my left arm and grabbing the edge of the swim platform. Hauling my ass on board, I shoved my mask up, brought my MP7 around, and cleared the distance to the first deck while scanning through my scope.

“November, copy?”

“Loud and clear. Two patrols on the upper deck are Oscar Tango Mike. Thirteen heat signatures stationary on the top deck. Movement starboard side on a top deck balcony two minutes ago. Clear the lower deck now. Breach upper deck portside. In and out. Go.”

I was already moving. “Copy.”

Taking the stairs to the upper deck in a crouch, I scanned for movement before I crossed to the side deck and hit the nearest slider. Opening the door, I stepped inside and quickly shut it behind me before the noise gave away my position. All the interior cabin lights off on this level, the only illumination from courtesy lights, I followed them down the closest hallway to the first cabin and tried the door.

Locked.

I tried three more before switching my MP7 to one hand and pulling my rucksack around as I whispered into comms, “I need overwatch on those two patrols. Cabin doors are secured. Picking locks now.”

“Copy. I see your position. You have twenty seconds.”

“I only need ten.” Nine seconds later, I was inside the first cabin with the door locked behind me. One scan of the floor-to-ceiling crates, and I knew what I was looking at. “Found the Javelins.”

“Radio silent,” November warned. “They’re on top of you.”

Waiting, listening to the steps out in the hall, I counted crates.

November came back through comms. “Clear. How many Javelins?”

“Fifteen count in this double-sized cabin. Can’t see what’s in the crates behind them. Moving to the next cabin. Maintain overwatch.”

“Copy.”

I cracked the door, scanned the hall and hit the next door. Quickly picking the lock, I checked inside. No ammo. “Moving to the next cabin.”

“Copy. You’re clear for about forty-five seconds.”

“Roger that.” Moving down the hall, I picked two more locks before I hit pay dirt.

Stepping inside the fifth cabin, I glanced at the dozens of crates as I swung my rucksack around. “Found ammo. Small arms ammunition, explosives, artillery shells, missile warheads.”

“Volume?” November asked.

A fuck ton. “Taking pics now and sending.” Grabbing my cell, I snapped a few shots and quickly sent them before stowing my phone and pulling out two more blocks of C-4.

“Received,” November replied.

“Copy.” I strategically placed the C-4 and set the charges. Then I grabbed one of the crates with familiar markings. “Moving. I need one more cabin. Heading portside, foredeck. Sitrep?”

“Hold.”

I waited.

Steps sounded in the corridor, and door handles rattled.

Setting down the crate of M67s, I aimed my rifle.

The door handle of the cabin I was in rattled.

I held position.

The steps retreated.

“Keep holding,” November warned. “Ten seconds.... Clear.”

“Moving.” Grabbing the crate, then cracking the door, I did a quick scan of the hallway.

Empty.

Double-timing it toward the bow, I stopped at the second-to-last cabin to pick the lock and whispered into comms. “Sitrep?”

“Still clear.”

I opened the cabin door, stepped inside and locked it behind me. Scanning the stacked crates, I didn’t find a stockpile of ammo like the last cabin had, but there were crates of 556 rounds, and I had the M67s. “Setting the last charge,” I warned November as I stacked the grenades on top of the ammo, took three blocks of C-4 from my sack and placed them. “Exfil in one minute. Foredeck, starboard side.”

“Copy.”

I set the charges, double-checked everything, then zipped my rucksack shut and palmed my MP7. Before I could tell November I was out, his warning came through comms.

“Movement above you. Balcony, starboard.”

“Copy, retreating. Exfiling to stern.”

“Negative. Patrols coming up on your six. Hold position.”

Spanish sounded in the hall outside the door.

“*Quiero follarme a la chica.*” The door handle of the cabin rattled as someone checked to make sure it was locked.

A second guy spoke. “*Andros te matará si tocas a la chica pelirroja. Carlos también.*”

“*Me importa una mierda. Valdría la pena.*” A door handle across the hall rattled.

The second voice laughed. “*Si te follas ese coño, te comerás una bala.*”

Footsteps retreated.

Follarme, chica, pelirroja, coño, bala.

Four helo flights to the boat in this goddamn storm.

Motherfucker.

I spoke low and lethal into my comm. “Where the fuck is Carlos right now?”

“The chartered flight is landing at NAP in four minutes. Alpha and Blade are in position near the airport.”

“Carlos isn’t on that goddamn plane.” I didn’t speak Spanish, but I knew enough to get the gist of what those assholes were saying. “Check your shit, November, and do it now. Both refuels on that jet.” There’d been a swap at one of them. Carlos had gotten on another fucking aircraft.

A faster one.

“Already did. What are you seeing?”

My instincts firing faster than my headspace was putting shit together, I shoved aside a pile of crates and climbed over another. “Check it again.”

“Pulling up the security footage for Halifax first, but the coverage was partial.”

“Then that’s where it happened.” Squeezing around two stacks, I aimed for the fucking slider that led to the cabin’s balcony. “Carlos got on another plane.”

“You have confirmation?”

“I don’t need fucking confirmation.” I unlocked the glass door and slid it open. “Carlos is on the goddamn boat.” I looked up.

Jesus Christ.

Red hair.

Beige dress.

Shouldering that fucking designer tote bag, the redhead gripped the railing and glanced down.

TWENTY

Anneliese

Rolling the canvas as tightly as possible, refusing to think about the damage I was causing, I told myself I was grateful for the fancy brand of bottled water that had a wider mouth opening.

But I wasn't grateful for anything.

Not my painting, not my brushes, and certainly not for my life.

I was angry.

And nauseous, hurting and exhausted.

And I wanted off this fucking yacht.

I didn't care if jumping into the ocean was suicide. I'd made myself a promise.

Never again.

And this sure as hell constituted *again*, and I was done.

I would not paint those canvases. I would not get hit again. And I most definitely was not sticking around to get drugged again or worse.

If that meant jumping, then I'd jump.

If I made it to shore, I'd figure it out from there.

Not *if*—when.

Feeding the rolled canvas into the water bottle, I said it in my head over and over.

When I get to shore.

When I get to shore.

Because I *was* making it to shore.

Besides, I'd found a large see-through carry bag in a storage compartment that had four life jackets. They were bright red and would make me easy to spot, but if I could manage to shove one into my tote and get far enough away from the yacht, I could put it on.

Assuming I got far enough before anyone realized I was gone.

Which was why I needed to move fast.

Screwing the lid tightly onto the water bottle, I shook my makeshift waterproof container to check that it stayed closed.

It did.

Not wasting any more time, I grabbed my leather paintbrush roll and spread it out. After making sure all the brushes were as far down in each of their pockets as possible, I placed the water bottle at the inside end. Then I rolled up the case, tied it tightly and placed it in the bottom of my tote bag.

For the first time in my life, I resented the expensive gift my mother had given me when I'd gotten my undergraduate degree. If she hadn't been so fixated on appearances and luxury designer items as a direct reflection of success, maybe I would be holding a bag that actually zipped shut right now. Then again, maybe I wouldn't be holding a leather tote that had traveled thousands of miles and carried countless items while being stuffed to near bursting, but still looked remarkably like it had when it was new.

Another gust of wind blew into the cabin, pushing me back to the precious present.

Grabbing my shoes, I tucked them into my bag. Then I took one of the red life vests, and stuffed the rest back into the storage compartment where I'd found them. Quickly folding the bulky life preserver in half, I wedged it into my tote.

The top stuck out. By a lot.

Shit.

I glanced out at the storming night.

The waves looked bigger, and I couldn't even see land from inside the cabin.

The boat pitched, the cupboard door banged again, and one of the jars of paint fell out, rolling toward me.

I couldn't wait anymore.

Terrified, angry, determined, adrenaline coursing through my veins—I hitched my bag on one shoulder and walked on shaking legs to the slider door.

Then I stepped onto the balcony.

Wind slapped at my face, the yacht swayed and I grabbed the railing.

I glanced behind me.

The deck, partially illuminated from some lights that were on inside, suddenly looked like too much of a risk to cross to get ten, fifteen feet closer to the surface of the water. The waves were cresting and thrashing against the side of the yacht anyway. Maybe a lower deck wasn't a good idea. Maybe the height from where I was would give me a better chance to jump further out.

I looked over the railing.

Oh God.

Deep breath.

I could do this.

I had to do this.

I glanced toward land.

Lights twinkled.

One mile.

I could do this.

It wasn't as cold as a Scottish summer.

I'd survive.

I would survive.

Jump.

Come on.

Just jump.

A wave hit, the yacht swayed, and all of a sudden, every light on the ship came alive, illuminating the storm's darkened fury.

For one stunned moment, I looked up at the lights.

Then my brain succumbed to panic, and I was moving.

I threw a leg over the edge.

A gloved hand clamped over my mouth. I was yanked back against something hard, and an arm locked around my waist.

The wind howled, and hot breath whispered past my ear. "Remember my voice?"

TWENTY-ONE

Kilo

Motherfucking fuck.

“The redhead’s on board.” And she was gonna fucking jump. “Oscar Tango Mike. Heading top deck, starboard, forward cabin balcony.” Stepping back into the cabin, I shut the slider.

“Negative,” November clipped. “Patrols at your nine o’clock. Top deck with fourteen heat signatures. Hold position.”

Fuck his *hold position*.

“Moving.” I climbed over the crates and hit the cabin door.

Cracking it, I took a quick glance of the corridor.

Voices, Spanish, close, no visual.

Goddamn it.

Quietly closing the door and locking it, I climbed back over the crates and hit the slider. “Exiting cabin. Taking the balcony to aft deck stairs. Need overwatch.”

“Working with only satellite heat signatures. Yacht’s Wi-Fi and internal security system are offline with the storm.”

“Do what you can. Going for the redhead.” I opened the slider.

“You have visual?”

I glanced up. Still holding onto the gunwale, she stood a deck above me. “Yes.” *Fuck, woman, do not fucking jump yet.*

“Updating Alpha. Do you have a visual on Carlos?”

“No.” If I yelled loud enough for her to hear me, I’d give my position away, then we’d both be screwed.

“Heat signature directly above you.”

No fucking shit. “Moving to aft deck companionway. Keep an eye on that heat signature that was above me.” I needed to get to her before she fucking jumped.

“Copy. Clear to stern, starboard side. Move.”

“Roger.” I ran down the side of the boat and hit the stairs. The wind kicking up, the boat fucking pitching, I broke sightline at the top of the stairs and quickly scanned the deck for tangos. Empty, but lights were on inside the main cabin. I ducked my head back down. “Top deck heat signature locations?”

“Spread out,” November replied before rattling off locations I could barely fucking hear.

“Repeat,” I ordered, pressing a hand over my ear.

“Port and starboard cabins, aft and bow salons. Three directly ahead of you.”

I glanced over the top of the companionway again. Lights on inside, the deck dark, they were a fishbowl, and I was out of time. “Clearing the deck.”

“Roger.”

I cut across the deck, and just as I hit the narrow walkway leading to the balcony, the fucking boat came alive. Exterior spotlights, interior lights. Sun, top and upper decks, she lit up like a goddamn Christmas tree.

I ran.

Too late, November’s warning came through comms. “Motion sensors back online. Hold position. Repeat, *hold position.*”

“Too fucking late.” I’d already tripped them. “I’ve been made.” The redhead came into view. Barefoot, her back to me, her hair soaked but her dress somehow dry, she clutched that

fucking tote and looked up at the spotlight above her. “Exfiling with the redhead. Closing in on her position. Need to get portside to the tenders. Relay sitrep on the tangos.”

“Tangos on the move, both port and starboard. Patrols coming up the aft deck stairs. Alpha and Blade are on their way back to the heliport. Take cover.”

Where the fuck was I supposed to take cover? “Negative. All running, deck and nav lights are on. No cover. Exfiling. Get me to those tenders.” I closed in on the redhead’s six.

“No clearance.”

She threw her fucking leg over the side of the boat.

Dropping my MP7 on its sling, I lunged.

Clapping a hand over her mouth, grabbing her around the waist, I spoke against her ear as I pulled her back from the edge. “Remember my voice?”

Her back arched, her arms came down, and she slammed her fists into my thighs as she fucking bucked like I’d electrocuted her.

“Easy. *Easy*. I’m gonna get you out of here.”

November issued a warning through comms. “Helo incoming, ten tangos converging on your six. Fifty seconds.”

Fuck.

I yanked my dive mask off the top of my head and spun her around.

When she caught sight of me in full dive gear, she went fucking rigid.

“Forty seconds,” November clipped.

Out of time, taking in the large bruise on her temple, noticing the life jacket that was shoved into the tote bag still hanging from her arm, I downloaded fast. “We’re going in the water. You’re gonna breathe through the mask and hold on to me. Point your feet before impact. Don’t swim. Don’t fight me. Just breathe, and let me do my job.”

Ignoring her terrified expression, I slid the mask over her face as carefully as possible, adjusted it, and repeated my instructions. “Don’t panic. Don’t kick. Don’t fight me. Keep that mask on, and don’t let go of me once we’re under. Got it?”

“Thirty seconds,” November warned.

She barely nodded.

I scanned my six. “Do you need that bag?”

She pulled it closer.

“Copy, but the life vest goes.” Yanking out the PFD that would slow me down, I tossed it overboard before taking her tote from her and swinging my rucksack around. Quickly unzipping it, I took out the spare air Blade had thrown in, tossed her bag in its place and zipped everything shut.

November’s voice came through comms again. “Ten seconds. Get out of there, Kilo.”

I locked an arm around her back and pulled her flush as she flinched hard. “Ready?”

Carlos’s men cleared the aft deck and came running at us.

“Exfil, exfil, exfil!” November ordered.

Shots whipped past our heads.

Pivoting as I shoved her behind me, I grabbed my MP7 one-handed and returned fire until those fuckers ducked.

Then I shoved the spare tank under my right arm, grabbed her from behind and leveraged us over the side of the fucking boat.

For two seconds, we were freefalling.

Then we hit the water, a firestorm of bullets followed, and her hands went to the mask in a panic.

Fighting the dive, she kicked.

Holding my breath and her, I let us sink.

Three meters, four, five.

Buoyancy hit our rate of descent, we slowed, she started to shake from the cold, and I moved.

Spinning her to face me, grabbing one of her wrists, I put her hand around my neck, and let go of her to throw on my fins.

Then I fit in the mouthpiece for the spare air, wrapped her other hand around my neck and her bare legs around my waist.

Following the boat's nav lights, I dove under the hull.

TWENTY-TWO

Anneliese

Restrained, unable to scream, my mind lost it, but my body reacted.

My back arched away from the assault, my hands fisted, and I swung them back as hard as I could.

“Easy. *Easy*. I’m gonna get you out of here.” I was spun around.

Every molecule of my being froze as if my blood had turned to ice.

Remember my voice.

It was him.

The elevator. The restaurant. Those eyes.

Those slate eyes.

I would recognize them anywhere. And his voice—rough, deep, quiet, penetrating, I remembered it. I just hadn’t believed it. But I didn’t have time to process the shock of any of this—him being here, his full dive gear, his giant weapon—before he dealt commanding, precise orders as if it were his job.

“We’re going in the water. You’re gonna breathe through the mask and hold on to me. Point your feet before impact. Don’t swim. Don’t fight me. Just breathe, and let me do my job.”

With expert precision, he put the mask that was attached to the device on his chest over my face. Quickly adjusting it to fit snugly, he threw more directions at me that were as fierce as

the wind accosting us. “Don’t panic. Don’t kick. Don’t fight me. Keep that mask on, and don’t let go of me once we’re under. Got it?” He looked a hundred times more terrifying with his hair hidden under his dive suit.

I somehow managed to nod.

He glanced behind him before looking back at me. “Do you need that bag?”

I pulled it closer.

“Copy, but the life vest goes.” He jerked the life jacket out of my tote, and I watched with voiceless horror as he threw it overboard before taking my bag.

Quickly swinging his military-looking backpack around till it hung from one shoulder, he pulled out a small tank, shoved my tote inside and zipped his bag shut before he repositioned it. Doing everything in rapid, efficient movements, his controlled actions were almost a blur.

Staring up at him, still in shock that he was here, I didn’t notice his next movements until it was too late.

He wrapped his hard, muscular arm around the small of my back and pulled me flush against him and the device on his chest. “Ready?”

My body already rigid, my muscles having no more room to constrict against the contact of his arm, I still flinched and sucked in a sharp breath. Warm, moist air from the mask filled my lungs just as Andros and more of Carlos’s bodyguards came running at us with their guns pointed.

Shots whistled past us, and my heart seized.

My rescuer was already moving.

Simultaneously shoving me behind him and turning his body to use it as a shield to protect me, he grabbed the large gun he was wearing on a cross-body strap. Aiming single-handed, he unleashed a torrent of hell. Bullets sprayed from the automatic weapon with shocking accuracy as the yacht pitched.

Andros and the other bodyguards ducked.

Not wasting a single movement or a fraction of a second, my rescuer let his gun fall, wrapped his arms around me from behind and leaned backwards against the railing while holding me in a tight reverse bear hug.

The very next second, in one fluid, swift feat of sheer strength, he kicked our legs up, swung them over the side of the boat and shoved off, hurdling us into the angry ocean.

For two terrifying beats of my heart, we were airborne.

Then shocking cold robbed me of all breath, and I completely panicked.

My hands flew to the mask to hold it in place even though it was strapped to my head, and my legs tried to kick us up to the surface, but he held me tight and let us sink.

And sink, and sink, and sink.

Until we were so deep, the lights on the yacht along the hull that shone just under the surface were almost invisible.

I started to shiver.

Violently.

Terror, cold, the piercing tunnels of bullets spearing the dark depth of the roiling ocean all around us like streamers of impending death, I held that mask against my face and shook.

Then my rescuer spun me, grabbed one of my wrists and yanked, putting my hand around the back of his neck right before he let go of me.

Let go of me.

Gasping short, panicked intakes of air within the mask, the very mask that was attached by tubes to his chest that made me his prisoner if I wanted to breathe, I watched helplessly as he slid giant fins off his left arm and put them over his dive boots with blind precision.

Because he was blind.

Black ocean.

No mask.

No air.

Oh God, *he had no air.*

How long had we been under? Five seconds? Five minutes?

How long could he hold his breath?

Just when I was about to pull the mask off to give it to him so he could take a breath—something I'd only seen in movies but had no idea if it'd work because nothing about the sinister black contraption attached to his chest was remotely close to the scuba gear I'd once tried—he grabbed the small tank tucked under his arm.

Adjusting some valve on the top of the black canister, he fitted in a mouthpiece, and a second later, bubbles escaped, letting me know he had air.

Relief came as a shaky exhale into my mask.

But then he grabbed my other arm and put it around his neck before he grasped the backs of my thighs and put my legs around his hips.

Freezing, terrified, sinking to a certain death in a watery grave with a lethal stranger who was more soldier than man, I hadn't thought about my dress.

But now I stupidly was.

My sleeveless Prada sheath hitched around my waist, my bare thighs around a man's waist for the first time in five years, I did more than panic.

More than I had when Carlos touched my hand, more than when Andros grabbed my hair, dragged me, pushed me and hit me, more than the terrifying depth of a storming ocean, I went there.

Back to where I promised myself I would never be again.

Back to that loft.

I would never be this again.

I would never be here again.

I would never be blind again.

But I was.

Powerless, voiceless, impotent, no control—I was exactly there.

My life not my own, I was at the mercy of men.

And this one was armed, maskless, and wearing a gun with his combat-looking wetsuit as he forcibly wrapped my body around his.

Remember my voice.

His thick, strong thighs flexed, and his legs kicked.

Easy. Easy. I'm gonna get you out of here.

My rescuer-turned-tormentor did not get me out of there.

He dove under the giant yacht.

TWENTY-THREE

Kilo

Needing to get her the fuck out of the water, knowing she wouldn't last much longer in these conditions, unable to see shit, I kicked harder.

Already shaking like hell, the woman wasn't hypothermic yet, but I didn't have long.

She'd survive an hour. Two, tops.

The latter only if I kept her moving, but she'd locked around me like a barnacle. The chances of getting her to swim versus kicking out in fear were slim. Add in the rough seas, the fact that she had no gear and her mask was attached to the rebreather strapped to my chest, and those odds went to shit.

If we were swimming in, I was doing the heavy lifting. But that wasn't the problem.

Getting her to shore before hypothermia set in was.

The clock was ticking, and my options were shit.

Kitting her out in my gear to keep her body temp up would take too much time. And I wasn't putting her back on that boat with the arms, my charges, and Carlos's men who were stupid enough to open fire with all the ammo on board.

That left the DPV, stealing one of the tenders, or me and my fins.

Swimming in was time she didn't have, and either of those tenders in these fucking swells was a suicide mission, but more, they could be tracked. Which put me right back at an underwater exfil with the DPV—but I needed to be able to see

my dive computer. Surfacing every two goddamn minutes for visual nav was not fucking ideal.

Taking another breath from the spare air, I held it till we were dead center under the hull, then released it. Already three breaths into the spare tank, I couldn't fucking remember Blade's calculations. All I knew was, I had twenty minutes of air, and with the DPV, we were forty minutes to shore.

Fuck, I needed to get to that tender where I'd dumped the DPV.

And only take a breath every other minute.

Doable.

Staying between the boat's navigation lights, bringing us up toward the surface on the portside, I held two meters short and scanned.

Barely making out the larger tender, then the small one, I took another breath, aimed and kicked.

A shaft of light cut through the water in front of us.

Back kicking, I sank us down as she frantically tapped my shoulder.

Ignoring her, palming my MP7 and holding position, I watched the beams from spotlights cut through the water in a crisscross pattern that narrowly missed us by a few feet.

Her arm went back around my neck, and she gripped tight.

A few more sweeps, then thirty seconds later, the beams moved toward the bow.

I glanced back at the stern.

No searchlights.

Then I scanned the boat with my limited visibility.

She wasn't underway, her stabilizers were still working overtime, no anchor, and the tenders were tethered. I glanced around for a place to safely stow the redhead while I grabbed the DPV. But that meant either removing her mask and

swapping her to the spare air while I surfaced solo or taking the time to strap the rebreather on her.

The beams from the flashlights cut through the water off the forward deck, and my decision was made.

Now or never, and she was coming with me.

Sparing her a glance, I quickly gave hand signals. Surface, swim, hold, dive.

No movement, she didn't show any signs of recognition.

Fuck me.

I made the rudimentary signal for *keep your mouth shut*, then I locked my hands together and thumped my chest.

She nodded.

I kicked off.

Five seconds later, we broke the surface.

Six seconds, I took a fucking breath.

Seven seconds, I grabbed the DPV.

Eight seconds, a swell slammed into us.

Nine, ten, eleven seconds, we rode the crest.

Twelve seconds, we came back down—and the fucking tender hold's doors were open with two of Carlos's guards standing there, one of them in dive gear.

My MP7 was out of the water, and my first shot hit the asshole in the wetsuit midchest before the fuck next to him drew.

I heard her yell through the mask, but I'd already fired.

The second asshole went down, and I was fucking kicking.

Holding the thirty-five-pound DPV with one hand, I dropped my MP7 on its sling and swam one-armed as fast as I could to the shell doors with a redhead wrapped around my torso.

Another swell hit, and she jerked in fear, but I rode the momentum. Turning at the last second and giving a hard kick,

I let the wave dump me ass first onto the small extended swim platform. She landed on my lap, I held onto the DPV, and we took a backwards ride as the swell slammed into the side of boat, flooded the tender hold and pushed us into the two dead assholes.

Dumping my spare air and grabbing the mask and scuba tank off the dead diver, I double tapped my comm before shouldering the larger tank.

Sitting on my lap, shaking harder now than ever, the redhead reached to take off her mask.

Letting go of the DPV to stop her, I shook my head.

November came through comms. "Kilo, sitrep."

"I have two fucking seconds. A couple of Carlos's men are down. I have the female. We're taking the DPV back to shore. Contact on resurface. That car better be fucking waiting." I slid the dead fuck's mask over my head.

The redhead's eyes widened in horror.

"Affirmative," November replied. "Vehicle is at the south end of the Powerboat Italia marina, keys in the usual location. Helo touched down on the Pelorus for a pickup five minutes ago. NAP and heliport are crawling with private security hired by Carlos. Alpha and Blade exfilled NAP to reposition the G650. Sitrep on resurface."

"Copy. Going radio silent."

"Radio silent," November repeated as another swell hit the boat.

The redhead, already showing signs of hypothermia, looked scared as hell behind the mask as she frantically waved her hands at me and pointed over my left shoulder.

I fucking aimed before I turned my head.

A guy came down a flight of stairs, saw me and retreated.

I made a judgment call.

Dropping my MP7 again, I reached for the dead diver and unzipped his wetsuit.

The redhead caught on quick. Letting go of me, she shoved her mask up. “N-no. NO.”

“We’re going back in the water. We’re forty minutes from shore, and the wetsuit will keep you from getting hypothermic.”

She was already shaking her head. “Sh-sh-shoot me, then. I w-w-will not w-w-wear *that*.”

Voices sounded a second before boots on metal stairs echoed through the tender hold.

“Hang on tight.” I shoved her mask down, grabbed my mouthpiece, hefted the DPV and launched us back into the ocean.

TWENTY-FOUR

Anneliese

Hell.

He threw us into hell.

I wanted to die.

TWENTY-FIVE

Kilo

My brain hijacked itself.

Except this time, it wasn't the fucking Breacher Syndrome.

Singularly focused, needing to get her to shore, I didn't give a fuck about the mission. Not watching my six, not being cautious, maxing out the DPV's speed, I didn't care about one goddamn thing except getting her out of the water as fast as possible.

I watched my nav board, and I watched her.

Every ten seconds, I touched her.

Her arms, her legs, her hands behind my neck, her back.

It didn't take a genius to figure out this woman hated to be touched.

I didn't care.

Swapping my grip on the DPV each time, I tapped, rubbed, held or applied pressure to a part of her body to keep her blood circulating, keep her conscious, and try to stave off hypothermia.

She'd fucking flinched—every goddamn time—for seven minutes straight.

Then it waned, but she'd held on to me.

For twenty-six minutes.

Twenty-six minutes where my brain rewired, and my fucked-up headspace added in a redhead like it was imprinting

that shit into my consciousness.

Twenty-six minutes where an addiction to blast waves and being under the surface took a back seat to the image of a woman throwing her leg over a gunwale in a raging fucking storm like she was a goddamn female Poseidon.

Then her arms and legs went limp, and for the past five minutes, I'd been holding on to her.

Two minutes ago, her eyes had closed.

Sixty seconds ago, her shaking stopped.

Three hundred meters out from the marina, I made the call.

Giving up speed, I dumped the DPV and my scuba tank, wrapped both arms around her, rolled to my back and surfaced.

Then I kicked like hell.

Swells slammed into us, I was swimming in blind, but the surface temp was a couple degrees warmer.

Hundred more meters.

I kicked harder.

I rubbed her hands.

Fifty more meters.

Her hair plastered to my gear.

Twenty-five more meters.

Small as hell in my arms, her head hung to the side.

Fifteen more meters.

I glanced over my shoulder.

Almost to the end of the marina, we crested a swell, and I shoved my mask up. "Come on, woman. Hang in there."

I rubbed her leg.

Almost there.

I gave three more hard kicks.

Then I rolled, let go of her with one hand to shove off my fins, wrapped both arms back around her and applied pressure.

That did it.

She started shaking again.

Thank fuck.

I swam around a rock jetty, and my feet touched bottom. Shoving her mask off, switching my hold on her, I got us out of the fucking water.

Cradled in my arms, shaking like hell, she looked up at me.

For half a beat, my brain not the only shit that rewired, I stared back.

Then I scanned the marina and aimed for the car.

TWENTY-SIX

Anneliese

I didn't die.

He saved me.

He'd killed two men.

But he'd saved me.

Shaking so hard, my fingers and feet feeling like fire and ice, my limbs were numb, and my breaths came short. I didn't know if I was naïve or principled for having refused a dead man's wetsuit.

Right now, I didn't even know if I cared that they were dead.

My teeth chattering uncontrollably, I was in no condition to walk, and my mind thankfully gave me a reprieve from the burning sensation whenever someone touched me—same as it had when he'd kept touching me on our human submarine ride through hell. But it didn't give me a reprieve from my thoughts.

I tried to speak. "Y-you're ca-ca-carrying me. Wh-who are you?" I deserved a name.

"Kilo.

"Wh-wh-where are we?"

"Naples. Powerboat Italia marina. Save your breath."

Italy. From New York to Naples, and I had no recollection of it. The thought would have been much more terrifying an hour ago, but I was too busy holding my blue-tinged fingers as

a stranger held me. His biceps stretching the limits of his wetsuit, his strides eating up the length of the deserted pier that was more stone jetty than dock, he stuck to the shadowed half where the lights barely touched us.

As he scanned left to right, his deep but quiet voice fell across my nerves and painted them with false security. “November, vehicle sitrep.”

I looked up at the angular planes of his face as they intermittently got caught in the outer bands of illumination from the passing dock lights. “P-pardon?”

No shortness of breath, no strain in his voice from the physical exertion of having just swum us to safety and lifting me out of the water and now carrying me, he spared me a glance that felt as rare as his presence. “Comms.”

His focus returned to our surroundings with another quick scan that, after seeing him shoot those two men and aim at the third before he’d even looked behind him, I was sure missed nothing. “Negative. Which one?” He looked right. “How long’s it been parked?” He glanced toward some parked cars. “Activity since then?” He looked behind us. “Copy.”

A gust of wind brought stinging rain, and he increased his pace, but he didn’t speak again until we were a few feet away from a black Maserati parked on the end of the stone pier.

He glanced down at me. “Can you stand?”

My teeth still chattering, I nodded.

Without comment, he set me down, reached under the back rear tire and came away with a key fob. With a few pushes, he had the car started and the trunk unlocked.

Another gust of wind drove right through me, and the rain picked up. I almost wept at the thought of getting inside the car and turning the heat to full blast. But the man who’d said his name was Kilo didn’t tell me I could, and something about his entire demeanor had me waiting for his permission... to do anything.

So I stood there, violently shivering, as he pushed the trunk open and I watched him.

He disassembled.

He pulled off the stolen mask he'd shoved to the top of his head when we'd emerged from the water.

The dive hood followed.

Inky black hair that was shorter on the sides and back fell in tousled waves over one eye.

He unshouldered his backpack.

He pulled the strap attached to the gun over his head.

He took off the military-looking breathing contraption.

He unstrapped a large knife from his leg.

He took off a device from one wrist, then the other.

Piece by piece, he transformed from a terrifying soldier combat diver to the lethal, aloof man in the elevator as he unceremoniously threw every item except his gun and backpack into the fancy sports car before he partially unzipped his wetsuit.

A linear opening cutting from his waist to his neck exposed an entire mountainous landscape of rippling muscles as he squatted by the backpack at his feet.

With the same quick, precise movements that defied normal human capabilities, he unzipped his waterproof bag and pulled out a black duffle. From there, he took out a folded silver square that caught the distant reflection of marina lights.

Rising to his feet with the same incredible strength and grace with which he swam, he shook out the silver until it was a thin, undulating sheet of mirrored material that crinkled like paper.

Holding it up in front of me, he gave a command like he had on the boat—with a penetrating stare and absolute authority. “Dress off.”

The tremor that wracked my already shaking body was... extra. But my voice, unlike my mind and body, didn't shake. “No.”

“Hypothermia,” he stated as if the single word were an answer, diagnosis and order all rolled into one explicit, inflexible command.

My feet finally on the semblance of land, no gun pointed to my head, half-frozen to death, in danger of losing the use of my fingers, I still couldn't do it. I couldn't explain to this storm-eyed warrior how this was the hill I would die on.

I couldn't tell him I'd been about to recklessly jump to my death with the delusional notion I would've survived that ocean without him just to avoid this very thing.

Powerless, shameful, impotent fear had a grip on my throat as tight and as raw as the tendrils that'd been wrapping around my consciousness since long before a cold, unforgiving memory in a filthy, drafty loft had choked my soul.

I shook my head.

His slate-eyed stare measured as sure as if he could read my thoughts, he said nothing. He wrapped the silver sheet around me, wet dress and all.

My reaction conditioned, I flinched. But something else also happened.

I didn't burn.

Not in my mind, not where his knuckles skimmed against my ice-cold neck, not anywhere as he pulled the material tight like swaddling and tucked one end into the other right under my chin.

“Thermal,” he stated with the same judicial use of words before he opened the passenger door that lifted like a butterfly wing and gave me a warning. “Putting you in the car.”

I didn't have time to think.

An arm behind my back, another behind my knees, he lifted me so quickly and effortlessly that one second I was being swaddled, and the next I was in the seat of the fancy sports car.

Then he tucked the ends of the sheet around my bare feet and legs, and buckled my seat belt.

No stretch in the material, unable to pull away, I held still and did what he'd told me to do on that yacht before plunging us into that ocean.

I didn't fight him.

I didn't fight him because I was wrong.

He wasn't my tormentor.

He was my rescuer.

But that rescue, it was too impossible, too coincidental, and it left me with so many questions that my mind was both shutting down and spinning with a single word. But before I could ask how—how had he known I was taken, how had he found me, how had we survived—my winged door was shut.

A moment later, his opened. Stowing his duffle in the marginal space behind my seat, folding his tall frame into the low-slung seat, he placed his gun on his lap and turned over the engine.

The Italian sports car roared to life, and he put the heat on full blast.

I forgot all about my questions.

Leaning my head back, I closed my eyes, and the shivering started to abate.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Kilo

She leaned back, closed her eyes and went quiet.

It fucking bothered me more than her shaking. So did that bruise on her temple, but I hadn't had time to do more than wrap her in the thermal blanket. I needed to get us the fuck out of here.

Double tapping my comm, I revved the engine and drove out of the marina that was too damn quiet.

November got my signal and replied. "Still not seeing any movement."

"That's the problem." Keeping my voice low, I glanced at her. Eyes still closed, she was either checked out or sleeping. "Need a calculation."

"On?"

"Marina. Waterway just past the jetty. Width and depth."

"What are you thinking?"

"Salvage." November would get my drift. Carlos might send someone—hopefully his guards who'd fucking shot at us. I could have it rigged. Controlled blast. But only if I had precise calculations.

"Understood. Give me thirty."

"Copy. Where's that helo?"

"Off the grid."

This fucking storm. “Charlie Mike?” The cell I’d programmed to be the detonator was tucked inside my wetsuit.

“Waiting on confirmation from Alpha.”

Fuck waiting. “Window’s closing.” Now that I’d been made, they’d not only be checking that boat, they’d relocate. “I’m still in range. Patch Alpha through.”

“Copy. Switch to cell.”

I fucking hated cell phones, and I could hear better on comms. “Negative. Driving.”

November didn’t give me shit. “Hold.”

A couple seconds later, Alpha’s voice came through comms with the background noise of the G650. “Kilo, we’re repositioning. November said you’d been made before exfil. Head to the safe house in Salerno with the female and sit tight. We’ll circle back once—”

I cut him off. “Already read in.” I wasn’t. Didn’t care. I was getting the redhead out no matter what, but that fucking boat was still full of weapons. “Charlie Mike? Window’s closing.” A couple streets up from the marina, with the harbor lights still in my sights, I checked my rearview mirrors.

“We don’t have confirmation yet on Carlos’s location.”

Translation—the fuck wasn’t on the boat. “Doesn’t matter.” We’d already discussed this before the mission went to hell. “You want it done, it happens now.” I hadn’t placed the C-4 with intent to conceal it. “They’ve had forty minutes for recon.”

“Understood,” Alpha replied. “November, how many souls on board?”

“Six, two not moving,” November answered. “Latest sat imagery shows no activity since the helo took flight after Kilo’s exfil.”

“Kilo, did you see any crew on board?”

“Negative.” The assholes I shot in the tender hold hadn’t been crew, and I didn’t count the third guy I’d barely gotten a

visual on.

“Ask the female,” Alpha ordered.

I glanced at the redhead. Her eyes were still closed, not that it would’ve mattered if they weren’t. I wasn’t putting this on her. “Negative.” I pulled out the cell as I eased off the gas.

“Is she conscious?” Alpha asked.

“Irrelevant.” He either made the call or I would.

“Copy.” Alpha cursed under his breath. Then he made the fucking call. “Charlie Mike.”

Continue mission. “Charlie Mike,” I confirmed, pressing first one button on the cell, then another before pulling to the side of the road.

Three seconds of dead air hung over comms before Alpha asked, “Confirmation?”

The ocean remained black for another two seconds.

Then an explosion lit up the night sky, quickly followed by a second.

“Confirmed,” November answered Alpha as sound waves carried two muted booms that breached the interior of the Maserati in rapid succession.

“Oh my God.”

I glanced at the redhead.

Eyes wide, lips parted, she stared at the fireball two clicks offshore, then her gaze cut to me. “Was that...?” She drew in a shallow breath. “Did you...?”

“Comms out.” I took the device from my right ear and studied her for half a beat. Then I pulled back onto the road.

A couple minutes later, her quiet voice, raspy from dehydration, broke the hum of the 630-horsepower engine. “Do you know Carlos?”

“Yes.”

“Is he dead?”

“No.”

The thermal blanket shifted, and her head turned toward the window. “Andros?”

Andros. Andros. I couldn’t place the fucking name. “Description?”

“Tall, mean. Carlos’s henchman.”

Carlos’s second. The fuck that’d been carrying her. “He’s not dead.” Yet.

The thermal blanket shifted again. Her voice got smaller. “Thank you for saving me.”

“Don’t paint me a hero, woman.” Carlos and Andros were still alive, and she’d nearly gotten taken out by hypothermia on my watch.

“What makes you think I’d paint you at all?”

This woman sank into my headspace even more, and I fucking cursed. Silently.

Then I glanced in the rearview mirrors for a tail and held onto my third-best skill set—the one that came after fucking and blowing shit up. Silence.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Anneliese

He drove. Silently.

I couldn't keep my mind silent. "You're American." Out of everything that'd happened, that was what stood out. If he was American, maybe he was a soldier and this was some sort of mission, and I didn't have to think about those men he'd shot or the explosion that was surely the yacht. Because it was starting to sink in. The warmer I got, the more I thawed out, the worse I started to feel.

"You're French and Irish."

"How do you know that?" How had he found me? *Who* was he?

"Your accent."

"I don't have an accent." I shifted to loosen the thermal blanket that wasn't a blanket at all.

He didn't comment. He drove.

Very fast.

The wrong things, the unimportant details, the negative space on a canvas—that was what spilled out of my mouth. "You know these streets." No tourist or someone unfamiliar with the narrow roads, sharp switchbacks and drop-off cliffs would handle the turns like he was handling them.

He still said nothing.

The sleek sports car hugged the road as he took the next turn.

I shivered, but it was residual—the cold of the ocean, the explosion, the visual of my life flashing before my eyes. “Where are we going?”

“Safe house.”

Safe house? That wasn't a normal word. Normal people didn't use that term. Normal people also didn't use underwater propelled devices and scuba gear in a raging storm to escape a yacht full of men shooting at them.

I had to ask. “Are you safe?” It came out wrong. I meant was I safe with him.

He answered before I could clarify. “Depends.”

“On?” Oh God, did I want to know what that meant? Should I be asking any questions at all? Shouldn't I be planning my escape instead? From him, from Carlos and whatever had been happening on that yacht. If I could get to a bank, I could—*shit*. I had no ID. I couldn't go make a huge cash withdrawal and simply hope to disappear from someone like Carlos who clearly had way more means than I did. But I did have digital access to that money. I could work with that. I could find a way to hide. Couldn't I?

He threw me an expressionless glance. “Your definition of safe. What happened on the boat?”

How many definitions of safe were there? And that wasn't a boat. It was a ship. Or it had been. I didn't know what was left of it now. “I'm not sure.” All of it had been off, but I still felt the need to try to explain, if not for any reason other than I didn't want this man to think I was complicit in anything having to do with Carlos.

But as soon as I thought it, I realized how complicit I had been. I'd allowed the sale of my paintings to go through. I'd chosen to take that money over my instincts. I'd not spoken up when Ami and Carlos arranged for me to go to the hotel. Just as I wasn't speaking up now, asking what exactly he meant by safe house.

Everything came out in a rush. “Carlos purchased a dozen of my paintings through the Gagosian in Manhattan, but he

apparently decided he wanted more. So he locked me in a cabin with large-scale canvases and said I had seventy-two hours to paint ten pieces. Where exactly are we going, and will I be able to leave if I want to?”

“Salerno, and yes. How large were the canvases?”

I released a breath I didn't realize I was holding. “Approximately four by five feet.”

“What happened before that?”

“I don't know. The last thing I remembered before waking up on the yacht was walking into Cut in Manhattan.” I glanced at him. “And you.” His hand on mine, his stark reflection in the glass, his masculine, metallic scent.

The slate-eyed man turned his almost colorless stare on me and filled in details he somehow knew. “You flew from Teterboro to Naples, got on another helo and landed on the Pelorus.”

Helo. Helicopter. But that wasn't the important part. “Another helicopter?”

“Yes.”

“When was the first?” I'd never flown on a helicopter in my entire life, not that I remembered.

“Manhattan to Teterboro.” A muscle on his jaw, just under the bottom of his five o'clock shadow, moved. “Start downloading.”

“Downloading?” Was he military? “Are you in the military?”

“I was. Sitrep when you became conscious. Location, state of dress, people within your proximity, conversations you had.”

State of dress.

Oh God.

I tried to push my thoughts down another path of focus. Sitrep, surroundings—he'd been in the military. “Which branch?”

“Navy. Answer the questions.”

The swimming. It made sense. But nothing else did. “Who are you now?”

“AES.”

He said it so succinctly, I felt as if I should know what that was, but I didn’t. “AES?”

“Alpha Elite Security. We’re a PMC.”

“PMC?”

“Private military contractor.”

Oh God. “The military sent you to get Carlos?” My throat constricted. “To get me?” Was I... in trouble? Legally? For taking Carlos’s money?

He stared at me a moment. Then he spoke in plain English, but I didn’t understand most of it. “MARSOC, JSOC, CIA, NSA, DOD—pick an acronym, they all outsource their bad shit to PMCs. Combat support, HVTs, recon, asset retrievals, you name it, we do it, including eliminating high-value targets like Carlos. They call it plausible deniability.”

“What do you call it?” I definitely had plausible deniability.

“Assignments.”

Assignments? Like a job. That’s what killing was to him? And the military or one of those acronyms he talked about was after Carlos, and they’d sent him. “What did you do in the Navy?” Because the way he moved, his extreme physicality, his skills, his disposition, the way he was both calm and exacting but deadly, he had to have some sort of special training.

His eyes watched mine. Then he spoke a single word with lethal dominance. “SEAL.”

Dear God.

This man wasn’t merely outfitted like a combat diver.

He was a Navy SEAL.

TWENTY-NINE

Anneliese

“Sitrep. Answer,” he ordered with absolute authority as if I weren’t sitting in stunned silence next to a Navy SEAL.

One whose questions came flooding back—*location, state of dress, people within your proximity, conversations you had*—questions that I didn’t want to think about. “I-I’m not sure. I woke up on a bed in a cabin, and the yacht was pitching.” Rolling. Like my stomach. “And Carlos was... he was....”

Carlos’s evil voice leached into my conscience.

If you keep pretending to still be asleep, I’m going to take liberties. First, by finding out if this red hair is real.

All of a sudden, I was back on that yacht, locked in that cabin, and I was drowning.

I tried to swallow and couldn’t. I tried to push down Carlos’s threat and couldn’t. I tried to erase a question the Navy SEAL asked and couldn’t.

State of dress. *State of dress.*

The three words reverberated with the past and wrapped around my throat in a death grip. “Stop.” I needed air. *Now.* “Stop the car!”

Cold winter eyes glanced my way.

My hands went to my mouth.

The car violently lurched as he slammed on the brakes and skidded to the side of a cliff. “Wait,” he growled, throwing his door open.

I didn't wait.

Frantically undoing my seat belt and shoving away the constricting blanket, I pulled on the fancy handle and pushed the door up.

Pitching myself out, I fell to the ground, and blinding-sharp pain stabbed into one knee.

It was instant.

I vomited.

Kidnapping, evil, ocean, bile, fear, and memories retched from my shaking body as my palms hit the dirt.

Huge feet bracketed my legs a second before my hair was gently gathered and held back. "Do you know what they drugged you with?"

Panting through my mouth, saliva dripping, praying I didn't smell my own sickness and retch again, I tried to shake my head.

"They didn't feed you."

He didn't ask it as a question, and I couldn't have answered in that moment anyway, but it didn't stop the utter horror of how he'd come to that conclusion.

The meager contents of my stomach nauseatingly spewed all over the ground in front of me, I tried to sit back, but another crippling stab of pain shot up my leg from my knee. The whimper involuntary, I tried to curl away from him, from my mess, from my life.

"Halt," he ordered abrasively.

Halt what? Vomiting? Panicking? Wondering how he could hold my hair and I could still breathe when I hadn't been able to let another man touch me in five years without losing it?

I didn't have time to ask.

My hair fell back down around me, large hands snuck under my arms, and I was lifted.

My body limp, my mind screaming, my soul motionless, I let it happen.

Except he didn't lift me how I was expecting.

His body sank to the ground, and my back fell into his chest as one of his knees hit the dirt while his other leg remained bent, his enormous dive-boot-covered foot firmly planted as he half squatted. Briskly but carefully, he maneuvered my injured knee over his braced leg. Then he settled my weight across his lap as he reached behind him into the car.

Pulling his black bag from behind the front seats, he let it land on the dirt and opened it one-handed. He did a lot of things one-handed.

The faint scent of motor oil or gasoline suddenly drifted around us, and my stomach lurched.

Horrified that I was going to vomit again, I tried to push away from him.

"Stand down," he ordered.

I was sitting. "The smell."

"Breathe through your mouth." Riffing through his bag, he grabbed a packet, opened it and pulled out a couple of hand wipes. With the same unattached efficiency that didn't waver whether he was getting us off that yacht, shooting to kill, submarining us to shore, or holding my hair while I vomited, he wiped my mouth. Then he used the second wipe on my hands.

Watching his strong arms, the way the muscles moved, the veins in his huge hands, how they caught the moonlight in between deep shadows, my mind didn't process his actions until he was on my second hand.

"I can do that."

Ignoring my protest, he finished his task, folded the first wipe around the second and tucked them into an outside pocket on his bag before reaching inside again. "They did something to you on that boat."

“Pardon?” He smelled like ocean and man and protection and whatever was in his bag.

This time he came away with a soft-sided black case. “Your hair,” he stated, using the arm that I suddenly realized he had around my lower back to hold the bag while he unzipped it. Then he spread open what looked like a small pharmacy and medical kit—if medical kits were stocked for surgical procedures—and reached for the side with pills, medications and small vials of God knew what. “It was wet.”

Watching him go for a small blister pack and deftly push a tiny pill out with his large thumb and long fingers, I forgot about his question. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you anti-nausea medication.” He held the pill to my mouth. “It’s sublingual.”

“It’s what?”

“It’ll dissolve. Put it under your tongue.”

Latent panic set in. “No, thank you.”

His eyes caught mine and held. “I’m not drugging you.”

Shame washed over me. He’d saved me from Carlos, from Andros, from *that boat* as he called it, and at no small expense to himself, even if he didn’t look any worse for the wear. But he was still a stranger, and I was... who I was. I deflected. “I don’t want to take anything I haven’t taken before.”

He lowered his hand. “Drug allergies?”

“No. Except for whatever they gave me. It made me sick.” Which was why we were here—squatting on the side of a cliff somewhere in Italy in the middle of the night—as a SEAL held me and cleaned vomit off my face before offering anti-nausea medication that he just happened to have in a bag of tricks in the back of a ridiculously expensive sports car.

“A concussion from the contusion on your temple will also make you sick. The meds will help.”

Another wave of nausea struck, and I caved. “Have you taken that medication before?”

“Yes.”

Of course he had. He carried it around with him. “Will it make me drowsy?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“You’re squatting by my vomit and putting up with me. Why aren’t you sick?”

He didn’t reply.

Embarrassment added to my shame. “That was meant as a joke.” Why was he being patient with me? Men weren’t patient. Not ones like him. Especially not ones like him. But maybe they were. I wouldn’t know. I’d never met a Navy SEAL before.

Still holding my stare, for a long moment, he said nothing. Then he crushed my attempted levity that I’d ignorantly spewed with flippancy. “I’ve seen worse.”

“Of course. My apologies.” By the very nature of who he was, he was a war hero. “I’m sitting on your lap, being inexcusably crass.” Heat flamed, and I tried to push myself up. “I’m not usually this tactless.”

His arm tightened around my waist in a belt of hard muscle, ropey veins and the kind of darkness I couldn’t capture with any paint color.

As fast as it’d come, the fight in me left, and I stilled.

Then it struck me.

I hadn’t flinched. At all.

“Done?”

Properly chastised, I nodded, but it only made my head swim and another wave of nausea hit.

As if he knew, he held the pill to my mouth. “Open.”

God help me, I parted my lips.

“Tongue up.”

Like a child, I did what he told me to do.

Like a clinician, he gave me the small pill.

I’d no sooner closed my mouth, and he was in motion.

Taking out two larger packets and two small ones from his bag of tricks, he set the items on my lap and quickly zipped the case before tossing it back into his bag. Picking up the two smaller packets, he tore them open and blotted what felt like stinging antiseptic on my scraped knee. Then he methodically massaged the larger packets in a manner not unlike how I’d soften a tube of paint in cold weather.

Placing one packet against my temple, he issued an order. “Hold this.”

Icy coldness seeped into my temple as I reached up. Then my fingers brushed against his, and that same current of shock that wasn’t fear raced from my hand, up my arm, and scattered all over the back of my neck.

He let go of the packet on my temple and placed the other against my knee. Tucking the soiled antiseptic wipes into the same outside pocket on his bag where he put the used hand wipes, he then reached inside the main compartment and came away with a bottle of water.

Cracking it open, he held it to my lips and tipped. “Small sips.”

I shivered.

Then I drank.

THIRTY

Kilo

Trembling, she drank.

I scanned her dress.

Dry, it'd shown every curve. Wet, it was borderline pornographic. But she wasn't a piece of ass or a mark, and I had a job to do. One I told myself didn't include letting her sink inside my headspace and take control, but I was already so far deep into this redhead, I hadn't come up for air.

Then she'd started heaving her guts out, and something I'd thought was long dead surfaced.

I knew sick.

I also, perversely, knew what her hips and ass looked like as she'd knelt on the ground. Not something I'd forgotten as she sat on my lap, taking water from me like a sub.

Fuck, this was gonna get complicated.

“Enough,” I clipped, pulling the bottle back.

“Sorry.” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Screwing the cap on the water, I handed it over.

She took the bottle, our fingers touched, and I felt it—like a fucking blast wave.

Me, her, sex.

Her voice caught. “Thank you.”

Not getting the hell up like I should have, holding her on my lap like I was some kind of fucking hero, telling my dick

to stand down, I cut to the intel I wanted. “Original question. You didn’t answer.”

“Which was?” She kept trying not to stare at my eyes.

I wanted her looking at me. “Did you shower on the boat?” Flipping the ice pack on her knee and palming it to hold it in place, I let my fingers land on her skin to see if she’d flinch.

She didn’t.

She shivered.

“Pardon?” Her gaze cut to her knee.

I applied pressure with my thumb and two fingers. “Simple question.” The answer was another story.

Her gaze drifting, her pulse hammering in her neck, she tried not to look where she’d gotten sick. “No.”

I didn’t put her back in the car. I didn’t let it go. “They touch you?”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “I don’t think that’s any of your—”

“Answer.”

Still holding that fucking breath, she clasped her hands like this was some kind of lesson on table manners and stared straight ahead. “Yes, of course they touched me. But not in the way you’re insinuating. At least, not to my knowledge.”

“Take inventory,” I demanded.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Self-assess.”

Her dark eyes met mine, and fire lit her attitude. “I was not sexually assaulted.”

“Underwear intact?”

Even in the dark, I saw her expression. The same damn one she’d had when she’d told me to shoot her instead of putting her in a dead asshole’s wetsuit. “Yes.”

I didn’t drop it because I fucking couldn’t. “You checked?”

“I’m done with this conversation.” She looked away, and the fire in her voice left with an exhale. “Besides, what would it matter now? Are you going to swim back to the remains of a yacht and defend my virtue?”

“No.” But I’d torture Carlos and every single one of his motherfucking guards before I blew them to hell.

“Then I reiterate my previous response.” She shifted on my lap. “I’m done with this conversation.”

I wasn’t. And if she shifted again, I was gonna pick her up and set her back down on my hard cock. “Why was your hair wet?” If she hadn’t taken a shower and they hadn’t fucked her or fucked with her, then what the hell had happened?

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Can we go?”

“No.”

“I would like to leave.”

So would I. As much I liked the hell out of applying pressure on her leg with the same three fingers I’d use to fuck her, the longer we sat here, the likelier we were to have someone see us. “Answer the question.”

The fire came back. Hot and full of anger, but tamped down by whatever bullshit manners or well-bred background she’d come from. “They threw water in my face. An entire bucket of it, actually. Is that what you want to hear? They drugged me, flew me halfway across the world, violated one of my favorite parts of Italy by ruining it with their presence, and they threw water in my face like I was an errant child or misbehaving canine.”

Carlos was a dead man. “Copy.”

“Copy what?” she snapped.

“Understood,” I amended.

“Excellent. I’m glad one of us does. Can we move on now, literally? Because sitting here next to my own vomit, on your

lap, while you interrogate me is not on my bucket list, pun notwithstanding.” She made to get up.

Letting go of the ice pack, I snaked a second arm around her waist. “Why?”

Mirroring my movements, she dropped her hand from her temple. “Why what?”

“The water.”

Her gaze went to where she’d been sick, and I knew before she opened her mouth. “I made a mess on their yacht. Carlos’s bodyguard wasn’t impressed when it happened a second time.”

A new fucking level of anger unlocked. “He tried to drown you?”

“No. I told you he threw the water in my face. Or someone else did. I’m not entirely sure who did it. I was bent over the railing.”

That *motherfucker*. “Voluntarily?”

“What do you think?”

“I’m not paid to think.”

“Just to ask the questions?”

“Explain bent over the railing.” Because I was starting to seriously fucking lose my shit.

“Apparently, he didn’t want me getting sick inside the yacht again. Now, I am truly done discussing it. Do you have toothpaste in that bag of tricks?”

Bag of tricks. Fuck me.

I reached into my go bag.

THIRTY-ONE

Anneliese

Without comment, he reached back into his bag, rummaged, and came away with a new toothbrush still in its packaging and a travel-sized toothpaste. With the same quick efficiency as how he'd handled his medical kit, he unwrapped the toothbrush, put toothpaste on it and held it out for me.

For a stunned second, I stared at the selfless gesture. Then I looked at him under the light of the moon, and all at once, it was as if I were seeing a completely different man. The sharp planes of his face were still there, each distinctly outlined, but it was as if he had dropped a mask of hardened indifference and let something else surface.

An intoxicating, breath-stealing something else.

I wanted so badly to paint him in that moment that my hand trembled as my fingers brushed against his. "Thank you."

He said nothing.

What little modicum of decorum I had left surfaced from the shallow pretense of safety that this man's lethally quiet dominance had buried me under and I realized I could be taking his only toothbrush. "What will you use?"

For only a sliver of time that competed with the elusive moonlight, his gaze dropped to my trembling hand as it perched over his. Ignoring my question, he looked back at me. "Need help?"

If embarrassment had a color and its depth was a brushstroke, my canvas would be wide swaths of Ruby Madder Alizarin. "No, thank you."

He merely tipped his chin and took the ice packs, tossing them into his bag.

I took the toothbrush.

Then I was suddenly aware of his overwhelming presence and the deeply nuanced intimacy of such a mundane task. Turning my head to brush my teeth, I wondered if I had the skill to paint him. Or even the talent.

Before I could figure out the logistics of how not to spit out the toothpaste in front of him, he was angling me.

With a hand under each arm, he grasped me with a firm hold and turned my torso so that I could lean over and away from him just enough to get rid of the toothpaste.

Trying not to be any more mortified than I already was, praying I didn't make much sound or that my shifting weight didn't send us both to the dirt, I spit and used the water I still had to rinse my mouth and the brush.

When I was done, I leaned back up. "Thank you."

His only response was to stand and take me with him, effortlessly lifting us both as I held on to the toothbrush and bottle of water like my life depended on it.

Again, I didn't flinch, and again, he didn't give me a chance or a choice of getting into the car by myself.

He set me in the seat, pulled out the safety belt, and reached to buckle it.

"May I ask you a question?"

He clicked the safety latch, then looked at me.

For being almost colorless, his eyes shifted hue every time I looked at him. So much so, I got lost each time I saw them. Almost forgetting what I wanted to ask, what I'd been wanting to ask since I first saw him on the yacht, I forced myself to focus. "Why were you in the elevator at the Four Seasons?"

"We had a meet."

"You and the other man you were with?"

“Alpha.”

I remembered the name he'd said earlier. “As in Alpha Elite Security?”

“His company.” Without further comment or explanation, he closed my door and got back behind the wheel.

Seconds later, we were back to his insanely fast driving, and I was sinking in my seat.

He didn't speak, and I didn't question him anymore.

A half hour later, high in the cliffs above the sea, with the storm below us, he pulled up to an almost hidden gate that was practically on top of the road. Maritime pines sprouted up behind it as bougainvillea crowded over the top and spilled down a six-foot-high solid stone wall that ran more than a half kilometer in either direction from the gate.

Putting his window down, he punched a code into a small, concealed keypad.

The gate opened inward, revealing a half-circular drive with a majestic glass-and-stone villa beyond with clear views straight through to the Tyrrhenian Sea. The grounds, the trees, the terraces and walkways, the villa itself—it was all lit with architectural lighting, and the scene looked more like a movie set than a safe house.

He pulled through the gate with the same reckless speed as how he drove and swung the sports car around so my side was facing the front door.

Then he cut the engine and opened his door as the gate closed, and all of a sudden, we were plunged into deafening silence.

It happened without warning.

My heart rate spiked, fear crawled up my throat, and I was back on that yacht, looking over the railing.

He got out of the car.

All the questions, the ones I'd been trying to compartmentalize, prioritize, and paint into small, carefully

controlled sections of color like I did on my landscapes, they broke their boundaries and bled.

Fear, panic, claustrophobia, the need to take flight—it all came at once, but he'd already opened my door and was standing there with not only his bag of tricks over his shoulder, but also his waterproof backpack and his big gun on the strap.

My subconscious blurted out what it thought I needed to be safe. "I need the car keys." A Maserati wasn't going to keep me safe from Carlos.

A SEAL held out the keys.

I reached for them.

He closed his hand. "Where are you gonna go?"

He'd killed two men with exacting precision, rescued me, most likely exploded that yacht and gave me a fake name.

I gave him the truth. "Nowhere that I would tell you."

"And if the car's being traced?"

That caught me off guard. And frightened me more. Because now an entire new series of fears were unraveling faster than I could think of them. What if Carlos had followed us? What if he blamed me for whatever this man had done? What if he was already watching us as I sat and he stood, vulnerable and exposed?

I barely formed a reply. "Then I'll find my way without it." Could I? Would I be safe?

"With what money?" he asked in the same even, non-emotive tone that was as void of color as his eyes.

Flustered, unsure how this conversation had become a test—one I was never going to pass—I reached for the only familiarity I had left. "Give me my bag, and I'll figure it out."

As if I hadn't spoken, he ripped more holes into my false bravado. "ID? Passport? Cell phone?"

Sudden overwhelming exhaustion mixed with the fear, but neither won. Weakness did. "When did you look in my bag?"

“I didn’t.”

“So you’re assuming I have none of those things?”

He said nothing. He just stared at me with those eyes that were neither the color of smoke nor mist, but just as elusive.

I stupidly, foolishly asked again about the explosion. “What happened to the yacht?” Was he sure Carlos wasn’t dead?

This time, he didn’t answer my question with a penetrating stare. He gave me an order wrapped with the muddied color of threat. “Get out of the car.”

My damp dress sticking to me, my muscles tight, my hair all but forgotten, I didn’t move.

Storm gray swirled with iced slate, and the man who’d named himself after a measurement of drugs became the drug. “Rephrasing. Get out or I’ll take you out.”

My knees quaked, my heart beat erratically, and I shivered hard.

But I didn’t move.

Because I was weak, and he was strong, and I had been wrong.

I didn’t want to die in that sea or run away in his car.

I wanted to drown in his dominance.

THIRTY-TWO

Kilo

Grabbing her, I lifted her out of the car.

She didn't flinch—she fucking recoiled, but I still saw it.

She wanted it.

Maybe not me specifically, which was enough to piss me off if I stopped to think about it, which I wasn't gonna fucking do, but she wanted dominance.

I could taste it on her. The fall from adrenaline, the sexual need, she was drowning in it.

She was also fucking spiraling.

Fear soaked every inch of her stiff muscles and that damn dress.

“Breathe,” I ordered, pausing by the keypad for the front door.

Sucking in a breath, she held that fucking toothbrush and water bottle like they were the only things keeping her together.

“Again.” I punched in the same code November programmed for me for all shit that needed them because not remembering numerical sequences was another fun fucking fallout from Breacher Syndrome. But a certain six-digit date I never forgot.

The redhead took another breath, and I opened the door to a safe house I'd only been to once before.

Carrying her inside, I scanned the open floor plan as I kicked the door shut behind us. Setting her down, I gave her another command. “Wait here.”

The second she was vertical and I wasn’t touching her, she found her voice. “Where are you going?”

“Recon. Wait.”

I cleared the main level. More importantly, I found the largest bedroom, and it had a walk-in shower. Dumping my shit on the bed before peeling off the top half of my wetsuit, I went back to find her. Halfway across the damn villa, standing in front of the windows, she was staring out at the view.

Not sure if I was pissed off that she was shit for directions, or turned on by her brazenness, I hit her six. “Clear.”

She jumped, then looked over her shoulder. Her gaze went to my chest, and she sucked in a breath. “P-pardon?”

That’s it, woman. Go ahead and look. “Secure,” I amended. “Let’s get you in a shower, then I’ll treat that contusion.” Not that I could do much for it now, but I didn’t like the fact that she was puking her guts out.

Her gaze cut to my arms, then my shoulders, and she inhaled again before repositioning and focusing back on the view. “Why do you call it a contusion?”

That accent. Fuck me. “What would you call it?”

“Bruise.”

“Carlos’s second whacked your head getting off the helo transport at Teterboro.” It was more than a fucking bruise.

She turned toward me with a frown. “What? No.” Her fingers went to the side of her face, just under the hematoma. “This is from Andros’s gun.”

“Carlos’s second fucking pistol-whipped you?” After he’d hit her head on the goddamn helo? My hands were on her face, shoving her still-damp hair out of the way as my anger hit a new level.

She practically bowed under my grip. “He-he had his gun to my head. He told me to stop vomiting.” When I didn’t let go of her, she angled closer in to me. “I got angry. I told him to pull the trigger.”

Under her hairline, just above her temple, there was another fucking hematoma from the helo. “That made him hit you?” I fucking thought about dismemberment. Specifically the motherfucker’s goddamn arms.

“Yes.”

“Did you lose consciousness?”

“I don’t know.”

That meant yes. *Fuck*. “Symptoms besides vomiting?”

She stared up at me. “Symptoms?”

“Headache, dizziness, impaired vision or coordination, confusion, memory loss?” Now I wanted her shit checked out by a doc. One of us with a scrambled head was enough.

Her stare lasted another beat, then she blinked, and the flipside of her came out. “Submarining through an angry ocean while freezing after being drugged, then having you show up pretty much covers all of those symptoms, so yes.”

“Submarining.” I mentally stepped it back. She didn’t need a doc.

“What do you call it?” she asked with the same flare of attitude.

“Diving.”

“I didn’t like that either. You didn’t warn me you were going *under* the yacht. And why did you tell me your name is Kilo?”

I didn’t. “You asked who I was. I told you.”

“Kilo is not a name.”

This redhead. I fucking relented. “It’s my call sign.” I angled the conversation away from who I was. “Not a fan of

swimming?” She was about to pitch herself overboard when I’d found her.

“Yes, I am, but that wasn’t swimming.”

“You’re right. It was diving. Let’s go.” I turned toward the bedroom.

Her voice trailed behind me. “Where?”

“Shower.” She needed one. I needed one. Before I fucked her. Or worse, kissed that mouth.

THIRTY-THREE

Anneliese

As I stood under the hot spray, the water pressure and heat hit my skin like a million little needles.

I wanted to wash everything off.

But I couldn't stop seeing him. The way he looked at me.

A silent SEAL.

He'd eclipsed every single horrific thing that'd happened since I'd left Gagosian in Manhattan. Everything except the fear of an insane Carlos and whoever—whatever—he was. I didn't care. I just wanted to disappear—something I'd never had a problem doing. Except now I was frightened enough not to leave this makeshift prison of a safe house. Not until I knew Carlos was no longer after me. But that left me here, with him.

Turning under the spray, I tilted my head back and let the water wash over my face.

From a cold bucket to a freezing ocean to a hot deluge—funny how the same act, same element, but with opposing temperatures, differing circumstances and separate geographic locations could be worlds apart. Like a sunset. No two were the same.

Finding a bottle of expensive shampoo I was positive the man in the living room had no hand in choosing, I washed my hair. Then I used an equally expensive fine-milled soap that left a hint of sweet almond on my skin. Turning off the shower, I stepped around the fogged-up glass and reached for one of the thick white towels neatly hanging on a rack.

Midreach, I froze.

Where my damp clothes had been on the vanity, there was now a man's T-shirt.

Awareness shot through my entire body, and I glanced back at the shower. The steam lingering, it wasn't transparent. But it wasn't opaque either.

He had seen me naked.

Anger and desire flared in equal measure, and I snatched the towel. With irrational, mounting fury, with a temper I did not have, I grabbed the T-shirt and stormed into the living area.

Shirtless, hair wet as if he had showered as well, sitting on the couch in black pants with a small device in his hands, the ever-hanging lock of inky waves covering half his face, he looked up at me.

My breath caught, and I got angrier.

"What is this?" I held up the trespassing offense.

"Shirt."

I spit my accusation at him and every defined muscle on his hard chest. "You came into my washroom."

"Bathroom," he corrected.

"*Fuck you.*" I threw the shirt at him and pivoted.

Faster than I could regret the most uncouth, ill-mannered thing I'd ever said, my hair was grabbed, and I was spun around.

Lethal slate eyes stared down at me. His huge bicep bulged next to my face, and soapy musk washed over me like a drug.

All at once, I wasn't breathless. Air running in and out of my lungs like it couldn't decide which way to go, I panted. Like a dog. Which only fueled my incensed rage, and my voice punched out in crude staccato. "Un. Hand. *Me.*"

He did the opposite.

Stepping closer, heat emanating from his chest, he leaned down as his voice dropped with deadly intent. “My hands aren’t on you.”

“My hair.” My voice shook.

“I’m not Carlos or his second.”

My body shook. “Let. *Go.*”

“Throw something at me again, and you’ll have more than my hands on you.” Releasing me, from his grip, from two different conversations, he unceremoniously tossed the shirt that smelled like him over my shoulder. “Get dressed.” Turning, he picked up the small black device from the couch, then sat down.

A single glimpse of his back, and shock gripped me.

From shoulders to waist, his skin was a canvas of scars. Speckled and sporadic and without pattern, a sea of raised flesh like a human version of a Jackson Pollock spread across his body like confetti.

Hating myself for my actions toward him, my rage thickened to guilt. “What happened?”

Focused on the device in his hands, his fingers manipulating wires, he kept his head down and said nothing.

I deserved that.

Turning toward the bedroom I’d stormed out of only moments ago, I was pulling my towel tighter around me when his voice closed the distance between us.

“Next time you want to fuck, say so.”

THIRTY-FOUR

Kilo

She tensed, and her bullshit gasp of propriety hit right before she hightailed it out of the living room.

The woman could wear her coat of respectability all goddamn night.

I didn't give a fuck.

I saw right through it.

Her eyes, the scent of desire, the way she'd looked at my chest—the woman wanted to fuck. Me or the uniform I'd been. I still couldn't fucking tell.

Which was only pissing me off more the further this woman sank into my headspace. And the sole reason I'd been off the couch before my shirt had hit me in the face.

Yeah, I took her clothes. To fucking clean them. I'd left her a shirt. My shirt. And I wanted to see her in it, not have it thrown in my face.

This was why I didn't fucking engage.

Any other woman, and her wet dress still would've been in that bathroom.

Rewiring a detonator that'd gotten damaged in the fucking cluster this assignment had become, I was trying to focus on anything other than a wet redhead who smelled like need when my cell lit up.

Glancing at the screen, I debated ignoring it like I usually did.

The light went off in the bedroom, and my decision was made.

Swiping to answer, I held the phone to my ear.

“I have that information you asked for.” The typing that typically filled the background noise of every one of November’s calls came through the line.

“What intel?” My mind elsewhere, I couldn’t remember what the fuck I’d asked him for.

“Specs.”

“Specs?”

“Calculations.”

Shit. Right. “Go.”

He rattled off the calculations I used to be able to do in my head with visual sight lines. Listening, I counted.

Then I waited until he was finished, mentally double-checked my numbers, and gave him my own calculations. “One-point-five kilometers.”

“One-point-four-seven, but yes.”

“I rounded up,” I defended.

November paused.

Christ. “What?” November’s pauses were never good.

“Delta flew in from Greece.”

Fuck. “Alpha called him in?” Delta was a goddamn prophet. The former SEAL wasn’t only a beast on the battlefield, he also had a sixth sense. The trifecta of intelligence, strength, and the ability to analyze anything, he was a fucking force. He was also who you brought in when shit was completely FUBAR.

“Yes,” November answered.

“Because?”

“Alpha and Blade have circled NAP three times, and I’m tracking down every angle we have. No movement.”

Shit was always relative. “No movement at all, or you lost Carlos’s trail?”

“Both.”

I glanced down at the device in my hand. “I’ll handle the marina.” I’d go back once I knew she was asleep.

“Alpha wants you to stand down until we have Carlos in sights.”

“Tell him that if blowing Carlos’s hundred-million dollar deal in illegal arms to hell didn’t bring the asshole out of the woodwork, then he’s gone to ground.”

“From a financial perspective, that amount will only make a small dent in Carlos’s net worth. From a psychological perspective, Carlos is vengeful.”

I fucking got it. Carlos made that much in a month, and Alpha was looking for the fucker to surface on the principal of the hit. Alpha also didn’t do half-assed. He’d not only want Carlos, he’d want all the players, including the CIA suit and whatever terrorist fuck Carlos was selling a small army’s worth of weapons to. All of which put me and the redhead on ice. “Give me the bottom line.”

“You’re in a holding pattern.”

“Not in fucking Italy, we’re not.” At a minimum, Carlos would send someone for salvage recon. If I wasn’t wiring that marina, then I didn’t want the redhead anywhere close to this.

“Moving her now is a risk.”

“Staying is worse. Just because Carlos went to ground doesn’t mean his contacts aren’t out looking. You said yourself Capodichino was crawling with hired guns.” Fuck this. “Patch Alpha through.”

“Hold.” The line went quiet.

A few seconds later, Alpha cut in. “November told you we’re in a holding pattern.”

“I told him I’m not staying in country.”

Alpha sighed. “Parameters?”

“Keep Delta. Give me Blade. I’ll get the redhead out.”

“The Gulfstream’s compromised.”

“Not fucking flying commercial.” That was for damn sure.

“November?” Alpha asked with the usual unspoken line of communication he and the hacker had between them.

“Zulu can fly in tomorrow.” November typed. “I’ll get him clearance to land at Salerno airport. He’ll be on the ground by twenty-two hundred local time. Good?”

“Kilo?” Alpha asked.

I glanced at my watch. Fuck. “Fine.”

Then Alpha asked the question I didn’t want to answer but knew was coming. One I’d been thinking about since a redhead had sat on my lap and asked for a goddamn toothbrush. “Destination?”

“Miami.” Sealing my fucking fate, I hung up.

The redhead walked back into the living room still wearing the towel.

THIRTY-FIVE

Anneliese

Standing in the darkened bedroom, staring at a view I would've loved to paint if I was here for any other reason, I listened to his voice as spoke on the phone, but I didn't hear him. I only heard one thing.

Next time you want to fuck, say so.

My nerves crawling, my skin on fire, there was an incessant pounding between my legs. The image of him shirtless and the ghost of his grip in my hair—they were making me angry.

And desperate for something I never thought I would want again.

Still holding the towel around me, refusing to put his shirt on, I moved closer to the bedroom door I'd purposely left open because closing it would tell him that he'd won this test of wills, real or imagined.

Speaking with a deeply impassive tenor that was so aloof, it gave nothing away, he drew me in like a moth to a flame.

Calm was my undoing. The love language I'd never had.

I couldn't imagine him yelling. I couldn't even picture him raising his voice. That man didn't have to. Not to get what he wanted from a woman. And that was more dangerous than the thought of why I was here in the first place.

My paintings.

Shit. My paintings.

And my clothes.

Which was why I'd stormed into the living room in a towel in the first place. Before I thought through what I was doing, I did it a second time.

As if he'd been waiting for me, his formidable and unreadable gaze met mine.

"Where's my dress?"

"Dryer."

Shock and tears that I never, ever let fall threatened. "You put a Prada dress in the dryer?" My outrage a far-distant second to my loss of control, I sounded like my mother.

He said nothing.

I made a demand I was in no position to make. "I want my dress, and I want my paintings back."

"Where are the paintings?"

"I don't know, but you're a SEAL. Shouldn't you be able to figure it out? You found me."

As if I hadn't just insulted and belittled him, he asked a question without any change in his tone. "Last known location on the paintings?"

"They were crated for shipping at Gagosian and loaded into one of their vans." Then I couldn't remember if the van had driven off or what had happened after that but before a SEAL had put his hand on mine at Cut. The self-righteousness I'd walked out here with suddenly dimmed.

A SEAL picked up his cell phone and nodded at the seat next to him on the couch. "Sit."

I walked over and sat.

"Name of contact at Gagosian?"

"Ami Ilan."

He handed me his cell. "Dial."

I dialed. Then I held the phone out.

He took it back, and our fingers touched before he put it on speaker.

Fire shot through my core, and the call connected.

“Gagosian,” a polite woman’s voice answered. “May I help you?”

“Ami Ilan,” he stated, all business.

“Miss Ilan is currently with a client. May I ask who’s calling?”

“Interrupt her,” he demanded with resolute authority. “This is an urgent matter.”

“My apologies, sir.” The woman became flustered. “But may I ask—”

“Family emergency.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t realize. Please hold.” The line went quiet for half a minute.

Then Ami’s voice filled the living room with familiarity I didn’t realize I had been missing. “This is Ami Ilan. Who’s this?” she asked coolly.

“Kavan Darach on behalf of Anneliese Laurent. What’s the shipping status on the Carlos-purchased pieces?”

I sucked in a breath as I heard him say my name. Until that moment, not only had I not realized he knew it, but the way his deep voice curled around the proper pronunciation, it was as if his tenor alone was protection.

Ami paused. “I don’t see how that’s any of your business, Mr. Darach.”

“Business,” he repeated, his tone barely different, but I heard the nuance.

“Yes. Business I will discuss with Miss Laurent when I speak to her.”

“And have you?”

Ami hedged. “Spoken to her?”

“Yes.”

“That’s neither pertinent to this conversation nor relevant information to you, Mr. Darach.”

“When Anneliese hasn’t been seen since she met with Carlos at the Four Seasons, it’s relevant. Did you ship the paintings, yes or no?”

“I demand that you tell me what’s—”

Interrupting her, Kilo made his own demand. “Answer the question.”

“Yes,” Ami answered abruptly, as if her response was a shock to herself. Then her voice lost the professional edge she unwaveringly used, and concern filtered in. “We released the paintings yesterday, but I haven’t heard directly from Anneliese since she went to meet with Mr. Carlos last night for dinner. If you have information, or if I need to report this to the authorities, please let me know. Anneliese isn’t answering my calls, and I’m very concerned.”

“Consider it reported.” Kilo hung up and looked at me. “The paintings are gone.”

Trying to swallow past a sudden swell of shit emotions, so far past questioning how he knew my name, I nodded.

“Paint more,” he said in the same impassive tone he had a master’s degree in.

“Some things aren’t replicable.” Time lost is never regained. “You didn’t tell Ami I was....” What? Alive? Here? With him? Almost drowned? Shivering while my flesh heated?

“She didn’t report you missing.”

“I’m not her responsibility.” The excuse jumped from a deep-seated principle that was more canon than ideology. One I’d never been able to fully capture, but one I had been taught religiously. I was no one’s responsibility. That was what my mother had always said. *Take care of yourself. Do for yourself. Rely on no one.*

“Who sent you to the meet?”

The jarring question pulling me from my reverie, I reared back. “Ami was not behind this. Carlos approached her.”

“Did he?”

I stared at a man who I thought I was beginning to understand, at least superficially. But in that moment, I realized how very, very wrong I had been. I knew nothing about him. I didn't even know his real name or if the one he'd used was one of a hundred aliases.

Suddenly more than desperate to take the attention away from me, I asked, “Was that your real name?” He knew mine. Didn't I deserve to know his?

He tossed his cell phone on the coffee table, picked up a drink I hadn't noticed before and leaned back. Bringing the glass to his lips, his eyes on mine, he took a swallow of... something. His throat moved, his lips wetted slightly, but he didn't answer my question.

He asked one of his own. Provocatively. “Thirsty?”

Hungry. Like I'd never been fed, and he was the Last Supper. “No.”

“Your pitch changes when you lie.”

“You don't know me well enough to know when I'm lying or telling the truth.”

“You think I don't see you?” he challenged.

“I think you don't know me.”

“Your face flushes when you're embarrassed. You're wrapped tight in pretense. You didn't think to ask about your work until now which says you paint to escape. Those brushes in your bag that you were unwilling to leave behind mean they matter more than your art. You hate appearing weak, and you own guilt like you have the corner on the market. For the record, we're not kicking it. I don't give a shit that you told me to fuck off. Stop owning that because you saw my back. My scars have nothing to do with your attitude. You throwing shit in my face won't happen again, though.”

Properly chastised, I reached for an apology. “I'm—”

“I'm not finished. You also don't like to be touched.” He took another swallow. “Why?”

The very heat he'd mentioned seconds ago flamed my cheeks. "I don't know your name."

"I don't know why the fuck you were with Carlos."

I gave him the truth. I owed him that much. "He purchased some of my paintings."

"And that bought him dinner?"

Offense reared like an ugly beacon for every character flaw he accused me of. "I'm not a prostitute."

Punishing me with my own attitude and guilt, he took a protracted sip of whatever was in his glass. Watching me as I watched him, the only man I had ever seen who made drinking look pornographic tipped the last of the contents back and swallowed. "Didn't say you were." He stood.

My throat dry, my tongue heavy in my mouth, I watched his tall, muscular body move across the open-plan living room with both the predatory stealth of a jaguar and the silence of a trained killer.

Without rushing, but also without any extra movements, he held the glass under the dispenser on the refrigerator door and filled it first with ice, then water. When he turned, he didn't merely walk back to the couch.

He stole every molecule of air from the room.

The couch dipped, his muscles bunched and flexed as he sat without leaning back, then his thigh pressed against mine and he held the cool glass to my hot lips. "Drink."

My sharp inhale of shock, he took for consent.

His hand threaded into my hair, he tipped the glass, my nipples hardened, and ice-cold water poured down my throat.

If a drink were an orgasm, I'd just had the best of my life.

THIRTY-SIX

Kilo

Her hair in my hand, her body leaning toward mine, her voice rasped, “What are you doing?”

“Giving you a drink.” Conditioning her.

“That was more than a drink.”

“It wasn’t.” But it could be. “You want more, say so.”

“Screw you.”

“If that’s what you want.” She fucking wanted it. She just didn’t know who the hell she was dealing with.

“Let go of my hair.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so and because it was already pulled tonight.”

My jaw clenched, and I had to focus on keeping my anger in check. “By Carlos or his second?”

“Why do you call him that?”

“Short for second-in-command. Answer.”

“Andros.”

“Say another man’s name again while I’m holding you, and we’re gonna have a problem. Did he hurt you beyond hitting you?”

“He yanked my hair. It stung more than hurt.”

I’d fucking fish for intel later. “Am I hurting you now?”

“In ways you’ll never know.”

I read the program. “Is that why you don’t like to be touched?”

“You’re touching me right now.”

“You got a problem with that?”

Her voice went softer. “No.”

“Then stand down. I have the controls.” I’d give her what she wanted.

Like a fucking switch, her back went stiff, her expression locked and the flipside of her came out. “Excuse me?”

No *pardon*. I clocked her for a second. “You heard me.” She’d flipped, but she was still holding back. I gave her the push she needed. “Give consent, and take a back seat. I’ll make you fucking feel. We’ll crest that wave of adrenaline you’re riding.” I’d dominate the fuck out of her, and I’d do it well.

Wrenching out of my grip, she looked at me with accusation. “Stand down? *You have the controls?*”

There it was.

With my gaze locked in, staring my fill, I set the glass down with deliberate slowness. Checking her like she was in my sights, I calculated my movements because I knew that look in her eyes.

I knew what she was tasting.

Life. After you caught a hard look at the other side. After all the shit was stripped away. That perspective made you do one of two things. Fucking embrace it, or freak the hell out.

She was on the latter run.

Palming the side of her face, holding the back of her neck, I lowered my voice. Then I repeated myself. “I have the controls.”

“*No*, you don’t.”

“Let go, woman.”

“You want me to let go?” Her hands landed on my chest. “Fine!” She fucking pushed.

“Harder,” I ordered.

“No one has control over me!” She futilely pushed again. “Not you, not them, not him, *no one*.”

Releasing her, I gave the redhead something I’d never given any woman. “You want control, then fucking take it.”

“*No*.” Losing her shit, she pushed at me again. “You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to pretend that you didn’t tell me to say I wanted to fuck, then tell me that you have the controls. I know what you’re doing. I know!” Her towel slipped.

Hard nipples, full tits, bare cunt—I fucking drank that shit in.

And for two beats, she let me.

Then she let out a war cry, pushing me again, and this time I let it happen.

I sat back, a redhead straddled my lap, then she threw down fucking limits as she went directly for my fly. “Do *not* touch me. I touch you. You do *not* have control. *I do*.”

Locking my hands behind my head, I’d play her game. For a hot fucking minute. “You think riding my cock is gonna give you control?” Because this sure as fuck was about more than sex.

“Yes.” She yanked down my zipper.

“Guess again.” Hard and thick, my pierced cock sprang free.

She took one look at my size and the eight-gauge straight barbell, and she fucking gasped. “You’re pierced.”

No shit. “Turn around, put your ass in the air, and back that cunt up to my mouth. Trust me, you’ll want my tongue before my cock.”

Color flushed her entire face, and her voice almost lost its flipside edge. “You don’t control me.”

The fuck I didn't. "You're on my lap because I'm allowing it."

"I'm on your lap because I'm allowing it."

"You better hope you know what the fuck you're doing." Because this woman was gonna get it. The second I let go of my hands, she was gonna be in for a world of hurt. The exact kind she needed.

"I've had sex before."

"Not with me."

"Is that supposed to scare me?"

"Yes."

Going up on her knees, she gripped my shaft under the apadravya and brought the head to her wet cunt. "It doesn't. I know what I'm doing, and yes, I'm saying I want to fuck. Do you?" All challenge and unhinged adrenaline, she threw down with her last question like it was a threat.

I didn't fucking answer.

I leveled her with a silent warning.

"I'll take that as a yes." She slammed down on my cock.

Jesus fucking Christ.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Kilo

She fucking rode me, and I let her.

But five thrusts in, high on the tightest cunt I'd ever felt, it happened.

My head blanked.

Except this time, instead of a total blackout, I fucking felt it.

Me, her, sex.

But that was it.

Then her grunts became words, I fucking blinked and was back.

Her tits shook. "What's your name?"

"Why? So you can yell it when you come?"

"I hate you."

"Just not my cock."

Grinding down on me with her wet-as-fuck cunt, she growled. "Name."

It wasn't a damn question. It was demand, and I was done giving in to her bullshit. "You think my name is gonna make you come?" I saw right through her. She didn't want to fuck me. Every thrust of her hips, every grind that she couldn't hit that sweet spot, pissed her off more. She didn't want control. She wanted to be fucked, dominated and used. Left in a

boneless mess with my come dripping all over her and an orgasm she could get off on every time she remembered it.

“*Name.*”

“You already heard it.” Reap what you sow, woman.

“Tell it to me again.”

“Fuck harder, and maybe I will.”

Lifting her hips, she slammed back down on me. “Name!”

White knuckling my hands behind my head, expression locked, I almost fucking came, but she’d never know that. “Is that all you got?”

Gripping the couch, her gorgeous fucking tits bouncing, she picked up the pace. “You did this. You gave me your drink. You used that voice. *You were calm.*”

My memory shit, her cunt mind-fucking tight, I tried to think what goddamn drink she was talking about. “I never gave you a drink.” I didn’t do alcohol. I was already head-fucked enough as it was.

“Water,” she grunted, rubbing her clit on her downward thrust. “You gave me fucking water.”

Recall hit. “I poured it down your throat. I also told you to ask. What of it?”

She didn’t answer.

She rode me like I was her first and last breath.

Then she fucking came.

Head thrown back, pussy clenching the hell out of my cock, she keened like no other woman I’d ever fucked.

Jaw clenched, sucking in air through my nostrils, refusing to fucking come, I goddamn held position.

Her cunt rippling around my hard cock, her body quivering, her skin slicked with heat—I stepped into a new goddamn addiction.

A torturous addiction.

With red fucking hair, perfect tits and a head so fucked, broken didn't cover it, this woman made me look like a walk in the park.

Fuck, I was in goddamn trouble.

So much trouble that I didn't register her anger had deflated into a curved back and limp muscles until she lifted up on shaking legs and started to take her tight cunt away.

My hands locked behind my head in a death grip so I didn't reach for her and start pounding the fuck out of her, I said the one thing I knew would get her to look at me. "You done?"

She sucked in a sharp breath, her back straightened, her legs locked, and my hard-as-shit cock out of her cunt as dark amber eyes met mine.

She let go of the couch to cross her arms over her tits. "I'm sor—"

Cutting her off with a glare, I held it as my cock pulsed.

She looked down.

Then the woman climbed off my lap, dropped to her knees and leaned forward with those lush lips as she reached for me.

My nostrils flared. "You touch my cock, I'm gonna fuck you."

Halting, she let her hand hover for a dangerous beat.

Watching her think about it, I gave it two seconds, then took the decision away from her.

Gripping her hair with one hand, I stroked my shaft with the other. "Did you like coming on my cock?"

Dropping her gaze, she licked her lips.

Thumbing my apadravya, slick from her arousal, I made her a promise. "One day, I'm gonna fuck that mouth."

Her hands landed on my legs.

"You like watching me jerk off?" Fucking close, I stroked myself faster.

Her voice turned to a breathy rasp. “Harder.”

Gripping her hair and myself harder, I issued her an order. “Spread your legs.”

Moaning, she dug her fingers into my thighs and did what I asked.

“You feel that emptiness where my cock was?” *Fuck*, I was gonna go off hard.

“Yes,” she panted.

Good. “Your nipples hurt?”

Darting her tongue out, biting her lip, she rose up on her knees. “Yes.”

“You want to watch me come like I watched you?”

“Please.”

Done in, by her, by her goddamn shift from crazed vixen to submissive lamb, I fucking jacked myself two more times.

Then I was exploding.

Controlling the release, barely, coming on my stomach, I was keeping it fucking tame until she groaned and pinched her tits.

With one more pulse in me, I offered the little sub my cock.

She didn’t hesitate.

Taking me into her hot mouth, the woman sucked.

I fucking saw stars.

Then she started licking the head and my piercing, and I was done.

Fisting her hair, letting this woman tongue-bathe me, I didn’t let go until she eased off and her mouth left me.

Flushed, heat covering her cheeks, she leaned back on her heels. Staring at me with a shyness I hadn’t seen on her before, she dipped her head and licked her lips like she’d licked my cock—with need.

Then she fucking proved my theory.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Goddamn. I fucking knew she was submissive.

Wasted cum all over my stomach, I didn't say shit as she stood with the grace of an angel and the body of a temptress.

Trembling, she glanced once more at the pool of cum on my abs, grabbed her towel and started to turn toward her bedroom.

That's when I saw it.

Need. Running down her thighs.

Fuck no.

“Halt,” I ordered.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Anneliese

His cock.

That piercing.

Shaking, his taste dancing on my tongue, the thick gauge of the steel piercing, the way it felt inside me—*oh my God.*

Desperate for more, my legs unsteady, I had to force myself to stand when all I wanted to do was crawl back onto his lap and sink down on his hard length again. But this time, I wanted him to fill me, and I wanted him to do it while he gripped my hair so tight, I couldn't move.

“Halt.” As if knowing exactly where my thoughts were, his storming gaze dropped to the juncture of my thighs. “You need to come again.”

“I...” I didn't deny it.

My mouth was watering, my lips were tingling, and an aching pulse between my legs was driving my every thought. I wouldn't lie to him. But I didn't know how to tell him that what I wanted and what I thought I should want were two very different things. And I definitely didn't know how to explain that I was more afraid of his touch than I was of the fact that I'd just had unprotected sex, so I didn't finish my thought.

He mistook my sudden silence. Or read it perfectly.

“Your cunt's wet, your hands are shaking, and you're biting that lush bottom lip. I can smell your need.” He widened his thighs and tipped his chin. “Turn around and straddle me.”

Oh God, oh God, oh God. “I don't think that's—”

“I didn’t tell you to think.”

I immediately turned and climbed back onto his thick, muscular legs.

His left hand landed on my thigh, and he paused.

I knew what he was doing, and I wanted to weep—from the gesture, from the growing tightness in my chest—but I didn’t.

I didn’t do anything.

I didn’t flinch. I didn’t react. I didn’t move.

Anticipation clawing, I held my breath.

“Good,” he murmured, pulling me back toward him as he widened his legs further. “Bend over. Hands on the floor.”

Oh God. No. I couldn’t do this. If I bent....

A rough finger drew through my wet heat. “You heard me.”

My mouth opened with a gasp, and I dropped.

Immediately, I could feel it.

The most intimate part of my body was wide open for him. Before I could think about what he was seeing and regret every single thing I’d done, he shocked me with his dirty talk.

“You want my cum in you, woman?”

Hanging my head, I succumbed to the full-body shiver as my hair fell in my face and my core tightened with the pain of emptiness.

I nodded.

“Answer,” he demanded.

“Yes,” I whispered.

Two thick fingers plunged into my pussy as sticky warmth was smeared over my tight bud.

I cried out, but it was too late.

He drove a finger into my ass.

Then he fucked me with his hands and his release, feeding his spent seed into my body with every buck of my hips.

The animalistic groans coming from my throat became a ritualistic chant that I didn't know I was capable of making as my vision tunneled and my breath came shorter and shorter.

Then someone was screaming. My body was flying, and hot wetness pulsed all over my back and tight bud right before an impossibly huge, hard length shoved into my most forbidden entrance, horrifically splitting me with blindingly painful pleasure.

Fire ripped through my core, all the air disappeared, and everything went black.

Lifted, floating, no gravity. Heady musk filled my lungs.

Something gently struck my cheek.

With a sudden breath, my eyes opened to black hair and a slate gaze.

He looked down at me with a furrowed brow. "You usually pass out when you come, or is this new?"

Pass out? "What?" My voice sounded breathy and wanton.

He studied me a moment longer, and then slowly, like the first true rays of a sunrise, the lines between his eyebrows released, and he gave me an almost nod, half chin tip that I could become addicted to. "The latter." His warmth started to shift away from me. "You need food. Be right back."

"No." I didn't want him leaving me right now, and I didn't want food. I wanted to sleep for a month. "I'm not nauseous anymore. Just tired." So, so tired.

His knowing gaze scrutinized me for a moment. Then he slid his arm under my head. "Go to sleep."

His beautiful face disappeared from my line of sight, and a brick wall hit my back.

My head filled with the scent of man, musk, sex and soap, and my eyes closed. Then, brief and fleeting and so foreign I almost didn't recognize it at first, the feeling came.

Contentment.

Bright like a sunrise, it blossomed across an exotic, dominant landscape.

I breathed in deep.

Then I was drifting. Slipping.

Sleep took me.

THIRTY-NINE

Anneliese

Consciousness dawned.

Then it was like a house of cards. Memories, sensations, colors, smells, tastes and events fell on top of one another as my mind registered exactly where I was and why hard muscles were surrounding me everywhere.

A Navy SEAL was holding me.

His bicep was under my head, his chest was at my back, his arm was around my waist, and his thick, heavy thigh was scissored between mine. His hard length pressed into my lower back, his dried release felt like a facial mask all over my flesh, and his intoxicating scent filled my every breath with awareness.

I was in the arms of the most enigmatic, mercurial, dangerous, striking man I had ever laid eyes on, and I wasn't freaking out.

I wasn't crawling out of my skin.

Bile wasn't climbing up my throat.

I wasn't freaking out.

Why wasn't I freaking out?

Because he had listened to me.

But not just listened.

He'd locked his hands behind his head, he hadn't reached for me, and he hadn't touched me.

Not once while I was on top of him.

He'd given me exactly what I'd demanded, what I'd thought I'd wanted. But the longer he'd kept it up, the longer he'd gone without touching me as I used him for my own demons, the angrier I'd gotten. Then it'd turned into a snowball effect.

The angrier I became, the harder I'd used him until I came.

But he hadn't released...

Until he did.

The memory played in a haze of lust, and my core pulsed, my stomach fluttered, and I was instantly wet just thinking about him coming.

Oh God. What had I become?

I was an animal.

He was an animal.

Together we were destruction, and all I wanted was more.

But that was bad.

His deep, rough voice penetrated my spiral. "Stop."

Oh my God, his voice. "Pardon?"

"You're overthinking. You're also back to using pardon."

I... didn't know what the last part was about, but his first comment, I understood. Overthinking was what I did best. "How did we wind up here?" That should've been my first thought when I woke in his arms.

"I carried you."

I remembered, vaguely, maybe, but that wasn't what I meant. My back was sticky, and I was sore between my legs in both my core and my backside. He hadn't used protection, and we hadn't cleaned up. The entire bed smelled like him and sex. "I need to shower."

"We both do. We fly out at twenty-two hundred." He didn't release his hold on me, and he didn't move.

I lay still.

I didn't know this man, but I knew he had something to say, and I was bracing myself.

Not unlike I expected, he chose a direct path. "You got a problem with all men touching you, or was it just me?"

My defenses back in good standing after a night's sleep—the best sleep I could ever remember having, a fact I was not prepared to think about—I painted over the holes in my protective wall. "I don't have a problem. Not that I see how it would be any of your business if I did."

"You didn't have a problem when you were head down, ass up, giving me that tight, needy cunt. Or when you were on your knees, watching me jack it. And you sure as fuck didn't have a problem with me penetrating your ass." His arm flexed under me, but he didn't technically touch me.

Was that the real reason I wasn't freaking out? Because *I* was touching *him*?

"What was different on round two?" His voice rumbled in his chest and vibrated through my soul. "You not facing me, or because you'd already ridden my cock?"

Everywhere his body touched mine, nerve endings tingled. "I'm not talking about this." I couldn't do that.

"Why?"

Uncomfortable, too comfortable, naked and out of my depth on every level, I fell back on my only defense mechanism. "Has anyone ever told you that you're more than crude?"

"You crawled on my shit like a woman starved. My dick was in your ass, and you've still got my cum in you. Little late to stand on pretense, beautiful. You got a history with sexual assault?"

Beautiful.

And sexual assault.

He'd done that on purpose.

My heart had leapt, then every muscle in my body tensed. I knew and maybe even appreciated his approach and directness, but I refused to go there. Not with him. Not with anyone, but especially not with him, and not after last night. “Now you’re being offensive.”

“But I was good enough to fuck and use as a backstop while you vomited.” Without warning, without an ounce of gentleness, he yanked his arm out from under me and stood up. “Nothing different about me from yesterday or the day before. Get up.”

The swallow stuck in my throat with the sudden realization.

I’d offended him.

Shame eclipsed everything. “*Je suis désolée.*” Realizing my slip, I quickly switched to English. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“Don’t give a fuck. Get up. We’re showering.” A ray of late afternoon sun cut into the room and fell over his face, illuminating him like he was the standard for male beauty. His hair more black in the direct light, his eyes almost colorless, too pretty to be real, too lethal to be my imagination, he stared down at me. “That wasn’t a request.”

Suddenly feeling the need to clutch at whatever shred of dignity I may have had left, I pulled the covers up to my chin. “I’ll shower by myself.”

“Where I go, you go.”

“Since when?”

“Since you fell in with the cartel’s most notorious butcher.”

Fear slid across my naked body. “Butcher?” *Cartel?* I couldn’t have heard him correctly.

“The Butcher,” he corrected.

Oh dear God. I could barely bring myself to ask. “That’s... Carlos’s nickname?” *He was in the cartel?*

“That’s his pastime.” He gripped the sheet and yanked. “Up.”

The sex-infused warmth of the bed left, and an immediate chill raced across my heated flesh, but it wasn’t the loss of privacy and fully erect, over-six-foot-tall man with a large piercing who was staring down at me that made me shiver.

I trembled because I had been *this* close to a man known as the Butcher.

Not just close. I’d been drugged, taken hostage and flown halfway across the world—while unconscious—by a murderous cartel butcher.

If not for the SEAL standing at the bed, holding his hand out to me after I’d used him and treated him like nothing more than a dog, if not for him plunging us into the Tyrrhenian Sea, killing two men and swimming me to freedom, I wouldn’t be here.

I wouldn’t be alive at all.

“Thank you,” I whispered, mentally bracing myself as I placed my hand in his.

“For what?” Warm, strong, calloused—his fingers wrapped around mine, and he pulled me to my feet. “Didn’t fuck you this morning.”

The flush crept up my neck as heat flamed between my legs, and his grip on my hand felt like fire, but not because I was freaking out that he was touching me. “Thank you for saving me.”

He instantly dropped my hand. “Turn around.”

His gaze impenetrable, his jaw set, I tried and failed to infer any nuance of tone in his command. Worse, I didn’t even think about not obeying or my state of undress. My nipples were hard, the wall of protection I’d so stupidly thought I’d had a handle on was gone, and I was already turning in anticipation.

A large warm palm landed on the small of my back as rough fingers spread from hip to hip. “Bend.” Standing behind

me, he pushed my chest down to the bed.

The anticipation turned to insufferable need, but I couldn't let this happen again. Could I? "What are you doing?"

In response, his huge hand gripped my ass, and he spread one cheek. "You got blood."

Mortified, I tried to jerk upright, but his hand on my back held firm. "Oh God." No. No, no, no. *My period? Now?* "Let me up," I demanded, drowning in embarrassment.

"No." Still holding me down with one hand, his other moved to my opposite cheek.

"Don't you dare," I warned.

"Hold," he ordered distractedly, doing exactly what I warned him not to.

I didn't know complete humiliation had a sound until cool air touched my tight bud, and I whimpered. "Stop."

He didn't.

Looking over my shoulder, desperate to end this level of mortification that felt exponentially worse than any picture I'd let a sick son of a bitch take of me, I gripped his wrist and begged. "*Please.*"

His gaze immediately met mine.

Except it wasn't the hardened, impassive warrior who looked down at me.

His eyebrows drawn together, his face a canvas of concern, he looked at me without hiding his expression, and a flash from last night taunted me.

My fingers tightened on his wrist. "Please. Stop."

Dropping to a squat and twisting his arm under my hold, he turned his hand face up. Then he unfurled his fingers in a heartbreakingly sweet offering before bracketing the gesture with his unwavering bluntness. "Cunt or ass?"

I wanted to cry. "I don't know." Embarrassment, and a fear of what it would do to my already emotionally fragile state if I

did take his hand, I held perfectly still.

He continued to hold out his intimate gesture. “It’s not your period.”

How he knew that, I didn’t want to know. I just wanted him to let me up so I could crawl away in shame and pretend this had never happened. “Can I get up now?”

He didn’t move. “When was the last time you fucked?”

My core pulsed as he said *fucked*, and the humiliation grew. “Years.”

His hand formed a fist, the mask descended back over his features, and he tipped his chin. “My metal ripped you.” He stood up. “We’ll shower, then I’ll handle it.”

Scrambling to roll over and grab the covers, I opened my mouth to protest, but he was faster.

Before I even had a hand on the sheet, he’d lifted me into his arms and was striding into the bathroom, walking us directly into the shower.

FORTY

Kilo

I'd fucking ripped her.

It wasn't the first time it'd happened. I had a large piercing and a big cock.

But with this woman? Seeing the blood on her ass, her thighs?

Fuck me.

Carrying her into the shower, I did what I should've last night after she'd fucking passed out on me. I checked in. "You hurting?"

Breathing heavy, staring anywhere except at me, she shook her head.

I narrowed the field of questioning. "Your cunt hurt?"

"Stop saying that." She barely spoke louder than the water I'd just turned on.

"The day I conversationally say vagina is the day I become one." I fucked pussies, I wasn't one. "Your ass burning?" I'd taken her hard.

"Jesus," she murmured before switching to French and saying something I didn't understand.

"Unless you know Dari or Pashto, speak fucking English."

"You speak Arabic?"

"No."

"But you just said—"

“Dari and Pashto. Not the same thing.” Not that I remembered a whole hell of a lot of either. My memory shot, the last thing I’d be able to do right now is converse with her in languages I’d learned years ago on the Teams. “What did you say?”

She didn’t answer.

I held her head under the water and repeated myself. “Not gonna ask again. What did you say, woman?”

Uselessly shoving at my arms, she relented. “Fine, *fine!*”

I stepped back.

She shoved her red hair that was now a shade darker out of her face. “I said I was stupid.”

I wasn’t touching that without more intel. “Context?” I also wasn’t letting her down until she gave me some of those thoughts spinning up in her head.

“I meant I’m only feeding your desire to shock me every time I react to something you say that’s only meant to incite my embarrassment when I know you have other ways to say it.”

Embarrassment. Christ. “I talk how I talk. I’m not the one who’s got a problem being honest.”

“I’m not dishonest.”

“You’re not forthcoming.” Except when she was kneeling at my feet or riding my cock.

Her gaze cut to mine. “That right there. That’s what I’m talking about. You speak two different languages.”

“Three, if you count English.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

I knew what the fuck she meant. I just didn’t know why the hell I was engaging. Past time to cut this off before I got caught in a headspace that wouldn’t be pretty, I set her on her feet and grabbed the shampoo. “Hand,” I demanded.

She held her hand out. “You’re not going to reply to what I said?”

I squeezed shampoo into her palm. “You say a lot of shit.”

“You swear a lot.”

Only when my dick was hard, a naked redhead was in front of me, and I was showering with her like I was in some kind of fucking domestic situation. “Wash your hair.” I washed mine.

“Or what?” She reached up to do the deed. “You’ll do it for me?”

I rinsed. “Not my MO. But spread your legs, and I’ll show you what is.”

Like I knew it would, heat hit her face, and she blushed. “Crude.”

She had no fucking idea. “If you’re aiming to insult a SEAL with a pierced cock, you’re gonna have to do a hell of a lot better than calling him crude.” I grabbed the soap.

“Like when I implied you were only *good enough to fuck and use as a backstop* while I vomited on the side of the road?”

I fucking paused. I was a lot of shit, but transparent wasn’t usually one of them. “Already answered that.” And her subsequent apology. “Rehashing shit with me won’t get you a different result.” Refraining from jacking myself, I soaped my chest.

“What will?”

Fuck me. I’d walked right into that. “Tell me to put my hands on you and find out.”

Her movements slowed as sharp color hit her cheeks again. “I believe you already did that.”

“My fingers in your ass and cunt isn’t the same as me putting my hands on you.”

“You had your hand on my thigh. You’ve picked me up.”

“I’ve also gripped your ass and held onto your hips for leverage.” The telltale fingerprint bruises on her pale skin only made me harder. “You wanna get down and dirty and talk fucking, then say so.”

Trying not to watch me soap my hard-as-shit cock, she leaned back to rinse her hair. “I don’t want to say so.”

“Clearly.” Because some fucking asshole besides Carlos and his second had done a number on her. I was fucked enough to want a name.

She finished rinsing her hair. “Are you always this way?”

I angled in to rinse off my soap. “Assuming you mean no bullshit, already asked and answered.” I held up the bar of scented shit that I’d now associate with her. “Need help?”

Snatching it from my hand, making her tits bounce, she dipped her head. “Is that your version of foreplay?”

Foreplay. Christ. “If I was angling to dick you down, woman, you’d know it.” I’d use my mouth. Preferably on those wet-slicked tits I couldn’t stop fantasizing about. “I’m telling you to hurry up.” It’d taken her longer to wash her hair than it took me to handle all my shit, and I was almost twice her size.

She frowned. “You didn’t say we were in a rush.”

“I also didn’t say this was a fuck-around-and-find-out shower.”

She reared back like I’d offended the hell out of her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If I want to fuck, I’ll tell you we’re fucking. If I say shower, then we’re showering.”

Her gaze cut to my hard cock, and she bit her lip before her voice turned raspy as hell. “Are we? Just showering?”

“What do you think?” She had blood on her from last night. I wasn’t a goddamn animal.

“I think you’re an aroused man in a shower with a naked woman.” With a trace of an accent, something closer to prude

than French, she unknowingly handed me more intel than this whole bullshit conversation of mental sparring.

“You don’t think I have control.” It wasn’t a question. I saw that shit all over her face.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. You think my head’s wrapped up in round two being a foregone conclusion because I already got my dick in you.”

She cleared her throat. “I believe I was the one to initiate.”

This woman had no fucking clue. She may have walked into my blast zone last night when she’d come back out of the bedroom still wrapped in that goddamn towel, but I’d already set the charges and wired the fuse. I was just waiting for a fucking excuse to throw that detonation switch. “Believe what you want.” I dropped to a knee. “Spread your legs.”

FORTY-ONE

Kilo

She pressed her legs together. Tight. “What are you doing?”

“Checking in.”

“My body is not a hotel.”

My cock thought her cunt was the fucking Ritz. “Good, because I don’t pay to fuck, and it’s a figure of speech. I’m looking to see where I ripped you.”

Her hands dropped to cover her bare cunt. “No, thank you.”

“Not a request.” I owned my actions. If I hurt her, I’d take care of her.

“You already looked.”

Not close enough. “I didn’t find the source.”

She aimed for red lighting me. “I’m not giving permission for you to touch me or look.”

I zeroed in on the fear in her eyes. “Is that how you need to run it?” If so, I’d follow her playbook. One last fucking time.

“I don’t know what that means. I’m not *running* anything, and I don’t need you checking in.”

She definitely needed me to check the fuck in. She was already losing her shit at the prospect of me touching her just to recon my damage. I spelled it out. “I’m asking permission to touch you in a nonsexual way to assess how badly you’re bleeding. I fuck rough, and I have a piercing. I don’t apologize

for either. But I own my shit. If you need aftercare, and you do, I'm going to provide it. Just need a baseline first."

Heat hit her face hard.

"Permission to touch you?"

Her throat bobbed, and the rasp in her voice came back in full force. "I've... never had aftercare, so I don't know what that means."

"First aid." On a basic fucking level.

"I-I can do that myself."

"Not how I operate." And no, she couldn't. If she was actively bleeding, had more than a small tear, or needed a stitch thrown, I was handling it.

Her face burned hotter, and it wasn't solely from this conversation. "No one's touched me in a long time."

I fucking got that. "Do you want to have that conversation now?" All I needed was a name, because I already knew the punch line. Whoever it was, the motherfucker would be unidentifiable within twenty-four hours.

Walking into my diversion trap, she shook her head. "No."

"Then drop your hands, Anneliese."

She stood there. Face red, nipples hard, body wet, covering her cunt.

Then she dropped her arms to her sides.

I moved in.

Quick, efficient, I pushed her thighs apart, then ran two fingers through her cunt, looking for blood before I parted her. She gasped, and her swollen pussy slicked my fingers, but there wasn't any damage besides a well-fucked cunt. "Turning you." Gripping the outside of her thighs, I pivoted her, then grabbed her ass.

"*Wait.*" She squeezed her legs together.

I didn't wait. I fucking saw this woman. Watching her, recognizing the signs, seeing how she lived in her head, I

already knew her. More time to think was the last goddamn thing she needed.

Zero hesitation, I spread her.

And found the source.

Red, inflamed, actively bleeding, a few drops smeared over a small tear at the top of her ass right where the head of my barbell entered her last night. Releasing her, I stood and issued a command. "Face me."

"No." Small, shaking, her voice matched her body language as she pulled her arms in like a shield.

I caught my tone and fucking tamped it. "Turn around, woman."

She pivoted but didn't look up. Then a flare of attitude came in hot, and she asked the last thing I was expecting. "Do you do this aftercare thing with all the women you have sex with?"

Fuck me. Jealousy.

And goddamn, it looked good on her. Too fucking good.

My cock harder than when I swiped my fingers through her wet cunt, I took the in. "Look at me, right fucking now."

She lifted her head and played at defiant. "What?"

I gave her an order. "Put your arms around my neck."

"Why?"

I stared her down.

Hesitant, avoiding my cock, keeping it to as few contact points as possible, she clasped her hands behind my neck.

"You got a problem touching me or just me touching you?" She'd let me pick her up and carry her, but that wasn't what I was asking. Her fear was sexual, and it was deep.

She broke eye contact. "I didn't say I had a problem."

No, she'd just told me not to fucking touch her. Repeatedly. "You good?"

“Pardon?”

I took note of her switch from *what* to *pardon*. “Right now. You good?”

She nodded.

“Look at me.”

She gave me those dark amber eyes again.

I issued another command. “Bring your mouth to mine.”

“I...” She looked down. Her voice dropped. “I can’t.”

“I’ve been balls deep in your cunt and ass, and you’ve swallowed my cum. You can press up against my erection. I’m not fucking you. This isn’t about that.” Not now it wasn’t. But it sure as fuck would be later.

“Then what are you doing?”

“Talking.” Getting her mouth against mine.

“This is more than talking.”

Cupping my hands behind me, I assumed parade rest. “Bring those lips to mine.”

Panic spread across her face. “I’m not kissing you.”

“Good.” Because minus sucking my cock, I didn’t let women kiss me. Not unless I was in the mood, which didn’t fucking happen often. But this woman was quickly becoming the exception. To every goddamn rule. “Bring it in.” Her, I was gonna kiss.

She didn’t move.

“Now,” I ordered.

Pressing her sweet curves against me, wrapping the full length of her arms around my neck, she went on her toes and still couldn’t reach my mouth.

Holding those eyes in my sights, I dipped my head. Then I dropped my voice. “You listening to me?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“You feel my hard cock against you?”

“You said you weren’t—”

“Simple question. Real answer. I’m only asking it one more time. You feel me?”

That submissive blush came back in full force. “Yes.”

“You’re fucking beautiful. Your cunt weeps like a dream, and you make me hard. But you know what really turns me the fuck on?”

Her chest rose and fell twice in rapid succession. “No.”

“You jealous.”

Dropping her arms, she started to step back. “I’m not—”

“Halt,” I barked.

She froze.

I gave her one goddamn warning. “You pull away from me right now, I’m gonna put both my arms around you and hold you against my mouth until I tell you what you need to hear.”

She fucking trembled.

“Arms back around me,” I demanded.

“I-I don’t want that.”

“Yes, you do. Same as you want to hear what the fuck I have to say.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You want to go down this road with me?” I’d held this woman while she’d fucking heaved her guts out. I’d fucked her unprepped ass. I didn’t shy away from shit. “Tell me there wasn’t a difference between the way you came when you were riding me and when I fucked you. You want to lie and tell me you got off on taking control? Tell me you enjoyed it? Tell me it felt so fucking good that you screamed my name, gushed on my cock and passed the fuck out?” She couldn’t, not truthfully.

“I didn’t scream your name.”

“You’re right.” She didn’t know my full fucking name.

The color in her face took on a whole new shade of fuck-my-head-up, and she looked away. “That’s not who I am.”

“Don’t lie or hide that shit from me. I see you, Anneliese Laurent. Every submissive inch. You want to deny yourself after we walk out of this safe house, that’s on you. Right now, this is on me.” And I never stood down when I needed to step the fuck up. “Put your arms around my neck, or I’ll do it for you.”

For two seconds, she didn’t move. Then she complied. Except she did it with the same hesitant touch as the first time.

Letting it slide, I loosened the leash I’d put on my dominant tone. “Look at me and ask your question again.”

“*Non*. I don’t care what you do with other women. It’s none of my business, same as my life isn’t yours.”

Bullshit. “The second you stepped on that elevator, you were my business. When I opened the door for you at Cut and saw Carlos, you sure as fuck were my business. When I jumped off a goddamn hundred-and-fifteen-meter boat with you in my arms, you were my business. Letting you fuck out your anger on my cock—also my business. You couldn’t be more *my business* unless I put a ring on it.”

Her sharp inhale made her tits and hard nipples press against my chest, and my headspace went to shit.

If this woman reacted any more to me, I was going to break my fucking promise not to touch her. “Bring your mouth to mine. *Now*.”

Gripping my neck, going on her toes, she left an inch between us.

Letting her keep her illusion of space, I gave her what she needed to hear. “I’ve only given aftercare one other time. First fuck after I got my piercing. I didn’t prep. Learned my lesson. That said, I should’ve been more careful with you.” I’d never fucked such a tight cunt or ass, and fuck me, this woman was addicting. “As far as this bullshit about your life not being my business—too fucking late. You walked into my blast zone, I’ve been in you bareback, and we’re not ignoring either.”

“Kilo.”

“New fucking parameters. I’m going to touch you.”
Ditching parade rest, I grabbed her face.

Then I kissed her.

FORTY-TWO

Anneliese

Cupping the side of my cheek, sinking his fingers through my wet hair until they were digging into my nape, not asking permission, he slammed his mouth over mine.

Consuming, intoxicating, he kissed me.

He kissed me exactly how he had fucked me. Hard, dominant, and without reservation.

Driving his tongue into my mouth, taking what he wanted, making no apologies, he thrust, he bit, he swirled, but then he gently caressed.

I absolutely fell apart.

The sounds coming from my throat burned my chest and painted my flesh in a thousand shades of a Mediterranean sunset. Every swipe of his tongue a brushstroke, this man covered me with his art of dominance and pure sexual prowess.

He didn't simply kiss. He put every ounce of his strength, height, and dominance into taking my mouth with his, and he did it all with only touching my face.

Of its own volition, my body leaned into his and reached for more.

As abruptly as he'd kissed me, he pulled back, but his grip in my hair tightened. Staring down at me with eyes as stormy as the sea last night, he looked like he was going to say something. Then, all of a sudden, he wasn't looking at me but

through me as every muscle in his body went frighteningly still.

“Kilo?”

His chest rose, and he blinked. Focusing his gaze over my head, he released my hair. “Shower’s over.” He shut off the water.

More than the loss of the warm water, a chill soaked into me. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” He reached for towels.

I had no right to pry, but after that kiss that had shattered every dark corner of my existence, after the way he’d been so honest about everything else, I couldn’t let it go. “You looked like you were going to say something, but then....”

“Then what?” he demanded.

“Something changed.”

“Yeah.” As if he had not just passionately kissed me, he unceremoniously dropped a towel over my shoulders. “You let me touch you.”

“I....” I pulled the towel in close. “I did.” But I didn’t. I let him dictate that he was going to touch me.

He ran his towel over his head once, then, ignoring his enormous erection, wrapped it around his hips. “Let’s get that tear taken care of.” He turned to leave.

I still couldn’t let it go. “You were going to say something.”

Looking over his shoulder, he paused only long enough to throw up a barrier. “I just did.” He walked out of the shower.

I sank.

Like in the ocean, like in that restaurant in the Four Seasons, like in a loft a lifetime ago. I sank, and I fell deep.

But I’d never fallen from this high. From the height of a Navy SEAL. From the arms of a man who’d held me all night, then left me lonely.

Because that was the real depth of this.

I was alone.

I always had been, but I hadn't known how very deep I'd been sheltering the loneliness until a wetsuit-clad arm had wrapped around me and jumped off the top deck of a yacht, plunging us into the sea.

“What's wrong?”

Startled, not having heard him come back, I looked up.

His impassive slate-colored gaze had returned as he stood there with his rippling muscles and his smaller black zippered bag in one hand. “You're overthinking.”

He was impossibly beautiful. “I'm sorry.”

“There it is.”

“Pardon?”

“Your submissive side. It's back.”

Deep-seated shame had me apologizing again. “*Je suis désolée.*”

“In English,” he ordered.

“I said I'm sorry.”

“For what? Falling into that kiss like you needed me to breathe?”

Oh God. Turning my head, I gripped the towel like my life depended on it. “Can you step back please?”

“As soon as you tell me why you're slipping into French and apologizing. Your English is near perfect. You only use French to swear or when you're upset.”

That had me looking back at him. “What do mean, near perfect?” I thought in English. I'd spoken it more growing up than I had French. “I do not have an accent.” I'd never spoken like my mother. I'd worked hard not to.

“You drop your H's, and you don't distinguish between long and short vowels.”

“I do too make the distinctions.”

“Pardon,” he stated, mimicking me as he pronounced it the French way.

“Fine.” On that, he was right. “You still didn’t answer my question.”

His stare his only response, he said nothing.

Trying out his technique, I mimicked him.

He broke the silent standoff first. “Come on.” He walked out of the bathroom.

As if I had no mind of my own, I followed.

He stopped at the bed. “Lose the towel and lie down.”

Oh no. *No, no, no.* I should’ve registered his bag of tricks earlier, but I’d been too busy falling into those mercurial eyes and fighting down hopeful reasons as to why he’d come back to the bathroom. So much so that I’d ignored the very obvious, very worrying reason he’d retrieved his bag in the first place. “No, thank you.”

“Not a request, Laurent.”

Laurent? He was using my last name now? After that kiss? After everything? I didn’t just fall, I plummeted. Crashing into the very emotions I tried to never feel and never let control me, I reached for my only weapon left, but even my voice betrayed me with a telltale shake of nerves. “Please tell me where my clothes are.”

“Laundry room.”

“And my tote bag?”

He tipped his chin toward a dresser in the corner.

Next to his waterproof backpack and large black bag, my tote sat upright. Refusing to think about if he’d opened the water bottle and looked at my painting, I prioritized. “Thank you.” I turned to walk out of the bedroom.

His voice, unlike mine, cut through the bedroom without any tremor. “Take one step, and I will stop you.”

FORTY-THREE

Kilo

She spun and the mask of bullshit she hid behind came out. “Is that a threat?”

She’d heard me. Not repeating myself, I didn’t say shit.

Hitching her towel up, her gaze dropped to my cock for a beat like she couldn’t help herself. Then her face flushed, and she amped up the pretense. “I know what you’re doing.”

Doubtful, when I didn’t know what the hell I was doing with this woman other than obsessing. I’d fucking kissed her. Hell, I’d slept with her, for Christ’s sake. Now I was playing doc like she was incapable of fixing her own shit when I knew damn well she could. But there wasn’t a chance in hell I was going to let her. Not on this. Carlos and his second were another fucking playbook. “Get on the bed.”

She crossed her arms. “Why did you use my last name?”

There it was. I knew there was something that’d tripped her up. “So you’d understand that this isn’t sexual right now.”

“Then what is it?”

Me being a domineering fuck. “Aftercare.”

“And if I don’t want it?”

I’d never worked it for a woman in my life. I didn’t give enough of a fuck to try. I didn’t give a fuck, period. They either green-lit my dominance from jump, or I was out. So why I was easing in on this woman, why I was letting her crawl into my headspace, it was fucking beyond me. The only other female I’d ever given a damn about was six feet under.

Had been for almost three decades. I barely remembered what she looked like. But I'd never forget her grit or personality. The redhead standing in front of me—reserved, poised, submissive—she was nothing like her. With one exception.

Her fucking fortitude.

Which had me assessing my next move like I was navigating a minefield and mentally laying out my options.

Walk away. Dominate the fuck out of her. Or give her what she thinks she wants.

My cock vetoed the first.

I voted for the second.

What little sanity I had left told me to go for door number three.

Telling common sense to fuck off, I laid out a trade. “Tell me why you’ve got a thing against having an accent and being taken care of while I fix you up, and I’ll tell you what I was going to say in the bathroom.” I couldn’t fucking remember what I was gonna say.

“That’s three-to-one odds, and not in my favor. I hardly think that’s fair, and I don’t need fixing.”

I was a breacher. I wasn’t in the business of playing fair. And if this woman didn’t need fixing, then my head wasn’t fucked. “Take it or leave it.”

“Or what?”

Option number two. “Walk away and find out.” If she thought the odds were stacked now, she had no fucking clue. With the headspace I was in, if she walked out that door, I was going after her. And it sure as fuck wouldn’t be for aftercare.

Watching me with those eyes that didn’t miss a goddamn thing, I saw the instant she put two and two together. I also saw her reaction.

Fear.

Acute fucking fear.

My cock pulsed, my dirty fucking thoughts went into overdrive, and it happened.

My head blanked. Again.

Sight, sound, processing—all stopped.

Holding position, not moving a goddamn muscle, I waited.

And waited.

Then I heard it. Faint, distant, and through a tunnel I knew wasn't there.

“Kilo?”

I blinked and was back.

The redhead was staring at me with alarm, the safe house was intact, and I played catch-up. Scanning the room, focusing on recall, I tried to think. Last thing she said to me, last thing I said to her, motions, sounds, movements—anything that could've triggered it.

Nothing.

Not a goddamn thing.

Except a number.

Four.

Four fucking times I'd blanked on this woman. Four that I remembered. The split second when I'd carried her out of the water at the marina, the couch when she rode me, the shower, and now. That was four more than the past few weeks. Four more than I was fucking comfortable with. And four inexcusable times I could've put her in danger.

Fuck.

I focused up. “Decision?”

“Fine.” She sighed. “I'll take your deal, but not the third part.”

Third part, *third part*.... What the fuck was the third part?
“Get on the bed.”

“That's the part I'm not agreeing to.”

Aftercare. Right. *Jesus fuck*. “All or nothing.” If she was smart, she’d go with the latter.

“What, exactly, are you going to do?”

Pretend I wasn’t having increasing episodes around her, fuck her again, then walk the hell away. None of which she’d asked. “Already answered. Choose.”

She drew in a quick breath. Then she started downloading without getting on the bed. “My mother was French and fluent in English, but she used her accent to manipulate, chastise, and act superior. I didn’t want to be like her, so I learned not to speak like her. Your comment came across as an insult.”

Was French. “None was intended.” I wondered if she had any family. Maybe there was something to November’s hacking. I made a mental note to ask him about her.

She nodded. Regally. “Apology accepted. What were you going to say in the bathroom?”

I didn’t apologize. I also didn’t forget I’d asked two questions. “Why do you have a problem with someone taking care of you?”

“No one’s ever taken care of me, and I don’t need anyone to.”

No, she just fucking craved it. But her denying a whole damn side of herself wasn’t the only bullshit she was dishing out. “You were on Carlos’s boat against your will.”

“I was about to handle it.”

“By jumping off with no dive gear, five-foot swells, and a storm bearing down?”

She shrugged one shoulder, then looked away. “It was better than the alternative.”

“We still only talking about paintings?” I wasn’t asking about the shit she’d already told me about Carlos’s second. That motherfucker was a dead man.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Something you not telling me about what went down on that boat?”

“I already told you everything.”

Doubtful. “Did Carlos say what the paintings were for?” And fuck, I forgot to relay her intel to Alpha and November.

“No. He didn’t even care what the subject matter was. He just said I had to paint them.”

More intel I needed to download to Alpha and November, but it could wait.

Grabbing what I needed, I issued her an order. “On the bed, back to me.” Purposely not making eye contact, I fucked with my bag.

Slow, like she was scared as shit, she got on the bed.

FORTY-FOUR

Anneliese

Without ceremony, he pulled the towel aside, spread one of my cheeks, and cold, stinging wetness pressed over a smarting ache.

I flinched. “What is that?”

“Antiseptic wipe.” He gently swiped, then the cold wipe was replaced by something dry.

I swallowed hard. “What are you doing? And what about... other things besides infection?”

“Applying pressure to stop the small bleed. You on the pill?”

An old, familiar twinge of sorrow I did my best not to think about came back in force, and misplaced hurt slipped through as an accusatory judgment that didn’t belong to him. “Something we should have discussed before last night.”

Immediately taking the blame for what I’d instigated, he owned actions that weren’t entirely his. “That’s on me. Won’t happen again. You need the morning-after pill?”

Jealousy flared, and I didn’t ask my question. I accused him. “Do you carry those in your bag of tricks too?”

Without an ounce of antagonism, he answered how he answered everything else. Calmly. “No. But I’ll get it if you need it.”

Rightfully ashamed, I dropped my antagonistic tone. “I won’t get pregnant.”

“Noted. Haven’t been bareback in years, and I’ve never gone raw during anal. You’re safe.”

Raw. Bareback. I knew the terms he used. I’d heard them over the years and immediately dismissed them as crude, vulgar even. But when his dark voice wrapped around them, it was art. When he spoke, period, it was art. Like walking into a new exhibit, he was an entire oeuvre. Except he wasn’t just a visual experience. Auditory, textural, olfactory, gustatory—oh my God, the intoxicating taste of him on my tongue when I’d never enjoyed that in my life, let alone practically wept for wanting from it—he was an overwhelming sensory experience that transcended description. But nowhere in that transcendent culmination was there room for the word *safe*.

Unsure of how to respond, barely containing the embarrassment warring with the intense desire his touch was eliciting, I said nothing.

The dry cloth and the pressure of his hand momentarily left. Then his finger gently swiped over my tight bud with cool cream.

I flinched again, but it wasn’t from his touch. “What is that?”

“Antibiotic ointment with topical pain reliever.”

His finger made another gentle sweep across my over-sensitized flesh. “Done.”

My core pulsed, and I barely managed a whisper. “Thank you.” I made to get up.

A dominant hand on my back stopped me. Then he pulled my towel completely away from me, and caressed my ass with a firm glance of his thumb across my cheek before he squeezed the soft flesh. “You need to come. My mouth or fingers. Choose.”

“You don’t want to... be inside me again?”

“You don’t want the answer to that.”

I looked over my shoulder at the most austere, stunning man I had ever laid eyes on. “Why?”

“Because the answer is a hard yes, but not in a way you’d enjoy.”

“I—”

“I ripped the shit out of you last night, then fucked you into unconsciousness. I’m not throwing down with you right now. You don’t want me while I’m in this headspace.”

He was the most open man I had ever known, but I still didn’t understand half of what he said. “What headspace?”

“The kind where I forget my own shit.”

It felt like I was missing something. “You forget yourself?” I wanted to say that couldn’t be right, I had to be misinterpreting it, but I knew I’d seen it not ten minutes ago. I was also remembering that moment when he’d carried me out of the ocean, and that split second when he was putting me back in the car after I’d gotten sick on the side of the road. Each time, the look in his eyes, the focus of his intense gaze, they’d slipped, just like in the shower.

“More often than not,” he answered bluntly right before he drew a finger through my slickness.

Desire flared, but so did the swirl of panic. “That’s not what I’ve witnessed.” He was controlled. Dominant. Capable. More than capable, *he was commanding*.

“Stick around.” Switching to a knuckle, his gaze on his hand, he sank his bent finger just inside me and circled my entrance with slow, deliberate pressure.

Oh God. My entire core clenched, and I fought to stay on the topic he was so skillfully, dexterously working to distract me from. “And then what?” Did I want to know? He was commanding. He was control. I needed him to be....

Two thick fingers plunged into me as he looked up and met my gaze with a stark expression. “You’ll see it.”

Desire and panicked fear wrapped around my throat, stealing my breath as my stomach plummeted and my inner muscles constricted around him. “See what?”

Slate eyes bore into my soul. “Breachers Syndrome.”

The floor dropped out from under me. “You’re sick?”
Breacher Syndrome?

“If by sick, you mean fucked in the head from too many concussive blows while I was on the Teams, then yes, I’m sick.” So gentle it hurt, he drew his fingers out.

For the first time since my father’s funeral, tears welled. “I... Excuse me.” Hastily grabbing my towel, I stood up.

I didn’t make it one step.

His fingers sank into my hair and gripped.

I froze.

“Your cunt’s dripping, you like my hands on you, and you’re running scared. You want to come before or after you tell me what got you upset? The real reason, not some bullshit excuse wrapped around what I said.”

I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t talk.

The emotional canvas of my life was suddenly staring at me as sure as if I’d painted it with every ugly color of truth.

A negligent, selfish, emotionally absent and overly critical mother who’d dragged me everywhere like a burdensome piece of luggage. An absentee father who’d never fought my mother for more time with me. He’d never fought for me at all. But I’d given that dark canvas a swath of bright color and told myself they were my parents. They’d loved me. They’d been my family. Then I lost my mother, started my masters, and fell into the first man who’d paid attention to me. A man who was selfish, emotionally absent, overly critical, abusive and never fought for me.

And now this.

A SEAL.

A warrior who’d saved me, killed for me, given me the best orgasms of my life and had Breacher Syndrome.

A warrior who could touch me exactly how I needed to be touched.

As if on cue, his grip tightened. “Choose.”

Reduced to sensation, in that moment, I selfishly didn't think about him or his needs.

I was desire.

My scalp tingling, a pounding, aching need throbbing between my legs, my nipples tightened to the point of pain, I closed my eyes.

Heat covered my back, the grip of my hair pulled even tighter, and his voice—*oh my God, his voice*—thick with sexual dominance grated across my neck and fell down my shoulders. “Making the decision for you. You're coming first.”

Before my lust-hazed brain could register his words, I was being dragged—no, propelled back to the bed, and he was issuing orders.

“Chest down, on your knees.”

My weak mind rejoicing, not even considering disobeying him, I crawled onto the soft comforter and laid my chest down as he kept his grip on my hair.

“Hands behind your back.” He shoved my knees wider. “Keep that ass up.”

Clasping my hands behind me, I inverted my back to do exactly as he asked.

“Good.” A finger trailed down my spine.

I shivered.

“You gonna edge into those fears in your head if I put my mouth on your cunt, little sub?”

I felt it. Desire, exactly as he'd accused, dripped down my thigh.

“Answer,” he demanded.

“No.” I swallowed down shame I no longer wanted to own. “But I want you inside me.”

“Me,” he stated darkly.

“Yes, please,” I whispered.

Thick, heavy and so, so hard, the head of his giant cock with its huge piercing drew through my slickness.

Then a SEAL drove into me.

FORTY-FIVE

Kilo

“You gonna edge into those fears in your head if I put my mouth on your cunt, little sub?” Fuck, I wanted to taste her.

On her knees, ass in the air, her cunt wept, but she didn’t say shit.

“Answer,” I demanded.

“No.” Her voice got quiet as hell. “But I want you inside me.”

That’s right, little sub. “Me.” My fucking cock.

“Yes, please,” she whispered.

Possession I didn’t fucking do hit my headspace hard and fast. Stroking my cock rough so I didn’t shove into her on the goddamn spot, I rubbed the head through her wet need, making sure the bottom bead of my barbell hit her clit.

She fucking trembled, and I dropped the reins.

I drove in to the hilt in one hard thrust.

The woman levitated.

Her back bowed up, her hands unclasped, her palms hit the bed, and she gasped loud as shit.

I ground my hips. “Is that all you got?” *Fuck*, she was tight. Tighter than last night. Swollen. From my cock. I got harder.

She said some shit in French.

“English,” I ordered, pulling almost all the way out to rub my apadravya against her G-spot.

“*Mon Dieu!*” Starting to shake, she tried to top. “Please, please, please.” Leveraging herself up from the bed with one arm, grabbing my thigh and digging her nails in with the opposite hand, she tried to both push and pull herself deeper onto my cock.

Gripping her hip with one hand, shoving her back down with the other, I held her immobile and fucking stilled. “What did I tell you to do with your hands?”

She froze, but her cunt pulsed on my cock. Then she let go of my thigh, dropped her other arm, and clasped her hands behind her back again.

For half a second, I fucking stared.

Christ.

This woman submissive was gonna fucking ruin me.

“Ground rules,” I stated, already wanting to fuck her into next week. “Two.”

That tight cunt constricted again.

Gripping her hair, shoving in deep, I leaned over her back so she could fucking see me. “You think you’re gonna come on my cock right now?”

Panting, lips wet, she begged. “Please.”

I gripped her hair tighter and repeated myself. “Ground rules. First one.” I let my cock pulse so she’d fucking feel me. “I have the controls.”

She sucked in a breath.

I didn’t give her time to think. “Second rule. Stop means stop. Copy?”

Chest heaving, her gaze half gone with lust, half steeped in fear, she looked at me.

I reiterated. “You say stop, I stop. No hesitation.”

She watched my eyes for a beat. Then she gave as much of a nod as she could.

“Verbal,” I demanded.

She spoke so damn quiet, I barely heard her. “Okay.”

Holding her down with my weight, gripping her hair, shoved balls deep into her swollen cunt, I double-checked. “You good? Because once this starts, it only ends one of two ways. Your cunt full of my cum. Or you saying stop. Last time I’m asking. You good?”

If her dark amber eyes hadn’t been locked on mine, I would’ve fucking missed it. But I didn’t. Right before she answered, I saw it.

A shift. Flipside. Trust.

“Yes,” she whispered.

My cock pulsed. Hard. Then I lost what was left of my fucking mind.

My hand already between her legs, thumbing her clit, I knew what I was gonna do. “You’re coming.” Right goddamn now. Then I was gonna fill her tight, swollen cunt—twice. “Grip my fucking cock,” I demanded. “Feel me.” Grinding my hips, hitting her cervix with my piercing, I circled her clit, and she started to shake. “Come now,” I ordered.

She fucking detonated, and I followed.

Filling her cunt, hot cum hitting her womb, my headspace went to hell.

One second, I was gripping her hair, covering her back, and having a goddamn orgasm like I’d never come in my life. The next, I was gripping her hips and pounding the ever-loving fuck out of her.

Wetter, hotter, tighter, her cunt was an addiction to end all addictions.

Thrust after thrust, balls slapping, fire-red hair everywhere, I reached for that high.

She shook.

I went harder.

Then her cunt gripped the hell out of my cock, she came on a scream, and went limp.

I fucking mainlined.

FORTY-SIX

Kilo

Buried so goddamn deep in her cunt that I never wanted to surface, I leaned over and kissed the indent above her ass that I'd been fixated on as I waited for my headspace to clear. "You still with me?"

Sweet, submissive as hell, and fucking shattered, she gave me that accent. "Yes."

Slow and careful, I pulled out, and my cum followed. Cognizant of her ass, I rubbed myself all over her cunt and thighs because *fuck*, this woman. "Wait."

Murmuring some incoherent shit I took for compliance, her ass still in the air, her red hair everywhere, she didn't move while I grabbed a warm washcloth.

Striding back to the bed, I wiped her and checked for blood. None. "You good?"

"Mm-hmm."

A blast wave hit my chest, and for two beats, I took her in. Jesus. Then I focused up. "Time to move."

"Okay." Trembling, wrung out, she reached for her towel. Then nothing.

She lay there.

Any other woman, I would've been out the door. But this was the redhead. The woman who'd told me to shoot her, who'd told Carlos's second to shoot her. Fuck, the woman who was gonna pitch herself off the top deck of a superyacht in a goddamn storm rather than subject herself to the Butcher.

She wasn't any other woman.

She was the redhead taking up every last functioning neuron I had left in my headspace like I deserved to have her. "You getting up?" Fuck, I wanted to own her.

"Oui, une minute, j'arrive."

Grabbing the excuse, closing in on her, I leaned down, covered her back, and braced my hands on the bed on either side of her so I didn't fucking crush her. Then I shoved my cock against her entrance and nipped her ear. "English, beautiful."

She let out a gasp that was more squeak, and gave me half and half. *"Oui. Yes, yes! I said one minute. J'arrive. I'm coming. I'm coming."*

"Really?"

She fucking froze.

I took the reins off. "You think you're coming again?"

Pause. "No?"

"Is that your answer?"

She tried to squirm onto my cock.

I didn't fucking move.

She froze again. "Yes?"

Then it happened.

Short, sweet, and fucking unleashed from every damn thing I knew about her, she let a giggle escape.

I whipped her over so I could see her face and—*fuck me*—hear that sound again. "Something funny?"

Sultry, her dark eyes shining, she let those lush lips tip up on one side by a fraction. "No."

"You smiling for me?" She was fucking stunning.

Her hands flew to her mouth, and she shook her head.

"You lying?"

She shook her head again. Then nodded.

The corner of my mouth twitched. “Your poker face is shit.”

Her eyes crinkled with another smile, but her hands hid it.

“Drop your arms,” I ordered.

The second she did, the vixen was back. Complete with accusations. “This is your fault. You did this.”

“Yeah?” I shoved her thigh with my knee and brought the head of my cock back to her entrance because I was fucking addicted. “What’d I do? Make you come too many times?”

“Yes.”

No hesitation, no teasing in her tone, I studied her for a beat because I didn’t know if she was fucking with me. Then I shelved it, and picked her up. “Time to move, woman.” My cock was pissed, but my head was on board, thought it was a great fucking idea. More so when she wrapped her arms around my neck.

“This isn’t me moving. This is you carrying me.”

I looked down at her. “You got a problem with that?” New kink unlocked. I fucking liked carrying this woman.

“Only when I need the restroom.”

“Copy that.” I put her down.

For half a second, her small-as-hell hand landed on my arm, and she steadied herself before her manners came out. “Thank you.”

“Grabbing your clothes. Back in two. Be ready.”

“Okay.” Unsteady on her feet, she weaved a path to the bathroom like a drunk-ass sailor.

I watched her until she shut the door.

Then I threw on clothes, grabbed my shit, left her bag and pulled out my cell. Ignoring the missed calls, texts and voice mails, I did a quick web search, then dialed Alpha first as I headed toward the laundry room.

He answered on the first ring. “I’ve been trying to get a hold of you.”

“November knew where I was.”

Alpha inhaled. Then he lit into me. “Carlos is still in the wind. He knows you took the female. He’ll correctly assume you destroyed his shipment. We still haven’t located his helo. There’s no intel on how many guards he has in country. The CIA contact is MIA, and no one at the Agency is talking. Answer your fucking phone next time I call.”

I ignored his rant. “Carlos wanted ten large-scale paintings out of her.”

“He already had them plus two spares. He purchased a dozen paintings from her show at Gagosian before he took her. That’s why she was meeting him at Cut, under the pretense of placement of the pieces.”

Shit I knew but hadn’t told him yet. “Source of your intel?” I didn’t know dick about art, but I’d looked up the gallery before I’d called him. A show there wasn’t only the equivalent of making it in her world, she was top of the mountain. And fucking exposed. About a thousand times more than I thought she was. But that still didn’t explain how Carlos had zeroed in on her.

“November followed the trail,” Alpha answered. “I contacted the manager at Gagosian. He said the curator had been calling the artist’s cell, wondering where she was. Apparently, she was supposed to return to the gallery after the meet with Carlos but was a no-show. The curator then had a call from the Four Seasons manager. Gallery manager claimed they’re friends. Gallery manager also said Carlos was a new client, had cash, converted it to a cashier’s check, and Gagosian made the sale.”

“How much cash?”

“Three hundred grand. One of Carlos’s bodyguards had it with him. Bottom line, the Four Seasons’s manager, same Jonathan Dahlgren that Blade mentioned, told the curator that

the artist voluntarily left with Carlos. Now Dahlgren's MIA, and once we dug deeper, his background didn't hold."

"In what way?"

"An Agency kind of way."

"Under deep?" I wasn't buying it.

"Don't know. No military records, no history before a few years ago when the Dahlgren profile showed up. He could be anything—mole, covert agent, one of Carlos's men."

I was going with the latter. That fucker was at least on the take. "The show?" I asked as cryptically as possible, cognizant of how sound carried.

"Hers? At Gagosian?"

"Yeah." I pulled her dress and underwear out of the dryer.

"What about it?"

"What's the connection?" I scanned the villa and outside terraces as I walked back toward the bedroom.

"As far as Carlos, there's none prior to her showing that we can find. As far as the gallery, according to the manager, the artist submitted examples of her work a couple months ago, and his curator jumped on it. The artist had the talent and pedigree."

"Expand." I hit the bedroom and halted when I saw her come out of the bathroom with sexed-up hair, an expression free from fear, and color in her cheeks.

She looked fucking beautiful.

And vulnerable as hell.

Alpha downloaded the intel I hadn't bothered to ask November about but should have. "Besides being the daughter of a well-known but now deceased art dealer, she has multiple graduate degrees from prestigious art schools, international residencies, and she had a Guggenheim Fellowship."

None of which she'd mentioned, all of which gave her more exposure, and nothing I'd fucking asked about but

should have.

Fuck.

I should've told Alpha to take me off this assignment and stepped the fuck down because I wasn't only sinking into my headspace over her, I was thinking with my dick.

“Kilo,” Alpha stated.

I stared at her. In a new goddamn light. “What?”

“Tell me now. Do I need to put Blade in?”

Fuck. “Because?”

Alpha turned all business. “Zulu touches down in thirty. He and Blade will take it from there. Hand off the female at the airport, then divert. Draw attention away from her.”

Feeding off the sight of her like a starved man, my addiction growing by the second, I stood there and fucking stared.

Then I made the second-worst call of my life. “No.”

FORTY-SEVEN

Anneliese

My legs shaky, my body sore in the best way possible, and my mind blessedly free of everything except a tall, enigmatic SEAL, I walked out of the bathroom in a towel that smelled like him because I smelled like him.

“What?” he demanded.

I looked up, and my heart skipped.

Dressed in black pants and the black T-shirt he'd given me last night, he stood in the doorway of the bedroom with the phone to his ear and stared at me so intently, he looked angry. “Because,” he stated.

The lock of inky hair was back to hanging over one of his eyes. I didn't know if it made him look sexier or more lethal. No man should be that beautiful. Or feel that good when he was being rough.

His nostrils flared, and he bit out a response to whoever was on the other end of the call. “No.”

Ending the call and pocketing his cell, he came at me with my clothes.

Mentally bracing, I didn't back up.

I also didn't speak. The last time I tried, he'd fucked me into a state, and I'd giggled. *Giggled*. I rarely laughed, let alone acted like a young girl with a crush. Not even when I was young.

Holding out my dress and underwear, he studied me in that way he did, like he was looking for all the things I wasn't

saying. “Cunt?”

Word by blunt, unorthodox word, I was figuring out his own unique language of dominance. I was also still figuring out the slight nuances in his tone, but this one I understood. It was all SEAL, all dominant, and he expected an answer. I gave him one. “A little sore.”

“Ice?”

My heart traitorously swooped. “No, thank you.”

He gave me the slight chin tip. “Get dressed. Meet me in the kitchen. Food, then we’re out.” He turned to leave.

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere safer.”

“In the car?” Because he’d said the car was being tracked.

“No. Flying.”

Anxiety coated my post-sex haze, and I glanced at my tote that was now alone on the dresser. “I don’t have an ID to travel.”

“Won’t need one.”

Didn’t private flights need IDs too? I didn’t question it because I had a more pressing matter. “I don’t have a hairbrush either.” Which I desperately needed, along with some makeup to cover the bruise on my temple, but I doubted his bag of tricks included that.

“Dressed. Kitchen.” He disappeared down the hall.

Taking my clothes that didn’t look too much worse for wear, I went into the bathroom and quickly slipped on my underwear and bra. Both had fared well and smelled of fresh laundry. The dress was another matter. Now slightly smaller, a hint of ocean scent lingering on it, I tugged it on, but the lining had a tear, the zipper was hard to pull, and the fine wool had lost some of its shape. No longer looking like the designer label it was, I was vain enough to be upset by it.

I told myself it was temporary.

Just like the Navy SEAL in the kitchen waiting for me.

That thought hurting immeasurably more than the compromised vanity of an imperfect dress, I was ashamed I had even made the comparison.

No article of clothing compared to the SEAL who'd saved me.

Then, for the first time in my life, he'd not only taken all my repressed urges, all the shame I carried over them, and all the desires I'd denied myself, but he'd given them life. A sensual, profound canvas of dominant brushstrokes marked with blood, sweat, tears, and sex so freeing, that I finally felt alive.

I didn't want to ever let him go.

I'd follow that man to the ends of the earth.

But he wasn't offering, and I'd never ask.

As if waiting for that very moment to haunt me, my mother's words to me before I'd left for my undergraduate program came back in a stifling memory.

"Remember what I am about to say. You are Anneliese Laurent. You do not ever ask a man for anything, especially that which you can do yourself. And there is nothing you cannot do yourself. Do you hear me?"

Not daring to remind her that I'd had a father who had been half responsible for my genetics, I merely agreed. "Oui."

"Non," she scolded. "You are going to an American university. Speak English, but never let anyone forget that you are French." She scanned my outfit, specifically my jeans, with disdain. Then she waved her hand in dismissal. "But these clothes you wear?" She tsked. "Les jeans sont un choix horrible pour une femme." She shook her head. "Go. Get on your flight. I can no longer stand here next to you while you are wearing those clothes." Rolling her eyes, she gave me an air kiss on each cheek, then turned and walked away on her Christian Louboutin Astrinodos.

I tucked the memory away and looked in the mirror.

My face bruised, my hair a tangled mess from both sex and having let it air dry after the shower, my dress not even worth mentioning at this point, I was sure that if my mother saw me, she would narrate an entire thesis on everything that was wrong with me and my appearance.

But a slate-eyed SEAL hadn't said one judgmental word.

Running my fingers through my hair before using the toothbrush that had magically made its way from the side of a deserted road to this bathroom, I brushed my teeth, then walked out of the bathroom.

Grabbing my tote off the dresser, I pulled my shoes out and checked that my brush roll and water bottle were in place. Then I made my way into the kitchen just as a SEAL was setting a plate on the counter.

"Bread, cheese, fruit." He slid the food toward me. "Water." A glass followed the same path as the plate.

"Thank you." Fighting a dull headache that hadn't abated since I'd been hit, I set my tote bag down and noticed he didn't have a plate for himself. "Did you eat already?"

"Yes."

I glanced at the water. "Coffee?"

"None made."

Suddenly self-conscious about eating in front of him but also realizing how hungry I was, I picked up a fig. "You don't drink coffee?"

"No." He glanced at my tote bag. "What's in the water bottle?"

"A painting." I ate another fig. Maybe it was the sex, the man or almost dying, but it was the best-tasting fruit I'd ever had.

"Of?"

"It's not finished." The lie was so automatic, I didn't think about it until it was out of my mouth.

"You rolled it up to keep it dry."

He didn't phrase it as a question, but I felt the need to explain. "Yes. I had it with me in New York for safekeeping before I... left." Not left—was taken, but I didn't say that. "I had it before, actually. I brought it with me from Milan when I came to meet with Ami at Gagosian. Fortunately, I found it in the cabin on the yacht." I didn't tell him I never considered going over that railing without it, and I hoped he didn't ask because I wasn't prepared to answer.

Letting the subject of the painting drop, he asked a much more basic question. "What's in Milan?"

That, I could answer. "A temperature-controlled storage unit with some of my paintings and art supplies."

"That's it?"

"And one suitcase."

He watched me for a heartbeat like he was looking for the answer to a different question. "Anything left behind in New York?"

I watched him back. Day had turned to late afternoon, which had faded to well past sunset while I was too busy letting him do whatever he'd wanted to my body to notice the time. But now I was noticing. How the light, the time of day, the hues—they affected the hard planes of his face, the ridges of his muscles, even the color of his hair.

Today's sun was now a memory, and he once again looked like the dangerous man in a Manhattan hotel elevator and lobby. His gaze cut through me like the deadly combat diver who'd shown up on a yacht in the Tyrrhenian Sea. But for a brief spell this afternoon, in a bedroom in a cliffside villa, he'd looked more dominant male than lethal SEAL. His muscles had moved with sinuous finesse instead of calculated precision, and the hard angle of his jaw had been softened by the wavy black hair falling over his hooded eyes.

But right now, he wasn't looking at me how he had in the bedroom.

He was looking at me like a SEAL.

I struggled to remember the question. What was left behind in New York was a world away. “Besides everything that was taken from my tote bag, I had another suitcase in a hotel in Midtown.” Not that I knew for sure when the items in my bag had been taken, but I figured New York was a logical guess.

He gave a clipped nod. “I’ll have the suitcase retrieved. Name of the hotel?” He pulled out his cell phone.

I told him.

He started typing.

I ate a piece of the cheese. Sharp, tangy, delicious.

His thumbs paused on his cell phone’s screen, and he looked up. At first, his gaze went to my mouth, but then he met my eyes. “What was in your bag that’s now missing?”

“Wallet, passports, cell phone, makeup, a few other things.” My dignity. My security. My identity.

“Like?”

“My hairbrush, toiletries, perfume, jewelry, a watch.” An Hermès watch my mother had given me. Gold earrings from my father. Perfume that’d been custom-made for me. Shampoo from my favorite boutique on a side street off the Avenue des Champs-Élysées in the 8th arrondissement. A brush that didn’t damage my hair. I picked up a piece of bread and then put it down.

“What was in the wallet?”

I picked up a piece of cheese, but my stomach twisted. “My debit card, a credit card, my International Driver Permit, some cash.” A picture of my mother and one of my father. I put the cheese back on the plate.

He watched my movements. “Which bank for the debit and credit card?”

I gave him the name.

He scanned my plate, then typed for another few seconds before shoving his phone into a pocket of the jacket that he’d

been wearing on that elevator but was now draped on a granite countertop in Salerno, Italy.

Wondering how many different places his jacket had seen, I forced myself to pick up another piece of the cheese, but I refrained from asking what he'd been typing and to who, because reality all of a sudden felt too real, and I'd already taken too much from this man... Like Carlos had taken from me.

“Eat.”

I glanced up.

“Take that bite,” he ordered.

Until that very moment, I hadn't known that the swirls of steam from the manhole covers on the darkened, nighttime streets of New York in the dead of winter had a color. They did. Gray, whispery, cold, no amber undertones, more translucent than smoke from a cigarette—that steam definitely had a color, and same as his eyes, it defied logic.

It struck me that I didn't want to go back to Manhattan, not ever again, but I had to. I needed to speak with Ami. I wanted my show taken down. I wanted all my paintings back, and I wanted out of my contract for representation. Then I wanted to run and never, ever look back, except... what if that was where an inky-black-haired SEAL lived?

Steeling myself, I asked, “Are we going to New York?”

“No.”

Was that good? Bad? I couldn't decide, but my breath was starting to come short.

He took the cheese from my hand and held it to my mouth. “Eat.”

“I... I can't.”

His gaze narrowed. “Nauseous?”

Yes, and wanting coffee. “A little.”

“Again or still?”

“Where are we going?”

“I’ll tell you once we’re in the air. Answer the question.”

“I was nauseous this morning.” I thought it was from hunger or my headache. I didn’t know what I was feeling now other than dreading having to go back to New York. “Why won’t you tell me now where we’re going?”

“The less you know, the better.”

I remembered what he’d said. “Plausible deniability?”

“Something like that.” He glanced at my temple, then at my sandals. “Need help with the shoes?”

I took the hint. “Time to leave?”

“Yes.”

“All right, and no, thank you on the offer of help.” I slipped on my Prada sandals that I now hated, and when I stood up, a wave of vertigo struck.

Blindly, I reached for the counter.

A SEAL was faster.

Coming at me quicker than I could swipe a paintbrush, he gripped my upper arm.

I flinched.

FORTY-EIGHT

Anneliese

“Hey.” Short and tight, the word was the color of concern but the hue of anger. “What the fuck was that?”

I drew in a breath, then another. “I’m sorry. I just lost my balance. I’m fine.”

“You flinched.”

Oh. “It’s...” It was what? Reactionary? Habit? Him? Another life? Someone I used to be. Someone I never wanted to be. What could I say? I didn’t want to discuss it with him, and I didn’t want him to see me as weak, but here we were, because I’d reacted. “Apologies. It’s just—I’m not used to...” Being touched or grabbed or looked after. “It was reactionary.” I swallowed hard. “I’m not a victim. I wasn’t reacting to you...” Stopping before I said anything more that only made me look exactly how I didn’t want to appear to this man, I shook my head. “Never mind.”

He didn’t never mind. He did what I was beginning to understand was inherent to his personality. He took me and everything I’d said head-on. “More than one way to be assaulted, woman.”

“I’m fine.”

“Doesn’t track that way.” He briefly glanced at my bruise and changed the subject. “After the flight, we’re getting that looked at.”

“I don’t need a doctor.”

“I wasn’t asking. Find that flipside, stop overthinking, and recognize I have the controls.”

Same as last night, his use of the word *control* set me on edge, but unlike last night, I now knew exactly what his kind of control felt like, and I wanted to drown in it. Except I didn’t know what he meant by flipside. “What side?”

“That sweet, submissive side.”

Sweet? “That doesn’t... put you off?”

“Put me off,” he stated.

Since I’d first heard it, his voice had only three tones. Three shades of the same storm. Unwavering, unwaveringly dominant, and unwaveringly commanding. I had heard all three, but for once, with just three small words, I heard a new shade. Unwaveringly incredulous.

Of its own volition, my breath held. “Yes.”

“I’m a SEAL. What part of that makes you think I’d want anything other than you submissive? Especially when you’re under me.”

My heart pattered in an unsettling rhythm. “And when I’m not under you?”

His firm grip turned into a heavy, languid stroke up my arm until his hand fisted in my hair. “What do you think?”

I barely breathed. “I don’t know.”

He became the storm. “I want to dominate the fuck out of you.”

The unsettling rhythm stopped. Everything stopped. My heart, my breath, my world.

Then he released my hair, and his expression shut down. “Still dizzy? Don’t fucking lie.”

Dizzy didn’t begin to cover it. “A little.”

“Headache? Impaired vision?”

He was impairing my vision. “No. Are we going to be seeing other people on this flight?”

“Yeah. Nausea worse or the same?”

“I’ll be fine once I get some caffeine, but I wish I had a brush and some makeup for the bruise.”

Without warning, he threaded his thick fingers into my hair, pushed it away from my face and captured the back of my neck. Then he leaned down like he was going to kiss me.

Except he didn’t kiss me.

Bringing his mouth almost to mine, he held my gaze. Then he gave me blunt. “Stripped down to base, freshly fucked, and smelling like that tight cunt, my cum and ocean, your hair isn’t what’s noticeable about you right now.”

So, *so* far in over my head with this man, I stupidly opened my mouth. “And the bruise?”

“Takes a back seat to your ass in that dress. The second you’re healed, I’m fucking it again.”

My face instantly flushed.

“And that, little sub, eclipses it all.” Releasing me as quickly as he’d grabbed me, he stood to his full height. “Hair’s fine. Time to move.” He shouldered his bags, took my tote from me and grabbed his jacket. “Can you walk?”

My panties now wet, my knees shaking, my equilibrium at the bottom of the Tyrrhenian Sea, probably not. “Yes.”

“Speak up if that changes.” He draped his jacket over my shoulders.

FORTY-NINE

Anneliese

His intoxicating scent surrounded me, and I wasn't dizzy, I was floating.

Until he picked up his gun.

Then I was staring at an almost six-and-a-half-foot trained killer as he carried his bags and my tote to the front door of a safe house and scanned the outside drive through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

So engrossed in him, I didn't realize at first that his pocket was vibrating. "I think your cell phone is ringing."

"Answer it."

Wait. "You want me to answer your phone?"

"You're wearing the jacket." He opened the front door and scanned the terraces in front.

"I can't answer your phone." Was this some sort of test? Or show of... what? Transparency?

He didn't say anything. He held the door and focused back on me with that penetrating stare that I now saw differently.

The vibrating stopped, then started again. "It's ringing again."

"Usually does."

"And you're not going to answer it? What if it's important? What if it's about... what happened?"

"If you're concerned, answer it."

“You’re not concerned?”

“I have three blocks of C-4, my Glock and an MP7. No, I’m not concerned, but you are. Answer.”

He had explosives? *On him?*

I stood there, suspended.

Shock I should have felt, shock I didn’t feel. Every call my mother always took, day or night, embedded in my upbringing. My own phone I never turned on when I was painting because I abhorred the distraction—not that I ever received calls anymore. All of it added up, and I couldn’t leave the thing alone as it continued to vibrate.

Pulling his phone out of his jacket pocket, I glanced at the screen that said it was a blocked number. My nerves rattled, I did something I never would have imagined myself doing.

I answered a man’s phone. “Hello?”

There was a pause.

Then a calm, reserved male voice spoke with both authority and formality. “Miss Laurent, this is November. Please put Kilo on the phone.”

I looked at an enigmatic man I did not understand. “It’s November.”

His stare locked on me like he wanted to devour my very soul, his expression grew more fierce. “Not interested.”

“Mr. November, Kilo said—”

“I heard. Put the phone to his right ear.”

“Pardon?”

There was another pause, and it sounded like someone was typing in the background. “Kilo doesn’t like to answer his cell phone because his hearing is compromised in his left ear. Normally I text him, but I need to speak to him. Hand him the cell on his right side, and tell him I have intel.”

My heart cracked with a new fracture in the shape of a SEAL with impaired hearing. Suddenly seeing the way he

stared, how he sometimes didn't speak, and his intensity in a new light, I did what November said.

I held the phone purposely toward Kilo's right side. "November says he needs to speak with you. He said he has intel." The last word felt heavy on my tongue.

Taking the cell without comment or change in his expression, Kilo held it to his right ear.

For half a minute, he stood perfectly still.

Then he spoke one word. "Copy." Ending the call, he slid the phone into his pants pocket. "Time to move."

"Is everything okay?"

"Everything's the same."

I didn't know if I believed that. "Then why are we leaving?"

"Because everything's the same."

"I don't know what that means." Then, because November had given me a piece of Kilo, I gave him a piece of me in an unspoken exchange. "My trust issues run deep."

"It means the manager of the Four Seasons was a plant. Carlos is still in the wind. The agency fuck that tipped us off to Carlos's arms shipment on that boat was rogue. There's no money trail, no buyer, and no intel on the procurement source. You don't have trust issues—you have trauma. You also don't ask direct questions. Start. Time to move. We're relocating. You can sleep on the plane."

There were about a thousand questions I should've asked, and a thousand more debilitating concerns to accompany them. But in that moment, I only wanted to know one thing. "How do you know I'm tired?"

"Your feet."

"Pardon?"

"You've been shifting from foot to foot since you've been vertical."

I glanced down at my Prada sandals. “It’s the shoes.”

“It’s not the shoes. Move that tight ass, or I’ll do it for you.”

Heat roared across my face, my core pulsed and my breath caught because that comment—I understood it perfectly. It was not my ample behind that was tight.

Straightening my spine, now hyperaware of my posture and stride, I walked out the door.

As I passed him, he fell in behind me and leaned down to my ear. “For the record, I like my tired on you. Almost as much as your tight cunt and lush lips covered in my cum.”

FIFTY

Anneliese

He drove away from the villa exactly how he'd driven us to it.

Very fast.

He was also silent.

I was silently freaking out.

About everything.

Carlos was a butcher and an arms dealer, Kilo wanted to dominate me, and I wanted to let him.

“Talk,” he demanded.

“Pardon?”

“Stop overthinking and start talking.”

“You weaponize honesty well.”

“Not weaponizing anything at the moment. Say what's on your mind.”

It came out without thought. “You're strikingly handsome.”

Taking a corner too fast, he threw me a warning glance that didn't need an interpreter to decipher.

“I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to objectify—”

“I know what the hell I look like. Despite my stay-the-fuck-back glare, women hit on me every goddamn time I'm in public. Ninety-nine percent, I ignore. The other unlucky one percent, I fuck, then bail on before dropping my name or call sign because I don't get involved. Hard fucking pass.”

Especially when a woman's on the hunt, but that's not you, and last night and this morning wasn't that."

Oh my God. I was just a fuck to him. Of course I was. I'd thrown myself at him, and him saying he wanted to dominate me didn't mean he wanted more than today, tonight. He just meant.... *Oh God*. I was such a fool. "I don't expect anything from you after this."

"If you're gonna serve up that kind of bullshit, save your breath."

"Because oxygen is going to disappear?" It already had.

"Not playing games with you. You heard what I said. Next subject."

Did I? Because all I heard was *hard fucking pass* and *I don't get involved* and the crushing in of my traitorous heart that had opened up to this man while I was busy *overthinking*. "I don't have anything to talk about." I had too many things, none of which I was going to say.

"You didn't wake up this morning choosing submission and a fear of being touched. There're two subjects. Pick one."

Honesty as a weapon was criminally underrated. "Why are you doing this?" He could just not speak.

"Why are you shutting down?"

Because I didn't know how to be like him. "We don't have to talk."

"You want to ignore this morning and last night?"

Yes, because I already felt more vulnerable than when I was about to jump off that yacht. "You said you don't get involved."

"I also said you weren't just a fuck."

Oh God, I did need an interpreter. My headache suddenly worse, I gingerly touched the goose egg on my temple.

"You hurting?" he asked sharply.

"I'm fine."

“Third time you’ve tried to feed me that line. Try real. Tell me how you felt when I was fucking you.”

“I will not.” I wasn’t giving him any more ammunition.

“Why? Because it felt like more than fucking?”

It’d felt like an explosion of colors I’d never seen, ones I didn’t even know existed. But instead of making myself more exposed, I grasped at the first subject matter I could think of that might derail this runaway train. “Why the piercing?”

“You’ve got a complaint about my apadravya?”

His overt sexuality radiating off him in a constant, flaming backdrop of Quinacridone Magenta, Indian Yellow Deep, and Scarlet Lake dangerously swirled and simmered as if waiting for the slightest provocation to explode. An explosion I knew firsthand. A frenzy of his mouth and hands and hard length as he thrust his hips and put his body all over mine with both controlled expertise and wild, untamed animalistic ferocity.

I already craved more.

I would drop to my knees for him.

I already had.

But I wanted to do it again, over and over, despite this conversation and what he’d said. I wanted him to feel the burning inside me. I wanted him to destroy me like he had that yacht. But I already knew that if I let him fuck me again, I would get hurt worse than I had five years ago.

“No complaints,” I barely managed.

He glanced at me with his unnerving stare. Then focused back on the road. “I like to fuck. The piercing adds to a woman’s pleasure. Feeds my addiction.”

My heart stuttered, then stopped. *Addiction?* To sex? He got pierced because.... *Oh God.* How many women had he been with? How could I have been so naïve as to think I needed him to fuck me again to hurt me more? “You’re....” My throat caught. “You’re addicted to...?” I couldn’t say it.

“Fucking?” He scanned the rearview mirrors. “Sex, blast waves, being under the surface. All vices.”

I didn’t know what he meant by the second two. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered after his first killing strike. My heart was carnage, and I’d already forgotten how I breathed before meeting an assassin disguised as a SEAL.

Fighting not to react to the sickening jealousy I now harbored like the very addiction he was speaking of, praying he was done talking, I looked out at the landscape speeding past. One I used to take solace in but now would only see as the palette of my destruction.

A destruction that wasn’t complete because he wasn’t finished decimating my now laughable wall of defense.

Digging into my insecurities with a blunt palette knife, he elaborated with his punishing honesty. “Bringing a woman down to base, then detonating her before I sink her is as close to a high as a blast wave.”

The punishing nausea I’d been fighting for five long years, the churning that had been blessedly absent when I’d woken this morning—it struck and drowned me like that plunge into the Tyrrhenian Sea.

I could barely ask the question. “How often do you do that?”

“Used to be about frequency. Now it’s about the high.”

Bile rose, my hands clasped, and I wanted to double over and vomit all over myself in self-punishment if it would purge this horrible, horrible devastation I’d allowed to happen by being weak. Now, I didn’t know how to come up for air because I couldn’t erase what’d happened last night or this morning from my memories even if I wanted to. Worse, the question was already rooted and growing painful, invasive tendrils, but I stupidly, idiotically had to know. *I had to*. “Did you get that feeling from me?”

My rigid muscles braced for impact either gave me away, or he was just that astute, because with one glance at my hands in my lap, his tone changed.

From unwaveringly dominant, it reverted back to unwavering. “You more afraid of the answer or the implication?” Resolute, impenetrable, his voice, his tone, the question—they gave nothing away as to his own feelings.

I was wrong.

This man hadn’t saved me.

No one could.

Life wasn’t a storybook. There were no happy endings, and the sooner I got back on familiar ground, the better. All I needed to do was cut open the old wound that I’d used as motivation for every decision for years. It didn’t matter that I hated it or that the absence of its gnawing persistence this morning had made me think it was possible to heal. Like every other emotional entrapment in my life, it’d been an illusion.

I didn’t know what was more crushing—that I couldn’t trust myself or that I couldn’t trust the one man who could touch me without my mind reeling into a panicked spiral. Hating fate and life, needing to get the bleeding over with, I picked up my own proverbial knife and stabbed myself. “I don’t fear anything except you touching me again.”

He didn’t reply.

He turned into an airport I’d thought was shut down.

FIFTY-ONE

Kilo

“I don’t fear anything except you touching me again.”

She was fucking lying.

I’d also fucked up.

Pulling into the Salerno airport, bypassing some construction cones, I let it go. For now.

Driving across the apron while scanning the empty airport, I pulled up to the only plane there. The G650 had her lights on, but the main cabin door was closed, and I couldn’t fucking remember Zulu’s number. Circling the nose once, I made sure Zulu saw me, then I parked the Maserati and glanced at her. “Wait.”

She didn’t say shit as I got out.

Grabbing my gear and hers, I glanced toward the terminal, but there wasn’t a fucking soul in sight.

The airstairs opened, and Zulu appeared with his hand resting on the 9mm holstered at his waist. “Kilo.”

“Hey.” I tipped my chin behind me. “This shit seem fucking off to you?”

Zulu glanced past me. “Airport’s under renovation, but yeah, I expected security.”

“November say he cleared it?”

“He just said to pick up you and Blade plus one passenger.” He glanced at the Maserati. “Where’s Blade?”

“Don’t know. But I want to get the fuck out of here ASAP.”

“Copy. Board your passenger, then we’ll split up prechecks.” He pulled his phone out. “Sending Blade a text now.”

“Tell him he’s got five minutes before we’re wheels up.” I wasn’t waiting for him.

“He says he’s ten minutes out.”

Fuck. “Fine. Cover us while I get her on board.”

“Roger that.”

I scanned the empty airport one more time. Then I opened her door and issued instructions. “Stay in front of me. Walk directly to the plane and up the airstairs.”

“Okay.” She glanced nervously past me. “Where will you be?”

“Right behind you. Ready?”

She nodded.

Stepping back only enough to give her room to get out, I fought the urge to pick her the fuck up and double-time it up those stairs.

She stood, I fell in on her six, and we hit the airstairs.

Before she got to the top step, Zulu stepped back, but not before he took in her face. “Ma’am.”

“Sir,” she murmured, dropping her gaze and quickly moving past him.

Zulu raised an eyebrow at me as she grabbed one of the first seats.

I shook my head.

“Doing a walk-around. Meet you in the cockpit.” Zulu headed down the airstairs.

I dumped our bags and the MP7, then I took the moment we had alone. “I don’t do drip feed.”

Midreach for her seat belt, she stopped and looked up at me with a frown. “Pardon?”

I purposely squatted. “Info dump. Drive over here. I downloaded what there is to know about me so you’d have all the intel up front. I don’t drip feed. I don’t ease in. It made you shut down.” I adjusted her seat belt, then buckled her in and grasped the outsides of her thighs. She didn’t fucking flinch.

“I...” She glanced down at my hands. “I don’t know what you expect me to say.”

That she fucking felt it. “You ever pass out or hit subspace with anyone else?” She hadn’t verbally answered when I’d asked before.

Her face flushed hard. “Have you?”

“Look at me,” I demanded.

No hesitation, she lifted her head.

“I’m not the sub.” But I’d fucked lots. Not one of them had responded to me how she had.

“You would know.”

I scanned her eyes. “I’m letting that comment slide because we only have a minute.” I wanted to get prechecks done and get the fuck out of here. “I meant everything I said. I’m not playing games to get my dick wet. You want to dance around shit, then tell me. But don’t feed me a line of bullshit about touching you. I’ve got my hands on you right now. You can’t deny the pull. I see it in your eyes. I fucking feel it when you look at me.” I stood. “That’s what I was getting at in the car.”

Zulu hit the airstairs.

“We’ll pick this up later.” I headed to the cockpit and angled into second chair.

Zulu followed a few seconds later and got in first chair.

We were on the last prechecks when Zulu asked, “Who gave her the injury?”

November was AES's hacker, but Zulu was Alpha's second. He took most of the client meets, and was the face of AES so Alpha could stand in the shadows. "Alpha didn't fill you in?"

"Haven't spoken to him. Victor and I have been handling a client situation for the past couple days. I left him there to come here."

"Must be a fucked situation if you brought in Victor."

Zulu chuckled. "Normally I'd agree, but I needed his language skills."

"Which language?" Victor was fluent in more than a few.

"French."

Christ. "Small fucking world. The redhead's French."

"You want me to reassign Victor?"

I threw Zulu a glare.

He fucking smiled. "Thought so."

"I'm heading back. You stocked?"

"With?"

"Food. She hasn't eaten."

"There's the usual." Zulu fired up the engines. "Send Blade up when he boards."

"Copy that." I got out of my seat.

"Kilo."

"What?"

"Who did a number on her?"

I glanced back. "Carlos's second."

FIFTY-TWO

Kilo

Stopping in the galley, I grabbed a couple sandwiches, fruit, water and a Coke. Then I found a blanket in one of the overheads and took the seat next to her.

She glanced toward the cockpit, then looked at me. “You know how to fly this plane?”

“Yeah.” Pulling my tray out, I dumped the food.

“You’re a pilot?”

I was a breacher. “When I need to be.”

“But you’ve flown this plane?”

Shaking the blanket out, I laid it over her. “Probably.”

“You don’t know?”

I pulled her tray out. “AES has a fleet of jets. I’ve flown a lot of planes. I don’t know if I’ve flown this own specifically.” I didn’t fucking keep track.

Blade came up the airstairs and glanced from the redhead to me.

Heading off whatever bullshit he was about to say, I stood. “You’re second chair. I’ll secure the cabin.”

Snorting, he dropped his sniper rifle and go bag and headed to the cockpit.

I scanned the still-empty apron, then shut the main cabin door and headed up front. “Cabin secure.”

“Roger that.” Glancing out his side window, Zulu started taxiing.

I looked at Blade. “You were late. Problems?”

“Besides Carlos still breathing?”

Ignoring him, I glanced at Zulu. “We need to be off the grid.”

“Already handled.” He turned the plane around at the end of the runway. “Wheels up. Take a seat.”

“Copy.” Heading back, I took my seat next to her.

She glanced from the cockpit to the window. “You left the car there.”

“It’ll be handled.”

“Handled,” she repeated as Zulu thrust the engines.

Not saying shit, I held the food in place while we took off.

Once we leveled out, I set the Coke and one of the sandwiches in front of her. “Eat. Then I’ll give you something for your head.”

She looked at the can of soda.

I reached over and opened it. “You drink coffee every day?” Back at the safe house, she’d mentioned it.

“Yes.”

“Caffeine withdrawal.” Makes for a shit headache. “This’ll help.” I tore into the other sandwich.

She watched me a moment, then drank a few swallows of the soda before unwrapping her sandwich. “You said you’d tell me where we were going once we were in the air.”

“Miami.”

“Why?”

“AES is headquartered there. Until Carlos is handled, it’s the safest place for you to be.”

“At AES headquarters?” She lifted the top of her sandwich like she was looking under the hood.

“No, another safe house.” I held out the other half of my sandwich. “Want this one?”

“No, thank you. Will you be staying at the safe house too?”

I waited a beat to see if she’d look up. She didn’t. “Yeah.” I ate the rest of my sandwich.

She lowered the top piece of bread back onto hers and picked up the Coke. Her voice went quiet. “How long will I be there?”

“You got somewhere to be?”

“My opening at the gallery is next week.” She took a drink.

Fuck. “You need to be there?”

She looked out the window. “Need and want are two very different animals.”

No shit. “You want to be there?”

She set her Coke down. “I didn’t want to be there before... this.”

Didn’t surprise me. This woman lived in her head. She didn’t seem the social type. But what had surprised me were the photos of her paintings on that gallery’s website. Every damn one was an explosion of bright fucking colors when the woman sitting next to me didn’t have a stitch of color on her except her hair.

Fucking glad I didn’t have to take her to that opening, I glanced at her tray. “Problem with the sandwich?”

She looked down at it. “Have you ever noticed the shades of food?”

“No.”

“Why are some cheeses orange when milk is white?”

No fucking clue. Reaching over, I removed the offending slices and dumped them on the plastic wrap from my sandwich. “Better?”

She didn't comment. She picked up half and took a bite.

I made a mental note I'd probably forget in two fucking minutes. Redhead. No processed shit. I repeated it. Twice. "Coffee, real food." Figs. "Anything else I need to know?"

"Why?" The flipside came out, but this time it was half-mast, reminding me of both her head injury and how she'd looked tired as shit. "Are you making a list? Are you going to go grocery shopping for me?"

"No. I'm gonna tell the staff to stock the safe house with shit you'll eat."

The sandwich halfway to her mouth, she froze for a beat. Then she slowly set it down. "I'm sorry. That was rude of me."

"Don't give a shit."

"I deserved that."

"Wasn't a comeback, woman. I was telling you I don't give a fuck if you're rude. Doesn't affect me, and your flipside serves a purpose. For the record, though, your version of rude doesn't come close to shit manners."

"I... Thank you." She rubbed her temple again.

"For what? Telling it how it is?" I grabbed my go bag and took out my med kit. Fishing out three Advil, I handed them to her. "Take these."

"What are they?"

"Ibuprofen."

"All three?"

She was right. Her trust issues ran deep. "Wouldn't fuck with you, medication or otherwise."

Her face flushed. "I think you already did." She took the pills.

I stared at her a beat. "You ready to talk?"

"Talk?" she repeated warily.

"Be honest," I amended.

For a suspended beat, she didn't say shit. Then she let loose. "You want to talk honestly? About what? Your addiction to sex, your *hard pass* on commitment, your *blast wave* and *under the surface* vices? How *this isn't that*? How someone referred to as the Butcher drugged and kidnapped me? How that yacht blew up? How a private jet picked us up at an abandoned airport? Or did you mean you wanted to talk honestly about everything you *downloaded* that I'm supposed to be okay with because you *wouldn't fuck with me*?"

"Any of those work."

"In case my tone wasn't clear—no, I don't want to talk."

There she was. "Flipside."

"With all due respect, fuck off. I don't have a flipside or a split personality. This is what no coffee, no hairbrush, and no patience left looks like."

Now we were getting somewhere. "You know what's in the aft cabin?"

"The cargo area? Feel free to go there."

Fuck, I wanted to dominate this woman. "A bed." Technically, two couches. They pulled out.

"I take back the *all due respect* part."

"Good." I didn't want her fucking manners right now.

"Great."

"You want to sleep up here or in back?"

"Right, sleep," she stated incredulously.

"What did I say in the shower?"

"You said a lot of things."

No, I hadn't. I repeated the shit I'd already told her. "If I want to fuck, I'll tell you we're fucking. If I say sleep—"

"You mean sleep."

"Like I said, I wouldn't fuck with you. That includes not barebacking you on a plane with an audience while you feel like shit."

“But if I didn’t feel like shit...,” she replied sarcastically, trailing off but still dropping that fucking gauntlet.

I picked it up. “Then we’d talk about why you’re pissed off before I told you to get some sleep.”

She crossed her arms. “I didn’t say I was pissed off.”

“Didn’t have to. I read you.”

“I’m not a book.”

“You’re injured, hurting, angry, feeling a loss of control, tripping on hitting subspace, and thinking I meant to hit it and quit it.”

“You don’t know what I’m thinking.”

I caught the look on her face on the drive to the airport. I fucking knew what this was about. “I know you think the sex meant nothing to me.”

“You said you don’t get involved. Well, guess what? Neither do I.” She turned toward the window.

“You done?”

“Quite.”

“Good.” I leaned toward her and lowered my voice. “Look at me.”

“No.”

“I don’t put my hands on women in public, but you’re the exception.” She was every goddamn exception. “Look at me right now, or I’ll do it for you.”

She turned her head.

Close enough to take those full lips, I fucking thought about it. “You see me?”

Breathing harder, she whispered. “Yes.”

“Then fucking look.” Letting the reins drop, I gave her unfiltered. “Feel that pull.”

Losing her mask, giving me real, her expression went from guarded to fear and she ditched the attitude. “I don’t want to.”

“No choice, woman.” It was there. “I have the controls. You’re safe.” Bringing my mouth to hers, I kissed her once, then leaned back. “You wanna sleep in back?”

“Where will you be?”

Giving her space. Because despite what I’d said about an audience, I couldn’t bed down with this woman and make any fucking promises. That bulkhead door closed, and she was in a goddamn dress. “I’ll be right here.”

“Then I’ll stay.”

“Copy that.” I reclined her chair. “Get some sleep, beautiful.”

Staring at me for a long beat, she didn’t say shit.

Then she slid off her shoes, brought her legs up, and pulled the blanket to her chin.

Swamped in my jacket, she closed her eyes.

I fucking watched her fall asleep.

FIFTY-THREE

Kilo

I was still watching her when my cell vibrated.

Fishing it out of my pocket, I swiped to answer and held it to my good ear, but I didn't say shit.

November started downloading. "Her suitcase is en route. It'll get here before you do. I'm still working on a couple of the items you requested, but everything'll be ready before you land. I'll leave them in an envelope in a company Range Rover that'll be waiting for you at Executive."

"Thanks." I glanced at her. Still asleep. Standing up, I moved a few rows back. "Add five grand in cash. Take it from my account."

"Copy. Anything else?"

"Yeah." I mentally ran through my checklist. "The safe house. Can you tell whoever we use to stock those places to get coffee, figs and real food. No processed shit or anything with food dye."

November typed. "Done."

"One more favor."

"Go."

I snapped a pic of her tote. "A woman's wallet. This brand. Sending you a pic." I texted him the photo. "Can you get one of those?" I almost forgot. "And a hairbrush. Something expensive."

November didn't say shit.

“Use my funds,” I added.

November still didn’t say shit.

“Personal favor. I’ll owe you.”

He finally spoke up. “All our safe houses are stocked with necessities.”

I fucking got that. Not what I was after. “She’s only asked for three goddamn things. I’m only asking you for two of them.”

“What was the third?”

“Makeup to cover where she was pistol-whipped by Carlos’s fucking second. Which reminds me, I need Talerco waiting at the safe house.” Talon Talerco was a former Navy SARC who went greenside and deployed with a Marine Force Recon unit. He was fluent in all shit combat medic related, and he’d seen it all. AES used him on occasion whenever one of us needed to be patched up beyond what we could do ourselves.

“I’ll arrange for the wallet and brush. They’ll be waiting when you land. Texting Talon now.”

“Thanks. Sitrep?”

“No new intel yet.”

“No salvage crew went out to the boat?”

“The Guardia Costiera got there first. They already have a dive crew on site.”

“They pull anything up?”

“Nothing salvageable. You’re mission complete.”

I no longer gave a fuck about the arms. I also didn’t miss his unsubtle-as-shit *mission complete* comment. “What the fuck is Alpha’s plan if you find Carlos?”

November hedged. “Capture is his priority.”

“Then?”

“Hand him over to the Feds.”

God-fucking-damn it. “Carlos knows who she is.” What the fuck was Alpha thinking? “He won’t let it go that she escaped. Hell, Alpha sent Whiskey after the fucking CIA suit fuck to cover those tracks, but now he’s gonna play good cop with fucking Carlos and bring his ass in instead of eliminating him? After we took out his arms shipment?” *What the fuck?*

“Bigger picture.”

Picture. Picture. *Fuck.* What was I forgetting? “I don’t give a fuck about the bigger picture. Behind bars, solitary confinement, in a goddamn hellhole—it won’t matter. Carlos will find a way to keep running his operations. You know that.”

“No disagreement here. Just relaying that Alpha has his reasons.”

“Yeah, to save fucking face with all his military contracts.”

“Alpha’s looking at the bigger picture. The artist wasn’t the only one compromised on the Pelorus.”

“I don’t give a fuck that I was made on that boat. I can take care of myself.” *Bigger picture.* Fuck, I remembered. The paintings. “Did Alpha tell you about the boat?”

“Which part?”

I downloaded what I hadn’t back at the villa because she’d been listening. Shit I’d told Alpha but then let drop after he’d given me his intel. But something about it had nagged the fuck out of me before I’d let myself get distracted by a redhead who was sinking into my headspace faster than a blast wave. “Carlos locked the redhead in a cabin on that boat with large canvases. Four-by-five-feet large. Told her she had seventy-two hours to paint ten of them.”

November typed. “Paintings that size would get crated to ship.”

“Crates large enough to ship the cash from a nine-figure arms sale.” One that wasn’t fucking happening now. “But who the fuck would have and ship that amount of cash? This is the digital age.” Shit wasn’t adding up, and I couldn’t shake that there was more to Carlos’s connection to her than coincidence.

“A cartel warlord would have that amount of cash, but the timeline is odd.”

“The whole fucking thing is odd, and Carlos isn’t selling shit to himself.” Or maybe he was. Laundering money in some convoluted way I wasn’t about to try to wrap my head around.

“I’ll relay the intel to Alpha and Delta. Alpha’s staying on the ground in Italy to handle some business and in case Carlos surfaces. Blade’s staying as your backup once you’re relocated to the new safe house. There’ll be a second company vehicle waiting there in case you need to split up.”

“Copy, but Carlos is long gone.” That fucker was underground by now.

“I’m tracking down all angles.”

November could hack away. He wouldn’t find Carlos, but I had an idea of how to find that motherfucker. I also had an idea of how to get her shit back. Except in order to do either, I’d need help from the last asshole on earth I wanted to fucking deal with. I’d also have to ask him for shit in stages because he never dealt straight. Not to mention, just making that call, whether or not I got what I needed, would put me in his debt. One guaranteed to be so fucked, I wouldn’t walk away clean—if I walked away at all.

November said something I didn’t catch.

I focused up. “Negative copy. Repeat.”

“Need anything else?”

“Yeah.” I thought about her paintings again. “Was there any cargo loaded onto that Italian charter at Teterboro?”

“Not that I saw. Bringing up the footage now. Looking for something specific?”

“No.”

November didn’t call me on my bullshit. “Two pilots, one crew, refuel, prechecks, then Carlos and his men got on. No cargo, no luggage.”

“Copy. Let me know when you have new intel, especially anything on how the hell Carlos latched on to the redhead.” She’d gotten into his sights long before he’d approached that gallery. I was sure of it.

November didn’t reply.

Christ. “What?”

“The redhead has a name.”

“So do you.” Motherfucker.

November, per usual, ignored my bullshit. “I’ll update you as soon as I have more intel.”

I stood. “Copy.”

“Kilo.”

Pausing before I took the seat next to her, I lowered my voice. “What?”

“Answer your phone next time.” November hung up.

Deciding to make that other call, but not until I had her secured at the safe house in Miami, I pocketed my cell, sat and looked at the redhead.

Curled up, sound asleep.

Jesus, she was fucking beautiful.

Blade appeared in the bulkhead between the galley and main cabin. “You got it bad.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m already fucked.”

I glanced at him, but he’d moved on from his rare personal comment and was tipping his chin toward the redhead. “You taking her home?”

“No. Safe house north of Miami.”

He smirked.

I leveled him with a look. “You got something to say?”

“I don’t have to.”

“Meaning?”

“You put that blanket on her?”

This fucking asshole. “Two-klick underwater exfil in sixty-three-degree temps without a wetsuit. You think she doesn’t need to conserve heat?”

“I’m not talking about your exfil last night.” Blade lowered his voice and glared pointedly at me. “You fucked her, transported her without backup, brought her on the plane in your jacket, avoided introductions, then reclined her seat and tucked that shit in like your head’s more spun up than your dick. You miss one more fucking shot at Carlos, and I won’t need Alpha to tell me to step in. I’ll take you down myself.” Pivoting, he walked back to the cockpit.

I glanced at the redhead.

Still asleep, face peaceful.

I fucking exhaled.

Then I reclined my own damn seat and did what I hadn’t in two nights.

I slept.

FIFTY-FOUR

Kilo

With Blade on our six, I scanned the apron that was already hot as fuck at oh eight hundred. Hustling her to a company Range Rover, I opened the front passenger door.

She hesitated. “There’s an envelope on the seat.”

“It’s for you.”

Blade threw me a look before scanning the traffic coming in and out of Miami’s Executive Airport.

She picked up the envelope but didn’t get in the vehicle.

“We need to move. Open it once we’re on the road.”

She glanced up and blushed. “Of course. I’m sorry.” She got in the passenger seat.

Refraining from buckling her in while Blade was watching, I shut the door.

Blade snorted. “Definitely fucking her.”

I fucking checked him. Arm to this throat, slamming him against the SUV, I got in his face. “Hear me once, motherfucker. Next time you mention her, you’ll become the exception to my rule.”

He smirked. “You have rules?”

“No killing Tier Ones.”

“Since when?”

“Since the last time I killed two SEALs.”

Blade shoved me off. “News flash, asshole. We were on the same fucking op. We were also at the same after-action review, so I know you heard every brother who did walk away from that shit show. You fucking called your blast zone. We all heard it. You don’t get to own everyone else’s fucking mistakes.” He got in the Range Rover.

Taking two goddamn breaths when all I wanted was to be underwater or deep inside a redhead, I scanned the apron. Then I threw my shit in the back next to a designer suitcase, and got behind the wheel.

Holding a wallet that matched her bag, she looked at me the same way she had when I’d carried her out of that fucking ocean. “How did you know?”

“Know what?” I started the SUV and cranked the AC.

“The kind of wallet I had.”

“I didn’t. Told November to get you one, then sent him a pic of your bag.” Throwing Blade a warning look in the rearview mirror before he said dick, I backed up, turned the vehicle around and headed for the exit.

“And the passports?” France, UK, US—she fanned out all three across her lap. “He got these too?”

“Yeah. Replacements for your bank and credit cards should be in the wallet. There’s a new encrypted cell, and your suitcase from the hotel is in the back.”

She turned in her seat.

Blade, the fuck, chose that exact moment to check the magazine on his MK 12.

She quickly turned around. Then she opened her wallet, and a sharp breath followed when she saw the cash. “Kilo,” she whispered.

“We’ll talk at the safe house.”

She didn’t nod. She didn’t say shit. She put the wallet in her bag. Then she fished the phone and a fancy-looking hairbrush from the large envelope, added them to her bag and set the tote at her feet.

For the next thirty minutes, I drove in silence.

Then I entered a code and pulled through the security gate of an oceanfront property AES kept as a safe house. Bypassing the garage, I pulled up the driveway and parked next to a Challenger and a second AES Range Rover that were in front of the main house. Cutting the engine, I glanced back at Blade. “You’re staying in the south wing. We’re taking the north. Rotating patrols. You’re up first.”

Not saying shit, Blade got out of the SUV and walked off with his sniper rifle and two 9mms.

She exhaled. “Is he a SEAL too?”

“The less you know about him, the better. I’ll come around and get your door. Wait.”

By the time I’d grabbed our shit from the back and had her door open, Talerco was standing on the front steps.

“What up, Prince? I hear you got a special lady who needs me more ’an she needs you.” Pushing his sunglasses to the top of his head, Talerco grinned.

Startled, the redhead shrank back in her seat as she looked at him.

Talerco flanked me. “Nothin’ doin’, darlin’, nothin’ doin’.” Smiling, he briefly glanced at her temple. “Prince here didn’t warn ya I was comin’?”

“Didn’t have a chance yet.” I took her arm and helped her out of the SUV.

“Had a whole ride over, the way I see it.” He chuckled. “Then again, saw you had company in back.” He held his hand out to her. “Come on, darlin’, let’s get that head looked at. Bet there’s a story behind it.”

She recoiled.

Stepping in front of her, I threw Talerco a warning glare. “Stand down.”

Talerco held his hands up. “Copy that, Prince. No touchin’.” He looked past me. “What’s your name, darlin’?”

Steering her around him, I answered for her. “Anneliese. We’re taking this inside.”

“Roger that.”

Leading her into the safe house, I dumped her suitcase and my bags in the entryway before taking her to a stool in the kitchen and downloading to Talerco. “Concussive hit, LOC, usual symptoms.”

Talerco turned all business. “Copy.” Stepping up to her, he glanced at the side of her face. “Turn your head and tilt up, darlin’.”

Looking at me, she did as he asked.

Talerco frowned. “Seein’ more ’an one hit, Kilo.”

“She was unconscious for the first. More concerned about the one on her temple.”

Talerco addressed her. “Look at me, darlin’.” He tracked her eyes. “What happened?”

She glanced at me.

“Pistol-whipped,” I answered.

Talerco turned and looked at me. His expression said it all.

I gave him the full rundown. “Vomiting, nausea, loss of appetite, headache, dizziness. She need imaging?”

“How old’s the injury?”

“Approximately thirty-eight hours.”

Talerco looked back at her. “How’s your balance, darlin’? Coordination or vision problems?”

“No.”

Talerco smiled. “There she is.” The fuck winked at her. “Was wonderin’ if you had a voice.” He dropped the smile. “You still vomitin’?”

“As I told Kilo, I’m fine. I don’t need a doctor.”

Talerco grinned and glanced at me. “I like her. I feel a nickname comin’ on. One befitin’ a redhead that shacks up

with a prince.”

“Prince?” she asked.

“Yeah.” Fucking Talerco winked at her again. “On account of his last name. I didn’t even have to work for that one.”

“Darach is a prince?” she asked.

Talerco burst out laughing. “Oh, darlin’, that was priceless. And this I gotta see.” Crossing his arms, he leaned against the kitchen counter and grinned at me. “Go ahead, *Darach*.” He tipped his chin. “Dig yourself outta this one.”

She caught on. “Darach’s not your name?”

“Oh, it’s one of ’em,” Talerco replied.

My jaw ground. “Does she need imaging or not?”

“Not.” He glanced down at her and *motherfucking* winked again. “You’ll be fine, darlin’, but hit me up if that vomitin’ comes back. You want somethin’ stronger than Advil or Tylenol for the headache?”

“No, thank you.” She looked at me. “What’s your name?”

I glanced at Talerco. “I’ll walk you out.”

Talerco chuckled. “Roger that. I can take a hint.” He glanced at her as he shoved off the counter. “Remember what I said, darlin’. You get worse, have Prince here hit me up. Otherwise, nice meetin’ you. No more pistol-whippin’, unless, of course, you’re the one holdin’ the pistol.” Fucker added a grin to his wink.

“Talerco,” I stated, already holding the front door open.

“Just givin’ my regards to the missus.” He slapped my arm as he walked past me. “Don’t go doin’ anythin’ I wouldn’t do, breacher.”

I followed him out and shut the door behind me. “You didn’t thoroughly check her out.”

Talerco dropped his usual humor and Southern accent. “Her eyes weren’t dilated, she followed my movements, and her cognition was fine. I didn’t see signs of anything more

serious than a mild concussion. I know your history, and I know you don't take head injuries lightly. She's good, I promise."

I watched his face for a beat. "Okay."

He nodded, and his accent came back. "How 'bout you? You doin' good?"

"Few more episodes than usual."

Talerco frowned. "Clustered or spread out?"

"Clustered."

"Since she's been on your radar?"

"Yeah."

Talerco nodded. "Stress, emotions." He gripped me on the shoulder and threw down a reserved smile. "A woman that smokin' hot would throw a better man off his game."

"I'll refrain from leveling you for that comment."

He chuckled. "I know. You're not the type. You'd detonate my ass before you kicked it. That's why I said it. Just gettin' a rise outta ya."

"Already threatened Blade."

Talerco laughed outright. "That crazy fucker'd piss off the Pope given half a chance."

Not commenting, I scanned the grounds behind him. The second Range Rover was now parked down at the gate, and the engine was running.

"Offer still stands."

I looked back at Talerco. "What offer?"

He tapped his own head. "Getcha hooked up with a doc I know. She's good. She'll keep an eye on you, monitor your symptoms. Be a soundin' board when you need one."

"That's what you're for."

"Appreciate the vote of confidence, but I'm not a doc, and I'm definitely not an expert on TBIs."

“I’m good.”

“All right. Anythin’ changes, let me know.”

“Copy.” I turned to go back in the house.

“Kilo.”

I glanced back.

“Who hit her?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Talerco pulled his sunglasses back down. “That bad?”

“Worse.”

“Then do your thing, breacher.”

“Plan on it.”

Talerco tipped his chin, got in his Challenger and peeled out.

I grabbed my cell and called one of the few numbers I knew by heart. One I knew from before all the Breacher Syndrome shit.

FIFTY-FIVE

Kilo

The call was answered on the fifth ring by a former SEAL who'd been pulled from the Teams for an off-the-books Spec Ops group because of his unique skill set that matched his call sign.

“Breacher,” Ghost stated.

“I need a favor.”

“Call Alpha.”

“My favor needs to stay off the books.” That was Ghost’s specialty. You never saw him coming, you never knew he was there, and no one could ever find him.

“Then call November.”

“Don’t want AES involved.”

“Do it yourself. I gave you access to the network.”

“Don’t want it on there either.” I didn’t know who or what Ghost had on his roster of secret spy shit—he’d been in deep with his Black Ops wet work for years before he’d claimed retirement. But I could guarantee whoever had access to his dark web bullshit, it’d definitely encompass operatives from all branches of the military and assholes from every alphabet soup agency out there. There was a reason I’d never logged on.

“Then I’m not sure what you expect me to do.”

What Ghost always did. Navigate with zero footprint.
“Find twelve items.”

“Not interested.”

“Easy day for you.”

He recited the SEAL saying by rote. “No easy day.”

“It’s a dozen paintings.”

There was a three-second pause, then he caved. “I might be interested.”

“They were sold, crated for shipment, and left Gagosian Gallery in Manhattan a couple days ago.”

The line went dead.

Fighting for patience, I pulled up the encryption software November had installed on all our cells and checked it. Clean.

I redialed.

The call connected immediately, but it was dead air. “I’m encrypted.”

“Don’t get involved with Carlos,” Ghost stated.

“You know who the buyer is.” It wasn’t a question.

“I also know who the artist is.”

Goddamn it. I fucking asked. “Why was she targeted?”

“You’re asking the wrong question.”

“I’m asking the only one I want an answer to right now.”

“Bullshit. You want to know why a beautiful redhead was on Carlos’s yacht and where her paintings are.”

Same as I hadn’t, he didn’t phrase what he already knew as a question. But that wasn’t the point of any of the head trip he’d just laid on me. A single word was. One meant to get a reaction.

I didn’t take the bait on his not-subtle use of that adjective before redhead. “I’m thinking the paintings are still in New York.” November said there hadn’t been any cargo loaded onto that plane at Teterboro.

“I’m thinking Alpha’s looking for Carlos.”

I gave him intel so he'd give me something in return.
"Delta too."

"And you're not?"

I reminded myself to play his fucking game. "My job starts where theirs ends. Paintings. Can you find them or not?" He already knew the playbook. He had the fucking trail, but he was gonna make me work for it. One goddamn chess move at a time.

Ghost didn't say shit.

I played my hand. "If you don't know where they are, then forget I called."

"You'll hear from me." Ghost hung up.

Pocketing my cell, I walked back into the safe house.

FIFTY-SIX

Kilo

She was waiting in ambush the second I stepped inside.

“What’s your name?” she demanded.

“Kavan.”

“Your full name.”

“Kavan Darach King.”

Her fire fell away, and she swallowed hard. “Talon called you a prince. Are you...?”

“No.” Far fucking from it. “Talerco nicknames everyone. Calling me Prince is his idea of a joke.”

She exhaled. “He also called you breacher.”

“Have a seat.” I walked into the kitchen. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.” She took the same stool she’d sat in before. “What’s a breacher?”

I found one of those single-serve coffee machines, and grabbed a mug. Then I tossed a pod in and set it to brew. “How do you take it?”

“With steamed milk. Breacher?”

Steamed fucking milk? I stared at the machine. It made coffee. Christ. I looked in the fridge. Milk. I grabbed another mug, filled it partway with milk and put it in the microwave.

“Kilo?”

For thirty seconds, I ignored her.

I watched the fucking microwave.

Then I grabbed both mugs, stood over the sink, and poured hot fucking milk into a cup of coffee. Turning, I placed the mug in front of her.

Grasping it with both hands, she watched me and asked again. “What’s a breacher?”

“Take a sip.”

She took a sip.

“How is it?”

“Not a cappuccino, but thank you.” She took another sip. “Breachers?”

“Explosives expert.”

The mug halfway to her mouth, she froze. “That’s what you do?”

“Yeah.”

“Now or when you were a SEAL?”

“Both.”

Her voice got small. “The yacht?”

I stared.

She sucked in a breath. Then she dropped the boat topic. “Is that why your back is scarred? Because you’re a breacher?”

“No. That was an IED. Took shrapnel.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“I’m not. I got off easy.” Some guys didn’t walk away that day.

“And your hearing in your left ear?”

“Who told you that?” I demanded.

“November,” she admitted. “But I would have figured it out. You stare, you watch my lips, you don’t always reply. Sometimes you don’t answer my questions at all.”

Fuck this. “I stare because you’re beautiful. I watch your mouth because I’m thinking about those lush lips wrapped around my cock. I don’t answer when I don’t fucking feel like talking, which is often, but I hear you. Every word.” I turned and opened the fridge. “What do you want to eat? Actually fucking eat. Not pick at. There’s real food. Eggs, meats, fruit, vegetables, bread, shit in containers—looks like yogurt. Cheese that isn’t yellow.”

“What do you like to eat?”

“Food is food. I eat to live.” The way I grew up, beggars couldn’t be fucking choosers.

“Do you cook?”

Not if she asked for some fancy shit like steamed milk. “Pick something.” I needed to feed her, then I needed two goddamn minutes away from her because I was pissed about the November bullshit. Not that I would’ve hid that from her if she’d asked, but it was my shit to tell.

She got off her stool and came around the island. “I’ll make breakfast food. Do you take coffee?”

“I’ll take your ass once it’s healed.”

Not commenting, her face flamed as she moved around me to pull shit out of the fridge.

I answered her question. “No on coffee. I don’t do stimulants of any kind. I need steady hands in my line of work.”

She took a glass from the same cupboard I’d gotten a mug out of, filled it with water from the fridge, then silently handed it to me with a large fucking dose of my own bullshit.

I took the glass and the hint. “Message received.”

“What message is that?” She opened a few drawers and cupboards before pulling out a pan, bowl, cutting board and some utensils.

“More answers, less silence.”

She moved around the kitchen in heels with ease.

“You like to cook.” It wasn’t a question. It was an observation.

She answered anyway. “When you spend your life alone, it’s one of the small pleasures. Why did you put five thousand dollars in my wallet?” She cracked eggs into the bowl.

I tallied up all the shit in that first sentence. “Walking around money. You like being alone?”

“I like not being beholden to anyone. I’ll pay you back.” She added milk to the eggs.

“You do, and I’ll take it out on your ass the next time I fuck you.”

Her back straightened. “I’m not one of your vices.”

No, she wasn’t. She was *the* vice. “You’re right.”

She ignored my comment. “I understand now what you meant by blast waves, but I’m not sure I get the *being under the surface* reference.”

“Underwater. I like diving.” I knew what she was doing.

She whisked the eggs. “Diving or swimming?”

“Both.” Now that we were alone, no audience, and in a house with multiple fucking bedrooms, she was talking. About everything except us.

She started chopping vegetables. “I can understand that, and it makes sense. You’re a SEAL. But why, specifically, do you like being underwater?”

“Why do you like painting?”

She set the pan on the stove and turned on the burner. “Art makes life beautiful.”

Her ass in that dress made life beautiful. “I like shit I knew before I had TBI. Being under the surface, that kind of quiet, it’s second to none. My headspace goes silent. Muscle memory takes over, and I swim. I don’t have to think. I don’t have to remember shit. My body works how it’s supposed to. Perfect synergy.”

She looked up, met my gaze with those eyes, and shit stilled.

Those fucking eyes. “You see me?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“That pull.”

“Kilo—”

“Kavan,” I corrected.

“This frightens me.”

“What did I tell you?”

Her voice went so damn quiet, I barely heard her. “You have the controls.”

Quick and sure, purposely not giving her any warning, I threaded a hand into her hair and gripped. Stepping into her, I tilted her head back, leaned down and gave her what she needed. “I have the controls. You’re going to feed us, then I’m going to feed you. When my hands are on you, you’re going to tell me everything that frightens you about this.” Releasing her, I dropped my hand.

“*Kavan,*” she whispered.

It happened.

My head fucking blanked, and every goddamn thing disappeared—except one.

Her.

I fucking saw her.

Lush lips.

Haunted eyes.

Red hair.

Redhead.

I blinked.

Shit came back, and I heard it in my head.

One goddamn word Talerco had said.

Emotions.

Fuck.

“Finish making the food.” I opened a cupboard. “I’ll grab plates.”

FIFTY-SEVEN

Kilo

I was shoveling in the last bite of the omelet she'd made me when I got a text alert.

Pulling out my cell, I glanced at the screen.

Blocked caller: *Go to your place.*

I shoved my phone back into my pocket.

"Is everything all right?"

She'd been on edge since we sat down to eat. I knew why.
"Yeah."

"Is it Carlos?"

"What about him?" I wouldn't lie to her, but I also wouldn't tell her shit that'd put her in more danger.

"Is anyone.... Is the company you work for still looking for him?"

"Yes. We'll find him." I was making it my fucking mission.

"How do you know Miami is safe?"

"Because Carlos is rarely seen outside Mexico, and when he is, his territory is South American. New York was an anomaly, and he's never been sighted in the Southern United States." At least, not according to the intel we had when I was on the Teams, and fucks like Carlos usually kept to terrains they knew.

"What about his men?"

“They stick close to their boss. You’re safe here.” Pushing my plate away, I pivoted to face her. “I’m gonna run to my place to grab some clothes.” I brushed her hair off her shoulder to see if she’d flinch. She didn’t. “When I get back, we’ll shower.”

Her fork poised over the last of her food, she stilled. “And shower means shower?”

“Shower means shower.” I cupped the back of her neck. “Then I’m gonna touch you.” I applied pressure to my grip.

She shivered. “What if I’m not sure about that?”

“Then you’ll tell me.”

“What if I want to shower alone?”

“Do you?”

She hedged. “How long are you going to be gone?”

“An hour. My place is in Miami Beach.” My condo was.

“Your place,” she stated.

I read her. “Ask your question, woman.”

She put her fork down and looked up at me. “If you have a place in Miami, why aren’t we staying there?”

“It’s in a high-rise. Not as secure as here.”

She looked back down at her plate. “I see.”

I was missing something. “What else?”

She inhaled and stood before grabbing both plates. Then her tone shifted. Not flipside, but she’d put a wall up. “I have my suitcase and a hairbrush. Thank you for that, by the way. I’m going to shower while you’re gone and get out of this dress.”

“Copy that.” Grabbing the utensils and our glasses, I followed her and dumped the shit in the sink. “Need anything while I’m out?”

She turned on the water to wash the dishes. “Because I can’t leave?”

I shut the water off, and grasped her chin. “This isn’t a prison. It’s a safe house. Security system’s wired to AES and monitored twenty-four seven. I’m leaving you with a patrol on the perimeter, and no one knows you’re here. I’m not taking you with me because you’re safer here.”

“You just said Carlos wasn’t in the US.”

I’d said Southern United States, and I’d purposely not told her he could be anywhere. “Precautionary.”

“What about you?”

It hit me, and my headspace fucking tilted. She wasn’t pissed she wasn’t coming with me. “You worried about me, beautiful?”

“Yes.”

“That pull.” I leaned down to those lush lips. “You feel it.” I kissed her. Hard, dominating, I gave her intent.

She didn’t touch me, but she leaned in and submitted.

There she was.

That sweet fucking flipside.

Tangling my hand in her hair, I kissed her another few seconds, then pulled back. “Shower. Don’t touch yourself. Call me if you need something. My number’s in your new cell.” Releasing her, I waited a beat to see if she’d comment on that second directive I gave her.

She didn’t.

“Back in an hour.” I turned toward the door.

“Kavan?”

For thirty-seven years, I’d hated my goddamn name. My piece-of-shit father had given it to me. But hearing a redhead say it? *Fuck*.

I glanced back.

She met my gaze with the same expression she’d given me in the reflection of that glass door in a hotel lobby. “Be safe.”

“Copy that.” I walked out and got in the Range Rover.

At the end of the driveway, I pulled up next to Blade and lowered my window.

He lowered his. "Fleeing the nest already?"

"Grabbing clothes at my place. She's inside. Keep an eye on her."

He held up his cell with the safe house's security feeds live streaming. "What the fuck do you think I've been doing? Playing house?"

Ignoring his bullshit, I didn't take the bait. "Back in an hour."

"Sure." He put his window up.

I drove to my place.

FIFTY-EIGHT

Anneliese

Two hours had come and gone, and he still wasn't back.

I looked at my phone for the thirtieth time.

No missed call.

No text.

At least, not from him.

I had a few voicemails from the Gagosian number as well as Ami's number. There were also texts from her, but I didn't read them, and I didn't listen to the voicemails.

I wasn't there yet.

Fixated on a six-foot-something breacher, I couldn't think about anything other than that kiss.

And his words.

That pull.

You see me?

I saw him.

I saw him everywhere now.

In the shallowest water at the tip of the waves that were lapping the shore—that translucent ice color—it reminded me of his eyes. In the dark screen of my new cell phone, when the light hit it just right and it picked up a hint of blue, I thought of his inky black hair. In every sharp, modern line in this fancy place that was more mansion than house, I was seeing parallels with the hard angles of his face.

Then there was the view.

A sweeping vista that was almost entirely ocean landscape, it reminded me of another body of water. But this ocean wasn't an angry storm. It was a lazy turquoise pool that undulated instead of churned.

Three days ago, I would have already been painting it.

Instead, I was looking at a cell phone that had a new contact programmed into it.

Kilo

My thumb hovered over the four letters.

I looked at the time.

Two hours and ten minutes.

I looked back out at the view from the large bedroom I'd pulled my suitcase into. The bedroom that had a bathroom that was larger than any place I'd stayed in over the past five years. The shower had felt like heaven—for two minutes.

Then I realized that not having a slate-eyed Navy SEAL breacher stare at me with hunger in his eyes while I washed my hair wasn't the shower I'd anticipated or wanted.

But I also didn't want an arrestingly striking man with a giant pierced cock who'd said he was addicted to sex—who'd fucked me like he'd had the practice to back up that addiction—to be the object of my every desire.

Kavan Darach King was the perfect landscape for heartbreak.

Every single thing about him—his looks, his touch, his occupation, his aim, his stare, his skills, his words, his vices—it was all danger.

He was danger.

And I was sitting here waiting for him.

Screw it.

I stood up and stepped out onto the balcony. Looking once again for the other man, the one who'd ridden here with us that I hadn't seen since, I scanned the length of the property.

Then I looked over at the wall on the north side of the expansive lawn.

That would work.

Pulling up an app, I typed, then waited.

A few seconds later, I got confirmation.

Picking up my tote, I dropped my cell phone in it and walked out of the bedroom.

FIFTY-NINE

Kilo

Holding the cell phone that'd been on the kitchen counter when I'd gotten back to my place, I watched the video for the tenth fucking time.

Grainy, taken from a shit security camera, the sound quality was worse than the pixilation, but I fucking heard it.

The grungy fuck paced as he argued on his cell phone.

"I don't give a shit if you have to kidnap her and hold her at gunpoint. I don't even care if you fuck her or pass her around. She sucks in bed. Just get me some goddamn paintings if you want to keep using my warehouse." The asshole snorted. "I'm in the exact position to make demands. The warehouse is in my name. I have the runners. I built the network. The contacts are *my* people. I control *all* the distribution on the streets. All you do is hand over the shit and get paid. You want to start over with someone else *for the entire fucking city*? Then go ahead. Throw away five years. I don't give a damn." Pausing to take a swallow of a drink, he swayed as he tipped his head back. "You'll *never* replace me."

His face contorted with rage. "Then get me paintings, *large exclusive ones done by her*, and not the pathetic, garish shit that's already in the show! I want my OWN paintings, by her, *for me!*"

He stopped pacing and listened.

Then he kicked over a side table. "I already *told you*. Why doesn't matter! If I want to piss on them or hang them in my gallery and write *fucking whore* over every goddamn one,

that's none of your business! I'm fucking asking, and I've never asked you for shit. But you've sure as hell benefitted from everything I've done for you, so now I'm not asking. *I'm telling you.* Get me paintings!"

He held the phone away from his face and yelled, "I DON'T CARE IF YOU BOUGHT THE WHOLE FUCKING SHOW." Stomping his foot like a toddler, he brought the phone back to his ear. "Do you know *nothing*?! That MAKES her famous, you fucking idiot!"

He threw his drink.

Glass shattered off-screen.

"I said no." He started yelling again. "I SAID NO. You have three fucking days, you hear me? *Three days* to get me shit no one's seen or I'm done! GET ME PAINTINGS OR I'LL NEVER WORK FOR YOU AGAIN." He threw the cell phone.

The video cut out.

Enraged, I called Ghost for the tenth fucking time. Just like the nine other goddamn times—no answer.

I hung up.

Then I watched the fucking video one more time, looking for any damn clues in the background, but there were none. I was about to grab a screenshot of the fucker's face and risk running it through November's facial rec software when my cell rang.

I glanced at the screen.

Blocked number.

I answered. "Who the fuck is he?" Besides the asshole that'd made her afraid of being touched and the son of a bitch who'd put her in Carlos's crosshairs. That much I fucking got.

"I see you found the video."

Motherfucking Ghost. "Name. Now."

"You're getting closer to the right question."

“His name and fucking address.”

“Closer.”

“I’m done playing games.” I started to hang up.

Ghost read me and my next moves. “November’s facial rec won’t pick him up, but you could ask the redhead who he is.”

My jaw fucking ticked. “What do you want?”

“It’s what you want.”

I waited.

“It’s been a few years. I almost forgot how reticent you are. You sure you want to work for Alpha?”

“Not working for you.”

“I’m retired.”

Bullshit. “You had a beat on Carlos before I called.” Some retirement.

“Keep your enemies closer.”

“Name and address of that asshole in the video,” I demanded.

“He’s in New York.”

Fuck. “Is Carlos?”

“That’s what you’re going to ask him before you kill him.”

There it was. “You want Carlos’s location before Alpha gets to him.”

“The question is, do you?”

He fucking had me. I ran it all down, but any way I looked at it, I was fucked. Driving up to New York would cost time and leave her alone too long. Involving anyone from AES, no matter how much I trusted them, ran the risk of making its way back to Alpha. Renting a plane and flying myself would leave a trail I didn’t have the resources to digitally erase.

If I wanted to end the motherfucker in that video, if I wanted to get the intel on Carlos’s location out of him, I

needed Ghost's help. He knew it. I fucking knew it. What I didn't know was why Ghost wasn't handling this shit himself.

"Why aren't you taking the asshole out yourself?" Ghost was the sniper.

"I'm not in New York."

"Neither am I." And I didn't want to leave the redhead with Blade any longer than I had to.

"You're closer. You also still have your place in Brooklyn and an unregistered bike."

Until recently, AES used to be headquartered at the Manhattan location, but Alpha had relocated the base of operations to Miami. I'd picked up a couple new properties in Florida when we'd moved, but I hadn't had time to do anything with my place in New York yet. I hadn't even shipped my bike down.

But that shit didn't pertain to this conversation. "I'm not going to New York to fucking kick it at my place or ride my bike. Give me that asshole's address."

"I'll do you one better and arrange transport."

"In and out," I warned. "I'm not fucking sticking around, and this needs to happen tonight."

"Copy that," he agreed. "Get the intel, do what you do, then report back."

Fuck him. "I don't work for you."

"Maybe not. But I'll have the location of your girlfriend's paintings by then, and you'll need me to go after Carlos. I'll text the target's address once I have your transport arranged."

"When?"

Ghost had already hung up.

SIXTY

Anneliese

His scent carried on the breeze and swirled around me in a whirlwind of goose bumps.

Not glancing back, I finished my brushstroke, drawing my size eight Series 7 Kolinsky Sable brush upward across the canvas. “You’re not as quiet as you think you are.” Or as punctual.

“Wasn’t trying to be.” His tone, noticeably harsh and stiffer than before he’d left, grated across my already raw nerves as he stepped up behind me. “Where’d you get the board?”

“Canvas,” I corrected, belatedly realizing I hadn’t attempted to hide my unfinished work from him.

“Canvas,” he repeated, his voice growing darker. “Where’d it come from?”

“The stretchers or the material?” Not that it mattered. They came from the same place.

At first, he didn’t reply. He stood motionless as I swept another broad stroke of the aquamarine hue I’d mixed from five different pigments but still didn’t have right.

“Both,” he finally stated.

“Id Art Supply on 81st Street. I bought the canvas and the stretchers. The store clerk loaned me their staple gun.” Dipping the tip of my favorite round brush in the acrylic paint, I wished for the countless time this afternoon for my oil paints that I’d left in Italy. I’d also wished countless times for a slate-

eyed breacher to text or call me and tell me why he was late. Then I'd realized what I was doing. Forcing myself to say it, I silently repeated a five-year-old mantra. *I would never be blind again.*

"Staple gun," he repeated.

"I didn't have mine." It was in my storage unit in Milan, where I needed to go—right after I went to New York and talked to Ami.

"The paint?" he asked, ignoring my last statement.

Inhaling the devastatingly intoxicating scent of him mixed with the warm ocean breeze, I tried to pretend it wasn't killing me as I prayed my voice stayed even. "Acrylic, unfortunately." Unable to stop myself, I glanced over my shoulder at him, but his slate-eyed gaze was fixed on my painting. Something struck my chest. "Easier to clean up... under the circumstances." Was he just a circumstance?

"New brushes?" he asked cryptically.

I told myself not to care—about the change in him since he'd come back, about my circumstances, about any of it. It was temporary. This was temporary. He was temporary. I had no claim on him. He would leave when he wanted, and come back when he felt like it. Never text or call or give me more than what he was, and this was him. He'd said as much. *Explosives expert.* He blew things up. That's what he did. What he would probably always do.

I couldn't afford to be with a man like that. I couldn't afford to be with one, period. But if I was, I needed more. I deserved more. I deserved to not be let down. He'd said an hour. That was hours ago. He wasn't explaining. He wasn't apologizing. I was overreacting. But I also wasn't. People never changed. Life had taught me that.

I wouldn't change this man.

But my brushes, they never changed.

I answered his question. "They're not new. They're from the leather case you saw in my tote." And he'd been right when he'd made that comment about my brushes being more

important to me than my work. “Where I go, my brushes go.” At least my most expensive ones. And they were expensive, priceless actually.

The brush currently in my hand retailed for almost four hundred dollars, and I had eleven more in my leather roll-up, but that wasn’t their true value. My father had gifted the brush to me when I was too young yet to know the difference between sable hair and synthetic. At barely nine years old, I hadn’t known what I was holding. I only knew that it was so soft, I could’ve spent a lifetime dragging the perfectly shaped bristles over the backs of my hands.

“How did you get to the art store?” he asked with the same stiff voice that I had already mentally added to his list of unwavering tones.

Stupidly, even as his voice was crushing me, I wondered what other nuances he had that I hadn’t heard yet. “Before or after I was accosted by the man in camouflage pants when I tried to walk down to the beach?” I switched the brush to my left hand.

“Blade.”

A knife? “Pardon?” I drew a similar upward stroke on the left side of the canvas, and it struck me. That was the feeling. A knife. Dragging through my chest like my brush dragged over this canvas.

“His name is Blade. You’re ambidextrous?”

“When I have to be.” When the art called for it. “Some movements, or fluidity, can’t be replicated with a single-handed technique.” The ocean moved how the ocean moved. A Navy SEAL moved in and out of my body how he moved. I didn’t create either. “Who names someone Blade?”

“Old OIC. You’re painting upward.”

“Yes.” Against everything I’d been taught as a young girl. “What’s an OIC?”

“Officer in charge. Why upward?”

“Look out at the horizon line.” I waited a few seconds as I made another stroke. “What do you see?”

“Ocean.”

“Which way is it moving?”

“Tide’s going out.”

And taking my broken heart with it. “Precisely.” I dipped the brush in the rapidly drying acrylic paint. “From this perspective, if you squint, it looks as if the swells are rushing toward the sky, but they’re not. They’re moving east and south. It’s an optical illusion.” My entire life had been an optical illusion—until a breacher had driven into me and showed me real. I swiped across the canvas. “Thus the upward brushstrokes.” Now I was seeing the other side of real.

For a long moment, he didn’t speak.

I painted and broke.

I painted and let him watch.

I hadn’t let anyone watch me paint in years, not since graduate school.

Not since—

At the mere thought of my past, my hand froze. But the usual fear that used to flood in didn’t happen. Neither did the shame and anger that always followed right before anxiety twisted my stomach, then my head. And once that spiral started, there was no stopping it. It would become a living nightmare I’d want to crawl out of but couldn’t because my body, my mind—they weren’t a suit I could simply unzip and step out of. My memories weren’t a skin I could shed. My past mistakes weren’t something I could forget, as much as I’d tried, because it wasn’t only a professor who’d taken horrible advantage of me. It was everyone who had ever been close to me, and a narcissistic photographer had become the embodiment of my entire life up until that point, with the worst offender being myself.

I still hadn’t forgiven myself.

Or learned my lesson.

Because here I was again, silently hurting as an almost six-and-half-foot, slate-eyed, mercurial SEAL stood at my back and broke me with the mere tone of his voice.

“You stopped painting.”

“You kept staring.” Why did he have to look at me, in the way that he did, with those eyes?

“You evaded Blade.”

Why did he have to make me feel special, even now, when he was hurting me? “You sicced your angry watchdog on me.”

“Blade’s not a dog.”

“Could have fooled me.” That was the problem. I’d been fooled.

Gravity struck his voice until it was as deep and threatening as a feral animal’s. “What did he say to you?”

I repeated the only thing the frightening man had said to me. “Go back.” How did I go back to that couch in a villa in Salerno? Would I if I could? Would I make a different choice?

The man I’d thrown all my fears at didn’t reply, and he didn’t move. In fact, he’d didn’t respond for so long, I turned and looked up at him.

Jaw set, expression steeled, muscles tensed—it struck me all over again. He wasn’t a SEAL or a breacher or a hero or a mercenary.

He was the storm.

And God had given him that eye color to warn every living being of his fury. Churning, brewing, crashing or mercilessly pounding down on you, this man wasn’t a tornado. He was a raging, silent tempest.

Low and lethal, he spoke. “Did he tell you to go back before or after you evaded him?”

I stared the tempest in the eye, and it happened. Like a gnawing, unscratchable itch, the urge tickled my fingers, crawled up my arms and made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

I wanted to paint him.

I wanted to capture him so badly, I started to shake.

Breath short, throat dry, I turned back to face my canvas, but I no longer saw the ocean. “I didn’t evade him.” I saw a broken landscape. “I rerouted.”

“No one gets past Blade.”

I blindly put my brush to the canvas. “I guess I do.” I stroked down.

“He was there for a reason.”

“I’ve already tried forced captivity twice.” I repeated the brushstroke, but this time in an upward swipe. “I don’t care to do it again.” The too-thick paint stuck to itself instead of spreading. “I’m done.” The painting was ruined. I was ruined. “Excuse me.” I stood up from the stool I’d dragged out here from the kitchen.

“Halt.”

I didn’t listen to the storm.

I rerouted.

SIXTY-ONE

Kilo

“I’m done. Excuse me.” Standing up, she about-faced.

Then she walked past me. Right goddamn past as if I wasn’t there.

The thin reins on my control snapped. “Halt.”

Ignoring me, she aimed for the kitchen.

Like a hit of fucking heroin, dominance mainlined in my veins, and I was following her. “You heard me, woman.” That’s it, walk away. See what happens, little sub. See what the fuck you unleashed, because now I was more than pissed. She’d left. For goddamn art supplies. And now she was *done*?

“Funny, you didn’t hear me.” Turning on the sink faucet, she held her brush under the water and systematically washed it in a pattern I’d bet my trigger arm she’d done thousands of times.

Good.

She liked patterns?

I’d give her a goddamn pattern.

On her ass. With my palm.

I’d give her every motherfucking pattern she’d never wanted. Right before I fucked this new attitude out of her. “I heard every word you said.” Including her *forced captivity* comment, like I was no goddamn better than that piece-of-shit Carlos. “What I didn’t hear was why you thought it was fucking safe to leave.” Or why the hell I’d left her soft, then

came back to this shit that eclipsed her flipside by a mile. My headspace already packed with rage—that video, her comment, Ghost’s bullshit, her escape act, Blade’s incompetence—I was stacking anger like blocks of C-4. “Tread carefully with your answer, woman,” I warned.

“Why? Because you’re the only one allowed to use blunt honesty?”

“Answer,” I demanded.

“You said it was safe.”

My jaw ground. Then I saw it.

The repetitive motion of her hands, the tightly controlled strain of her movements, the paintbrush that was already clean.

She was barely holding it together.

I fucking inhaled. Three times. “There’s a utility sink in the laundry room.” I didn’t give a shit where she cleaned her brushes, but that sink was larger, lower than the kitchen counter height, and she was short as fuck without heels.

“It’s water-based. It’ll wash down.”

Fuck the paint. “How did you bypass Blade and get to the store?” Blade was officially on my shit list. And what the fuck other *forced captivity* was she talking about?

“While you drive around in your Range Rover, oblivious to how the other half lives, there’s a universal convenience called a taxi. Also rideshares, cars for hire, and plenty of apps where you can summon a vehicle within minutes to take you wherever you need to go.” She looked up at me. “For people who can’t afford the expense of luxury SUVs.”

“Company car,” I corrected, refraining from telling her she was staring at the *other half*. I’d come from shit, and my untamed dominance would’ve driven me to ground zero if the Navy hadn’t picked up on my defiance and unhealthy obsession with explosives and turned that shit around.

With her hands still under the water, massaging that fucking brush, she made a broad sweep with her head across

the safe house. “And I suppose this is a *company* house on *company* land with a *company* view.”

“It sure as hell isn’t my place.” My house was bigger.

She went back to her task. “So you’ve said. Are we done here?” Turning off the water, she twisted two fingers and her thumb over the brush hairs in a downward spiral before looking up at me with a raised eyebrow.

“You want to be done, woman?” It wasn’t a question. It was a warning.

Studying my face like I was one of her paintings, she took her time replying. “Do you know what I can’t figure out?”

Why the fuck we were having this bullshit conversation? “Why Carlos set his sights on you?” Because now that I knew, I didn’t want to wait for Ghost and his bullshit games to get intel. All I needed from her was a name. One motherfucking name, a plane and six hours. That grunge fuck would be obliterated, and I’d be back here, fucking her *I’m done* bullshit into submission.

“No. I don’t care why. Not anymore.”

“You should. Carlos is still breathing.” So was that grunge asshole. “And your bank account’s full of cartel money.” If the Feds came looking, as far as they were concerned, she may as well have fucked Carlos on the steps of Langley.

She stiffened. “I know what you’re doing.”

No, she didn’t. And she wouldn’t. Not until it was done. Because as much as I wanted to ask her for a name, I wasn’t gonna make her an accessory before the fact. “Besides looking out for you and wondering what the fuck happened to piss you off while I was gone, I’m not doing shit.”

“Me. Angry,” she stated incredulously. “You’re the one who came back angry, hours after you said you would be back. But I suppose that’s the norm for you. You do what you want, when you want, and you don’t answer to anyone. Like you said, you don’t get involved. So why don’t you go back to your vices and your diving, and you can keep your head

underwater and not engage while you keep your precious quiet.”

I absorbed her direct hit. Then I fucking got it. “That’s what this is about. I was gone longer than an hour, and you’re pissed. You needed me to call. Message received. Next time, I’ll give you a sitrep, but that shit runs both ways. You need something from me, speak up. You had my number.”

“I don’t need anything from anyone.” Her expression, her body language, her voice—they all locked the fuck down.

For two beats, I stared at a redhead.

Then I walked the fuck out of the kitchen.

Grabbing my cell, I dialed as I strode into the safe house’s panic room where all the security monitors were.

Blade answered on the first ring. “What?”

“How many times has a woman given you the slip?”

“None.”

“Congratulations, asshole. Now it’s one.” I hung up.

He immediately called back.

Pulling up the security feeds for the place, I answered the call on speaker without saying shit.

Blade lit into me. “Uber, art store, Uber, safe house. Pull your fucking head out of your ass. She didn’t give me the slip.”

“Then why the fuck didn’t you take her?” And why the hell did he give her a free pass to make herself a fucking target?

“You ever gotten on the bad side of a redhead?”

“Don’t bullshit me with stereotypes. The assignment was simple. Watch the fucking client.” I toggled the feeds until I found her.

Blade snorted. “Now she’s a client?”

“She’s Alpha’s client.” I watched her walk past the pool, then exit the property, beachside.

“Right, and you jumped off that yacht with a redhead instead of taking out sixteen of Carlos’s soldiers when you had the fucking chance because she’s *Alpha’s client*. First the missed shot on the flyway, then the yacht, now this bullshit call. What’s next? You going to start carrying her fucking purse for her? Handle your shit.” Blade ended the call.

Still watching the security feeds of her taking a goddamn stroll on the wrong side of the six-foot perimeter wall surrounding the north lawn, I heard her come up behind me.

“I came to ask a certain royal prince if I could leave, but now I don’t know if I should commend you for defending the color of my hair or condemn you for being a stalker.”

“Neither.” Not fucking engaging with that first bullshit she tried to lay on me, I cut to the feeds covering the front of the safe house. “I’m doing my job.” Just like Blade said, she got into a waiting Uber. Half a second later, Blade fell in on their six. I memorized the plate on the rideshare.

“Spying on me is your job?”

“When you make yourself a fucking target by leaving the safe house, then yeah, looking out for Carlos’s men is my job.” I toggled to the feeds covering the south end of the property.

“So which part did you lie about? That I can leave or that I’m not in danger from Carlos or his men?”

“Never lied to you, woman.”

“So you’re just watching security cameras for the fun of it?”

“You want to have a real conversation, let me know.” Looking for a tail, I watched the feeds for a few seconds longer, but there wasn’t one.

“This is a real conversation,” she argued. “If they can find me here, then what’s safe about this house?”

“The two Tier Ones covering your six.” Exiting out of the feeds, I logged into AES’s servers and ran the plate on the rideshare.

“What’s a Tier One?”

“In this case, SEALs.”

“So that makes me safe? Two SEALs against Carlos’s countless bodyguards? I thought you said I didn’t have to worry about Carlos. You said he never came to the US.”

I scanned the details of the driver, then turned in my chair and leveled her with a look most men would cave under.

Crossing her arms over a white blouse that didn’t have a speck of paint on it, she stared back.

When she didn’t break, I returned to the monitors.

“For your information, it’s not a purse. It’s a Louis Vuitton OnTheGo Monogram Empreinte leather tote, and it’s more reliable than anything else in my life.”

Her steps retreated, but her scent lingered.

SIXTY-TWO

Anneliese

I was a horrible person.

Turning my insecurities, hurt and embarrassment into anger, I'd lashed out at him.

Worse, I'd used his friend's nickname against him, made it derogatory, and I'd lied.

I hadn't followed him into that room full of invasive security monitors to ask permission to leave. If I wanted to truly leave, I knew he would let me, same as his watchdog had let me.

In truth, I was full of shit.

I'd followed him because I was choking on insecurities.

He hadn't raised his voice at me in anger. He hadn't fought back. He hadn't lashed out at me. He hadn't done one single, awful thing that I'd spent five long years telling myself all men did.

All he'd done was speak the truth.

Except he didn't just speak it—he lived by his words.

But I hadn't.

I knew before I'd followed him that I was too afraid to leave, and not even the embarrassment of the fight I'd instigated, followed by the complete humiliation of him calling out my neediness, had me packing. And he didn't just call me out for my behavior. He'd cut straight through my

defenses, taken me and my trust issues head-on, then delivered his brand of reasoning in the form of direct, brutal honesty.

He was right.

I'd probably made myself a target by going to the art store alone today.

But he'd also said Carlos wasn't known for coming to the States... and yet that was exactly what Carlos had done.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't terrified of a man nicknamed the Butcher.

But I also didn't want to think about it—or the fact that I'd dragged my stool and canvas and paints back inside immediately after I'd walked out of that security room because the balcony I'd been sitting on all afternoon had no longer felt safe.

Which was why I was now in the large, open-plan living space of the huge beach house, pretending to paint while a SEAL sat across the room, silently working on a small black device.

He hadn't spoken to me since I'd told him my tote was more reliable than him.

But he'd brought me water twice and a terrible cup of coffee with microwave-heated milk once. Each time, he'd said nothing. He'd simply set the drink on the table where I was pretending to paint, then went back to whatever he was working on.

He hadn't returned to the security room. He hadn't made any calls. He hadn't answered his cell when it'd vibrated, and he hadn't left me alone.

I didn't know if I wanted to throw myself at his feet and beg forgiveness or run away as fast and as far as I could from him.

All I did know was that whatever stoic, mental gymnastics he was playing, it was working.

I couldn't stop looking at him.

But if I were being honest with myself, I'd admit that I didn't think he was actually playing games.

Kavan Darach King was simply, extraordinarily, who he was.

Vices and all.

Which was why I was so upset.

I couldn't compete with his sexual experience, and I was sure I wouldn't be able to hold his attention in the bedroom for long. I knew what he'd said about wanting a submissive woman, but no man wanted that all the time.... Did they?

I glanced at my shitty painting, but then looked back at him for what felt like the hundredth time.

His hair was so inky black, the color had a texture I could feel without touching it. Smooth and slick, like the viscosity of my favorite oil paints, the strands fell over his eyes in a perfect imitation of a sweeping brushstroke. When his head tilted, the movement became a whole canvas.

I truly hated myself for what I'd said to him.

And I hated that I'd intentionally picked a fight.

But the worst part was that I hated that I'd needed to do it in order to protect the crushed remains of my shattered heart as I tried to sweep what was left of it into a pile of rubbish.

But I couldn't get rid of my broken pieces as easily as taking out the trash, any more than I could deny the complexities of a Navy SEAL breacher. The sheer density of him had expanded with every word he'd said. So much so that I didn't know what to think, what to believe or what to trust, which made me trust none of it.

No one was as honest as him.

Nothing was as simple as how he stated things.

And he was wrong—it didn't run both ways between us. There was absolutely nothing parallel between us. I was sitting here, waiting for him to make the first move and fix my life

because I was a coward. While he was sitting there being exceptional in his dominant silence.

Until he broke the awkward silence I'd created.

“You stare.”

I hadn't flushed in front of a man, or anyone, since I was thirteen years old, but it happened again at the mere sound of his voice. Quickly averting my gaze, I looked out at the spectacular array of dusky mauves and twilight blues as the horizon line succumbed to night.

“Of course I stare.” Chill bumps scattered across my nape as I took note of his distinction. Not that I was staring, as in at that moment, but that I stared, period. I liked his attention to detail. No, I craved it. Almost as much as I yearned to sink my fingers into the falling river of black wavy silk that covered half his face every time he looked down. He was so strikingly handsome that each time I looked at him anew, it was a physical shock. Like a bolt of electricity stealing my breath and making my heart jump. “It's my job to stare.” I had no job. I had a compulsion.

“Sounds like an excuse.”

He was right when he'd said I paint to escape, but I held on to the pretense that this was a conversation about what I did, not who I was. “An excuse for what? Observation?” The urge to paint him grew stronger. “Isn't that what you do?” I saw him. I wasn't alone in this.

His stark slate gaze cut through the space between us without him lifting his head. Then he both ignored my last question and gave me his bluntness.

“An excuse to check out.” As fast as he'd given the direct glimpse of his eyes, he took it back. Focusing on the device in his large, calloused hands, he deftly used the tip of the blade on his lethal-looking knife like a screwdriver. “Stand behind your paintings. Let life happen around you while you capture it for someone else.”

Raw and so close to the surface, my insecurities and fears came out in a sharp retort. “If you're seriously asking me

about painting while you make your bombs and use explosions to decimate lives as life happens around you, then yes, I suppose I am standing behind my canvases while the world spins, with you and everyone else in it.”

With his gaze locked on the device, he flicked the blade of his tool closed, then pocketed it. “Not a bomb. Remote detonation trigger.”

“Remote,” I repeated. “Who’s the one checking out now?”

“You.” He looked up again. But this time there was something in his eyes. Something I knew I didn’t want to see only a split second before he annihilated me with his words. “You paint in bright colors so you don’t have to live in them.” His voice lowered to a seductive destruction. “You’re holding on to that flipside, little sub.”

SIXTY-THREE

Kilo

Not giving her time to sit with my statement or this bullshit distance between us anymore, I stood and issued her an order. “Kitchen, now. We’re making dinner.” She hadn’t painted a fucking thing since she’d been sitting at the table, and this woman needed her hands moving.

I strode into the kitchen, half expecting her attitude to follow.

It didn’t.

She walked to the sink, washed her hands, then went to the fridge. “What do you want for dinner?”

“I’ll eat anything you make.” Not because food was food, but because I finally had her letting go of that tight grip on her hang-ups.

“There’s chicken,” she stated without half as much attitude as thirty seconds ago.

“Need help?”

Her back to me, her perfect ass in full view in those tight beige legging things she’d been wearing, she bent to grab food from the fridge, and her voice softened even more. “No, thank you.”

I waited until she dumped shit onto the counter.

Then I fisted her hair as I stepped up behind her and pulled hard enough so she’d feel me.

Her head fell back, and she looked up at me with parted lips as she gasped in surprise.

I made good on my promise of giving her sitreps. “I’m gonna walk down to the gate and check in with Blade before doing a perimeter check. Ten, fifteen minutes, tops. Taking my cell. Call if you need me. I’ll answer.” Releasing her, I turned toward the front door.

“Kilo?”

“Kavan,” I corrected.

“Kavan?”

Pausing, I glanced back.

“Thank you.”

I did exactly what she’d accused me of. I fucking stared at her a beat. Then I felt it coming.

That goddamn headspace blank.

But this time, I actively tried to stop it.

Zeroing in on her, taking in every sexy inch, I fought like hell to stay focused.

Come on.

Come the fuck on, SEAL.

Focus up. Breathe. No easy goddamn day. Me over them. Her over me.

Her over me.

That shit retreated.

I exhaled.

Then I said what I hadn’t when she’d been sitting at that damn table across the room from me. “I wasn’t aiming to insult you with my checking out comment.”

Dropping her head, she gripped the edge of the counter.

I braced for flipside.

It didn’t come.

Looking back up at me, she gave me soft. “It felt like you were.”

“I was making an observation.” Breacher Syndrome fucking pissed me off. It’d also humbled the hell out of me. “From someone who doesn’t always have a choice, I was saying you do. Be who you need to be, woman. No one’s stopping you except yourself.” I opened the door.

“You called me that name,” she blurted.

I looked back. “Wasn’t a name, little sub. It was a compliment.” And a term of endearment. Something I’d never done with any woman.

She blushed like hell. “I’ll make enough food for three. Please tell Blade dinner will be ready in thirty minutes.”

“Not sharing you, woman. Not over a meal or any other damn way.” I walked out.

SIXTY-FOUR

Kilo

She cooked, served, then ate in silence.

Picking at her food, she pushed shit around her plate.

I'd finished eating five minutes ago.

"Talk," I ordered.

She set her fork down, then placed her hands in her lap.
"You said you don't share."

"Not you. And not exactly what I said."

Her voice went quiet. "What do you share?"

"My T-shirts with a redhead. When she's not throwing them in my face."

Her head snapped up.

I winked to let her know I was fucking with her.

She looked back down at her lap, but not before her face flamed. "Not sharing has certain implications."

"Only one implication I can think of." Not fucking sharing her.

She inhaled. Then she pivoted in her stool to face me and gave me brass. "Much like you, I don't do relationships. The last one I had, the only one, actually, was five years ago, and it started poorly and ended worse. You live in Miami. I live all over. You've made several comments that lead me to believe that you might want more, but—"

"No might about it."

She cleared her throat. “You’ve made several comments about your... desires. But, with the exception of one kiss, you haven’t touched me since we left Italy, and sex with a stranger, no matter how good, especially under stressful situations, isn’t a basis for a relationship.”

I dug. Carefully. “Is that how your last relationship started?”

“I’m not discussing my past, but definitely not.”

“This the fuck who made you afraid of being touched?”

“I said I’m not discussing it.”

“Because he assaulted you.” I saw that motherfucker. I knew his type.

“Because I was a student, he was... not, and I made horrible choices that I’m not proud of. End of discussion.”

That motherfucker was her teacher? He was so goddamn dead. Focusing up before I lost my shit—or worse, blanked the fuck out—I let it go.

But I didn’t drop how we’d gotten here. “Then how would you know sex isn’t the basis of a relationship? And so we’re clear, the sex wasn’t good, it was fucking great. By the second round, you gave up control, came on a scream, hit subspace, then passed out. Third round eclipsed that. The way you come, how your tight cunt milks my cock, the pull between us, it’s fucking there, and it’s strong. But it’s more than just your cunt feeling like a goddamn dream. It’s about the shape of your body, the depth of your cunt that barely fits my length, the angle, how I slide into you—it’s fucking phenomenal. I’m not saying sex can’t be great with a shit ton of other partners. Anyone can fuck and get off. But the way we fit, how my cock angles into you, I know you felt that. I saw it on your face the first goddamn second you slammed down on me. We fucking fit, woman. Perfectly.”

“Ki—”

“Not finished. Also, we’re gonna have a conversation later about when and why you use my call sign versus my given name.” She kept fucking flipping on me. “As far as the

nonphysical shit between us—I see you. I know you’ve got fears. I heard your words. I’ll respect your trust issues. But I’m also gonna crush them, and you’re gonna let me. That’s my dominance and your submission. Whether you want to talk about it now or later doesn’t change facts. It’s there, it fucking fits, and it works for both of us. You need a reminder of that, then say the word. I’ll put my hands on you right now, respectfully, non-sexually, and you’ll see exactly the reaction I’ll elicit from you.” I’d release the reins and give her my full fucking dominance.

“And last, addressing that comment about not touching you since Italy—also a respect issue. I told you I don’t do audiences. This house is wired for maximum security, Blade’s monitoring the feeds, and the only places not wired are the interior of the bedrooms. You ready to fuck, then let’s take this down the hall.”

Her face fucking flaming, she barely whispered, “We live on different continents.”

“Then one of us will move, or we’ll travel.” I had a pilot’s license. “I’ll buy a plane. Teach you to fly.”

“I—you would *buy* a plane?” She looked at me like I was insane.

“If you want one.” Maybe I was fucking crazy. Didn’t care. Other guys at AES had planes. I’d teach her to fly, or at least the basics in case my headspace went south while we were in the air.

“You’re talking about purchasing an airplane, and I have cartel money in my bank account. You do realize this isn’t normal, right?”

I was waiting for that comment to come back and bite my ass. “Spend your money.” I made a mental note to have November set her up with an offshore account.

“It’s cartel money from a cartel butcher. Don’t you think he’ll want it back after everything that happened?”

“No. Not his MO in this instance.” Carlos would come for her. But not because of the money. The Feds would follow that

trail, though. If Alpha handed Carlos over, it'd be the first thing they'd start chasing.

“Says you.”

“Says DEVGRU, SOCOM, military intelligence, the CIA and probably a half dozen other alphabet soup agencies. I'm not the profiler here. Carlos has patterns. Going after three hundred grand isn't one of them.” But killing everyone he deemed a threat was.

Her shoulders straight, her posture strung tighter than tripwire, she stared at me. Then she flipped the narrative. “Why do you think Carlos chose me?”

Because that piece-of-shit, whoever the fuck he was, had it out for her. My guess, she'd dumped him. Fucker'd been waiting ever since for an opportunity to screw her over, then saw she had a show at that high-profile gallery. Not that I was gonna download that shit to her now. Or that it mattered. I'd heard enough on that video. That fuck was in bed with Carlos, and he'd put her in the line of fire. Dead man walking.

“I'm not in the speculation business.” It wasn't a lie. Until her, I'd been in the blow-shit-up business. Still was. Except now I was waiting for a goddamn text from Ghost.

“Do you think I'll ever know?”

I evaded. “You said you didn't care why.”

“You're right. I did.” She was quiet a beat. “I heard the phone conversation you had earlier.”

“I know.” I glanced at her plate. “Eat some food.”

“I'm done.” She pushed her plate away and stood. “You didn't complete your mission because of me.”

Keeping my focus on her dark eyes and my expression watertight, I didn't give her an opening. “I did exactly what I needed to do.”

“But I'm not Alpha's client. I didn't pay him. I probably can't even afford him.”

“AES does pro bono, but that’s not the point. You’re right. You’re not a client.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “So, I’m a charity case?”

She was a fucking female Poseidon, cock-sucking submissive, mind-fuck redhead with a mountain of baggage and a river of denial. She was the sexiest goddamn woman I’d ever seen. “You’re an artist. Not a charity case. Not a client. Not since I fucked you. Not something I was gonna tell Blade. Artist,” I repeated, refraining from telling her she was fucking mine.

She stared at me a beat. Then she gave me a dose of that flipside attitude paired with her soft-spoken manners for a direct hit of sarcasm. “What gave it away? The brushes or the canvas?”

Christ. “Your CIA file.”

All composure left her expression. Except this time, it wasn’t indignation that spread across her face. It was fear. “The CIA has a file on me?”

“Yes.” My cell vibrated with an incoming text. I glanced at the screen.

Blocked number: *Ninety minutes. The private airstrip in Wellington. Pilot will take you to Teterboro. Car will be waiting.*

An address in New York followed.

“The CIA?” she asked again, her voice off.

I memorized the address and looked up. “Yeah.”

Her gaze drifted, her body swayed, and she reached out for the nearest anchor, missing the edge of the counter by half a foot right before her head rolled, her legs gave out and she pitched.

I grabbed her.

A five-foot-nothing redhead fainted, and my world fucking stopped.

SIXTY-FIVE

Anneliese

“She stood, then fucking fainted. No. No. Don’t fucking know. She’s coming around now.”

A warm, calloused hand brushed my hair back from my face. “Hey. You hear me?”

Oh, that voice. I wanted to drown in it.

“Open your eyes, woman.”

Breathing in musk, soap, metal and fresh laundry as warmth covered my entire back, I did as I was told and opened my eyes.

An angry breacher looked down at me with a storm-threatening gaze. “You fainted,” he accused.

It all came back in a rush, and embarrassment struck so hard that as I realized I was lying on his lap, I tried to sit up and nausea hit.

“No,” he ordered sternly, his hand landing just under my breasts to hold me down. “You’re talking to Talerco first.” Swiping his thumb across the screen of the phone in his other hand, he held it near me. “Talerco, you’re on speaker.”

“Hey, darlin’. How you doin’? Heard you took a power nap after dinner.”

A SEAL threw me under the bus. “She didn’t eat her dinner, and it wasn’t a nap.”

“Is that right, darlin’? You’re not eatin’?”

“I ate.” A little.

The storm grew angrier. “Bullshit. She’s picked at food for two days, isn’t hydrating, and she spent all afternoon in the heat on a balcony.”

Talon chuckled. “Gotta hand it to Prince, darlin’. He may not be charmin’, but he’s definitely keepin’ tabs. How’s that head feelin’? You dizzy? Nauseous? Confused?”

I lied, a little. “None of those. I’m fine.” I wasn’t. I wanted to crawl under the covers on that soft bed in the main bedroom and hide in mortification.

“You pregnant, darlin’?”

The storm looked at me, I looked at him, and my heart stopped.

Then we both opened our mouths.

I said, “No,” at the same time he said, “Possibly.”

“Okay, darlin’. I’m gonna have a chat with Kilo now, but you’re gonna be just fine. Stay outta the sun tomorrow. Drink plenty of fluids, and get some food in you once you feel like you can keep it down. If you’re feelin’ dizzy or nauseous or if you faint again, Kilo’s gonna take you in to get that head X-rayed. Kilo?”

The storm took the phone off speaker and held it to his right ear. “Go.” With his gaze locked on mine, he didn’t speak again for a few seconds. Then all he said was “Copy” and hung up.

“I’m fine. I was just upset about the CIA file thing.” And about this afternoon when he hadn’t called. Not to mention, the whole thing about Carlos having patterns, which I was too afraid to ask about. Also, admittedly, I hadn’t eaten much because I’d been upset, and now I was just tired, and it had been warm on the balcony.

“You’re taking a pregnancy test in a week.”

“I...” *Oh God, oh God, oh God.* “I’m not pregnant.” I couldn’t remember the last time I’d gotten my period.

“You’re panicking.”

“You’re not.” Did he ever panic? About anything?

His hand still on my chest, he applied the slightest amount of pressure. “No.”

I sucked in a breath. Then another. Then I had to ask, but I couldn’t look at him when I did, so I stared at his ridiculously large biceps. “Why not?”

“Look at me.”

I was. “I am.”

“You can look at me right now, or I can make you.” His fingers brushed once against the waistband of my leggings.

Lying on his lap as he sat on the couch, I remembered what he’d said about the whole house being wired with security cameras, and I didn’t just look at him. My eyes immediately landed on his. He looked the same, but something felt distinctly different. Something had changed.

Dominance settled into his tone and blanketed the storm in a deep navy that was darker than the night sky. “You see me?”

Oh God. “I see you,” I whispered.

His hand slid down to my lower stomach. “Not panicking.”

I fell into the storm.

SIXTY-SIX

Anneliese

With his warm hand on my stomach, I couldn't speak. I couldn't breathe.

I didn't want this.

I wanted this.

But he was the storm, I was the low-pressure system, and the Coriolis effect would never allow us to come together.

His fingers gently stroked. "I see you."

No, he didn't. "I'm sucking you into my unstable atmosphere."

"Context?"

"You're the storm. I'm the air. The earth moves without us." And I was falling into him deeper than my darkest colors.

He gave me that barely imperceptible tip of his chin. "Coriolis force."

I shouldn't have been shocked, but I was. "How do you know about the—" I stopped myself. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply you weren't... that you didn't..." *Shit*. "My apologies. I wasn't trying to insult you. You just surprised me."

"Not offended. Also not educated. I joined up after high school. My skill set and knowledge are focused. I know about the Coriolis force because it affects ocean currents, weather patterns, and how you fly."

Of course. "You're a pilot."

“Breacher,” he corrected.

“SEAL,” I added.

“Content,” he countered, skimming his hand up my stomach and over my breast. “Like this. With you. My headspace quiet.” He fingered a lock of my hair. “Never had that.”

Neither had I, and I wanted to capture this very image of us on a canvas as large as this room so I could live in the moment every time I looked at it, but I knew reality. It wasn’t a twenty-foot painting, and it wasn’t a single moment you could live in forever.

Unsure if I was allowed to reach up and touch his hair like he was touching mine, I broke the spell of his stare with a whisper instead. “I’m not pregnant.” But for the first time in my life, I thought about it. No, I thought about him as a father.

“We’ll find out in a week.”

“Then what?” God help me, I envisioned him with a small boy who had black hair and his eyes, and I wanted to paint them together.

“Then you’ll *fucking* eat when I tell you,” he replied in utter frustration.

I blinked, then it happened so suddenly and so unexpectedly, I immediately slapped my hands over my mouth after the inappropriate giggle escaped.

The entire right side of his mouth tipped up. “Something funny, little sub?”

Awestruck by the brilliant transformation of his face that was more spectacular than any sunrise, I rapidly shook my head as I held my own smile.

Grasping my wrists, his smile gone faster than it’d appeared, he pulled my hands away from my mouth. “Out with it.”

“With what?” I bit my lip.

“What’s so fucking funny?”

My own smile felt so foreign, it barely stretched my lips. “I’ve never seen you frustrated before.”

He raised an eyebrow in warning. “You think this is me frustrated?”

I didn’t get a chance to respond.

Grasping me under my arms, rapidly picking me up like a doll, he brought me to his face so quickly, my head spun. Then he lowered his voice and spoke, his lips a mere breath away from mine. “I want to fuck you into submission, Anneliese Laurent.”

A shy smile, one that said I was demure and full of trouble—a smile I didn’t know I possessed—it came out to play. “Just not into pregnancy?”

“Try me.”

My smile fluttered away on butterfly wings as my heart ran free like a wild mustang. “That pull,” I whispered.

“Now you feel me.”

“I never didn’t,” I admitted.

“I know.”

I confessed another admission. “You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever met.”

“You’re beautiful.”

I pulled my legs under me and kneeled between his thighs as I grasped his hard, muscled arms. Then I voiced a truth I didn’t even want to admit to myself. “I’m frightened.”

He cupped the back of my nape. “Never gonna let anything bad happen to you.”

“Every promise I’ve ever been given was broken.”

“There it is,” he quietly returned.

“Pardon?”

“I see your fears.”

I didn't say anything. Instead, I reached up and fingered the soft strands of wavy ink that fell over his eyes.

He didn't stop me. He didn't move.

He watched me.

I let the silk fall between my fingers. Then I grasped it, and fisted my hand as I looked at the dichotomy of my pale skin against his Ivory Black hair.

"Two," he stated.

"Pardon?" How could two people be so different and yet this feel so right? He was a stranger, a killer, a SEAL, a breacher. I was an artist. This shouldn't work, and yet....

"Two times," he amended.

I looked at him.

"I've let a woman top me exactly twice." He paused. My heart stopped. "First time was on a couch in Salerno."

My poor weathered heart picked itself up. "And the second?"

"Now." His gaze became the storm. "Letting you fist my hair."

I dropped my hand.

He stared.

I didn't dare move.

"C-U," he stated into the sudden drop in atmospheric pressure between us.

"You see me?"

"Periodic table of elements. CU. Atomic number twenty-nine. Soft. Ductile." He paused. "Copper."

"Copper," I repeated, still feeling the ghost of his hair between my fingers.

"Mineral. Thermal. Conductive. Essential element." He searched my eyes for a moment, as if waiting for me to understand. "The color of your hair."

Ah. “From my father’s side of the family.” Maybe my mother’s. I’d never asked. She’d had rich brown hair that was darker than Raw Umber. I’d envied it. More, I envied the way she’d carried herself with grace and poise, but also inherent femininity that made men and women stare whenever she entered a room. I got stared at for another reason. A copper reason—one that the mercurial storm of dominance surrounding me had broken down into scientific terms.

“Irish,” he stated, as if it were both a reason and state of being.

Taking in every hard angle of his face, I didn’t reply.

He briefly glanced past me. “You stopped earlier.”

“Pardon?”

“Painting. When you were at the table. You stopped.”

I’d been too distracted. “It wasn’t turning out correctly.” I glanced behind me at my abandoned South Florida landscape.

“Looked good to me. You always paint landscapes?”

“Thank you, and no.” I turned back to face him, but then I did another thing with him that I’d never done with another man. I curled on my side and rested my head against his chest. “I used to paint other subject matter.”

His arm wrapped around my back, then his voice vibrated in his chest. “Like?”

If sound waves had colors, his would be deep elusive hues like those under the ocean. “Portraits.”

“Is that what’s rolled up in the water bottle?”

“I don’t want to tell you,” I admitted. Especially now.

“One day you’ll show me.”

I looked up at him. “How do you know that?”

“Because I’m going to earn your flipside.”

“My—”

“Trust,” he amended.

A new kind of awareness came to life and bred. Racing across my skin in chill bumps, it took up residence in the dark corners of my heart. “How are you going to do that?”

He used my words against me. “Fucking and blunt honesty. You ready to go to bed?”

I both tested him and dared to ask. “To sleep?”

“For you.”

“You’re not going to sleep?”

He fingered a strand of my hair. “Not tonight.”

I sat up and looked at him, but I couldn’t decipher a single thing in his impassive expression. “What’s going on?”

“I need to take care of something. You’re going to bed. You’ll sleep. I read in Blade. He’ll be on patrol all night. I’ll be back before sunup.”

“You read Blade in on what?”

“That I’ll be off the grid for six hours tonight while I take care of something.”

My concern grew into alarm. “That’s all you told him?”

“Yes.”

I had to ask. “Is this about Carlos? Are you going after him tonight?”

“Not reading you in. It’s for your own protection. But no, I’m not going after Carlos tonight.”

I watched him how he watched me. “Are you lying?”

He didn’t hesitate. “No.”

“And what if you’re not back by dawn?” Because the last time he left, he said he’d only be gone an hour. But that hour turned into an entire afternoon, and now he was talking about being gone all night, and I was panicking.

“Then I’ll text and tell you.”

“Tell me what?” That he was injured? Not coming back? Changed his mind about being content?

“My revised ETA.” His cell vibrated in his pocket, and unlike all the other times, he didn’t ignore it. He pulled it out and glanced at the screen. “Come on.” He stood up, lifting me with him as if I weighed nothing. “I’m putting you to bed before I leave.”

A much-too-short walk later, I was in the soft bed, he was hovering over me, and his gaze was the eye of his storm.

“If I had more time, I’d be filling that tight cunt with my cum.” He kissed me, deep and slow and erotic as he snaked his hand down my pants and thrust two fingers into my already wet heat.

Stroking me three times in a hard, purposeful circular motion, he rubbed that spot deep inside me, then he flicked my clit.

My back arched, my legs spread, and the cry that came out of me was pure need.

Immediate and cruel, he withdrew his hand and his kiss. Smearing his soaked fingers across my lips, the storm gave me a dark, dominant order. “Don’t touch my cunt tonight. I’ll be back in the morning to make you beg.”

Before I could do exactly that and beg him for more, he was gone.

I was almost asleep when I realized what had changed.

I didn’t flinch anymore when he touched me.

SIXTY-SEVEN

Kilo

I met the turboprop at the private airstrip, and hitched a ride to Teterboro. Then I drove a waiting car to the city, and dumped it a few blocks from the address with the keys in it.

That was twenty minutes ago.

I'd watched the old building, specifically the sixth floor. No lights. No movement. No one in or out.

Breaking into the lobby, I bypassed the old elevator and took the stairs. Then I picked the lock on the loft's door.

The first thing that hit me was the stench.

Sweat, rotting food, chemicals, garbage, cigarette smoke.

Looking for the grunge fuck, focusing on the sleeping area and a bathroom, I cleared the large space in seconds. Empty.

Then I turned on my flashlight, scanned, and fucking saw them.

Dozens of them.

Framed photos of her. Naked. Legs spread. Raw fucking fear in her eyes. And words. A single, handwritten derogatory word over every image, each one different.

Rage like I'd never experienced hit me so hard and fast, I fucking detonated.

A row of cameras on a shelf—destroyed.

Industrial-sized bottles of photo-processing chemicals—dumped.

Every goddamn picture frame—smashed.

Then I went to work.

Waking up the piece of shit's computer setup, I didn't even need a password. Searching for her name, I didn't find shit. Then I started typing the words. On the third try, I found the images. Hundreds of them, in a folder marked *Whore*.

My jaw clenched, one hand fisted, I deleted every goddamn image. Then I went into the motherfucker's cloud storage and deleted the backup files.

Ten minutes later, my charges were set, the place was rigged for total fucking destruction, and I was across the street, hidden in the shadows.

I waited.

The fucker didn't come home until the first hint of daybreak.

Staggering up to his bullshit loft, he dropped his keys once, then managed to let himself in.

Reeking of alcohol, sweat and habitual drug use, the motherfucker didn't notice me step into the lobby on his six. Didn't even notice as I watched his two attempts to shove up the ancient elevator door with his weak-as-shit arms.

The fuck didn't notice me until I stepped in beside him.

Then he looked me up and down and smirked. "If you're going to the whore on eight, I can save you the trouble. She can't suck dick worth shit, and her pussy's stretched out like the Grand Canyon."

Refraining from burying my fist in his face, I looked straight ahead.

He snorted out a laugh as he lit a cigarette. "Got it. One of those silent types." The elevator stopped on six, and he stepped off without a backwards glance. "Enjoy your shitty whore."

I didn't speak.

I followed.

He unlocked his door, stepped inside, and I moved.

Kicking the back of the motherfucker's knees as I shoved his door shut, I watched him hit the concrete. The same goddamn floor she'd been lying on in all those motherfucking pictures.

"What the fuck?" Cigarette still in hand, the asshole rolled to his back. Then he focused up and smirked again. "Cop, right? Or Fed?" He sneered. "Go ahead, search the place. You're not going to find anything, and plenty before you have already tried. If you're looking to score, I don't have shit."

Crushing the hand holding the smoke with my boot so we didn't both go up in flames, I stepped hard on his chest with my other foot. "Not a cop or a Fed." Unsheathing my Glauca B1 knife, I flipped open the blade, and held it to his throat. "One question."

Belatedly registering the pain in his hand, he tried to pull away. "Ow, motherfucker!"

"One question," I repeated, breaking skin with the tip of my blade.

"What?" he asked belligerently.

"Carlos's location."

The asshole laughed. "Do I look stupid?"

I sank the blade in an eighth of an inch and dragged it horizontally. The piece of shit only lasted three centimeters before he broke.

"His fucking compound, okay? Him and his soldiers, they're all there. Jesus Christ, *what the fuck?* Get the hell off me. That's my shutter han—"

I ground my heel until I heard the bones in his hand snap.

He fucking howled.

I waited.

Then I asked again. "Carlos's location?"

"Mexico, okay? Zamora, *motherfucker. Zamora.*"

I slit his throat.

As I stood, the glint of a chain with an L pendant caught my eye. Then the pictures of her, followed by the words written on them, replayed in my head.

Bitch. Whore. Worthless. Slut. Pathetic.

Gripping the chain, I yanked it free and pocketed it.

Then I was moving.

Wiping my blade on his shirt, pouring bleach over it from a bottle he had with his photo-developing shit, dragging the body to the area I'd staged, I dumped the rest of the bleach on him. Scanning, I took one last glance to check my shit.

Then I walked out, went down the stairs and crossed the street.

Sticking to the last of the shadows before the sun broke, I hit the detonation switch.

The windows on the sixth floor of the old warehouse building blew out with a controlled explosion. The blast wave hit, and car alarms went off.

I pulled a baseball cap low over my head, and took the stairs down to the subway. Grabbing a burner from my pocket, I dialed.

The call connected on the first ring, and I got dead air. "Zamora, Mexico. Make the arrangements."

"I need a couple days."

"Fine. Text me the warehouse address." I hung up and waited.

A few seconds later, a text came through with an address in Hunts Point.

I read it three times, then pulled out the SIM card, broke it in half and dumped the cell in a trash can before walking the length of the subway platform. Taking a different set of stairs back up to street level, I pulled out my work cell, powered it up and ignored the missed calls. Swiping to the text prompt as the sun rose, I typed.

Me: *On my way back, beautiful. Couple hours.*

I hit Send, then pocketed my cell and walked a few blocks to another subway station. I was going down the stairs when my phone vibrated with a call.

Checking the caller ID, I answered the blocked number. “What?”

Blade’s voice came on the line, and he downloaded. “Your girlfriend called another Uber. She left the house a half hour ago with her suitcase and an attitude.”

A new level of rage hit, and I fucking halted. “What the fuck did you say to her, and why the hell did you let her leave?”

“I didn’t say shit to her. She approached me. Said you said she wasn’t a prisoner. Then she threw her cell through the Rover’s open window, muttered some shit about not being a charity case, and got in the fucking Uber. What the hell did you expect me to do? Draw on the goddamn Uber driver?”

If he fucking had to. “Stop her. *Now.*”

“Already tried that shit last night, and too fucking late. Answer your goddamn phone next time you go AWOL. I’m not your fucking babysitter. Her Uber’s pulling into MIA as we speak. Departures. Last favor you’re getting out of me. You want me to stop her or let her go? You got two fucking seconds to decide, because if I’m executing a hostile detainment, it needs to be right now.”

It fucking happened.

My headspace blanked.

“*Kilo.*”

The tunnel.

“*Kilo!*”

I didn’t move. I didn’t speak. I didn’t fucking think.

I felt.

Rage.

“Goddamn it, Kilo. Now’s not the time to fucking check out. KILO.”

Red fucking rage.

“Motherfucker. KILO. She’s exiting the Uber. You hear me? Goddamn it. Looping in November. Fuck.”

She left.

“I need service. Seven-seven-one-two-five. Hurry the fuck up.”

Left.

“November, putting you on speaker. I got a runaway redhead about to fucking fly commercial out of MIA. Kilo’s unresponsive on the other line, and I got one goddamn second left to make a move. Detainment will be hostile, repeat, hostile. Witnesses and TSA fucks within sight. Redhead’s exiting her Uber. She’s Oscar Tango Mike. Make the call, November.”

“Stand down, Blade. I’ll track her from here. Where’s Kilo?”

Redhead.

“Don’t know. The motherfucker left last night. Said he’d be back before dawn. He’s on his work cell. Trace it. Kilo, you hear me?”

“Blade, I’m not seeing movement on the female, and her cell is pinging from your vehicle.”

“That’s because she fucking threw it at me. Said she wasn’t a charity case. I’ve got it here in the Rover.”

“Copy. Is Kilo still on the line?”

“Yeah. Kilo. KILO.”

“He won’t hear you right now. Patching myself in to your call. Leave the line open a few seconds.”

“Goddamn it. Copy. Call’s still active. He hasn’t hung up.”

“I see, and I’m in. I’ll take it from here.”

“The redhead?”

“I’m tracking her. RTB and call Alpha with a sitrep. You can end both calls now.”

“Copy.”

“Kilo, it’s November. Blade hung up. I see you’re in New York. You’re at a subway station, but you’re not moving. Are you injured?”

Injured.

“Relaying intel I have so far. Anneliese used her cell phone and credit card to purchase a plane ticket to JFK and book a suite at the Omni Berkshire. If she gets on the flight, she’ll land in New York in three hours. I’m watching her on Miami International’s security feeds now. We can let her go, then I’ll wipe her digital footprint after she checks in to the hotel. Under the circumstances, I think it’s the safest option. Copy?”

The noise of New York came back in a rush, and I fucking inhaled. “Copy.”

“Kilo,” November stated. “You okay?”

Walking back up the stairs from the subway station, I tried to play catch-up, but I couldn’t connect the dots. “Why is she going to New York?”

“Did she know you were heading there?”

I hit street level. “No.” Sirens sounded in the distance.

“Then I don’t know. I’ll track—”

“Text me her flight and hotel info.” I hung up.

Then I tried like hell to remember a warehouse address.

SIXTY-EIGHT

Kilo

Three hours later, I was standing at arrivals when she came through the restricted security area.

Pulling her bag behind her, looking frightened, tired and vulnerable as fuck, she was beautiful.

Then she lifted her head, saw me and froze.

I waited.

Cautious, like I was the fucking bomb and she was approaching annihilation, she came toward me at a hesitant pace. Then she stopped three feet away and gave me flipperside, but the fear in her eyes didn't back up the attitude. "I needed to be in New York."

"That's not why you ran."

"I didn't run."

Yes, she fucking had. "Try again."

"You broke your promise."

I'd been fucking busy. "You didn't check the text on the cell you threw at Blade, and you could be carrying my kid."

"I'm not.... I can't...." She sucked in a breath. "I'm not pregnant, and I didn't throw the cell phone at him. I returned it." She averted her gaze. "Through his open window while I was walking to the Uber."

"You done?" I didn't mean with the fucking attitude.

She sucked in a deep breath and looked back at me. “You told me not to mistake you for a hero. That was one of the first things you said to me after you got me away from that yacht.”

“Nothing’s changed.”

“All you’ve done is save me.”

I fucking got it. “Situational.” She didn’t want to need anyone. I’d spent my life not needing anyone. And I sure as fuck didn’t want her in danger. I didn’t want to have to save her again after I handled Carlos. I wanted her safe from every-damn-thing except me.

Looking like I’d caught her off guard, she frowned. “So if it had been another woman on the yacht who was about to go overboard, you wouldn’t have saved her?”

Fuck me. I knew where this was going. “Didn’t say that.” Despite letting every guy on the Teams think I didn’t give a fuck about collateral damage or saving lives, I did. Problem was, I’d already been tested. And I’d fucking failed.

“So you would have saved them, which, by definition, is a hero,” she stated like she knew what the hell she was talking about.

Diving deep, where I never fucking went, with anyone, I handed over the detonator to not only my obsession with her, but to every chain I’d put on myself. “I said situational because it’s exactly that. At any given second, at any given time, the shit that’s fucked in my head can surface. A second, a minute, ten. A fact, a detail, a memory, current situation—Breach Syndrome can hit and wipe out my cognition. Sometimes I know it’s coming. Other times it hits without warning. I could’ve fucked us as easily as exfilled us from that boat. I’m no hero. I never have been. Now, I have TBI. I fucking forget shit. But I did send you a text with my revised ETA.”

Her throat moved, and I saw the fight to keep her shit in check. “Does traumatic brain injury heal?”

“No.” Maybe. Partially. If I never fucking blew a charge again. Didn’t matter. Not one doc I saw had good news, and

shit hadn't gotten better since I'd been discharged. Add in that new excuse for a trigger Talerco mentioned, and this woman was playing Russian roulette with me. I fucking got that. But I was still goddamn standing here because I had to see her.

"Does it get worse?" Her voice shook.

I stared down a future I didn't have. "Don't paint me into one of your pretty pictures. This won't last." I knew the long-term statistics on TBIs.

"This," she repeated, looking more upset by the second when she was the one who'd left.

"Me fucking you," I clarified. "Isn't that what you want to hear? Why you ran? That I'm no good for you, that I'll intentionally break my word, hurt you, use you as a vice." I fucking saw her. I saw her fears. I also saw her panic when Talerco asked if she was carrying my kid.

For a long beat, the woman stared at me with something too damn close to physical pain before her expression took a right turn and morphed as if she saw through my bullshit. Then she spoke, and there was no *as if* about it.

She nailed my ass.

"I think you chose your profession so you could do this very thing—blow your life up whenever it suits you."

My nostrils flared, my headspace went to shit, and then I was back, in the past, on the side of the highway. Ten fucking years old. Glass in my mouth, lying in weeds, I watched that shit happen all over again.

The wreckage, the blood, her head angled wrong against the steering wheel. The smell of gas, the creak of metal. That fucking split-second whoosh from the first flame.

Then the explosion.

The blast wave went through my body.

It killed hers.

"*Kavan?*"

A redhead came into view.

“What?”

Dark amber eyes stared at me. “What happened?”

We wrecked. “She died.”

“Who?”

“My sister.” Half.

Her expression fell. Her hand went to her chest. “*Je suis désolée.*”

I stared.

She spoke in English. “I’m so sorry.”

I inhaled.

“What happened to her?”

The brain fog lifted, shit settled, but it was too late. I’d opened my fucking mouth. Now I had to make a choice.

Taking in a redhead who was gonna jump off a yacht alone to save herself, I didn’t pussy out. “Wreck on the side of the highway. Car exploded before I could get her out.” The six-digit date I never fucking forgot. The day I’d never told anyone about—until now.

Eyes wide, face pale, her expression gave away her headspace. “You... watched it happen?”

“Yeah.”

“Were you....” She trailed off.

I filled in the blanks. “I was ten. She was seventeen. Cops kicked down the front door. Drug bust. We hauled ass out the back. We knew the drill. Wasn’t anything new. Neither of us wanted to go back into the system. We ran, then stole a car. We were aiming to get as far away as possible from her piece-of-shit father and our drug addict mother when highway patrol flagged us. We were already going too fast. Next turn, we went off the road. Car wrapped around a tree. I was thrown through the windshield. She never made it out of the vehicle.”

“Kavan, I’m so sorr—”

“You’re right. I did choose breacher. I’ve been on borrowed time since I cheated death in that car wreck.”

“Do not say that.”

I already had. Many times. Only difference now was, I’d fucked a redhead and wished it weren’t true. “My life’s dispensable. Yours isn’t. You wanna be done with me, fine. But don’t deny who you are. Live your life, woman.”

Turning, I walked the fuck away.

Then I pulled out my cell and dialed.

November answered on the first ring. “Kilo. Everything okay?”

Ignoring his question, I issued orders. “The redhead’s standing at arrivals at JFK. Track her to the hotel. Make sure she gets there. Then I want eyes on her suite for a couple days. Link the security feeds to my cell. If I need anything else, I’ll let you know.”

“Copy. Where are you going to be?”

“Out of reach.”

“Kilo—”

“Sitrep on Carlos?” I didn’t need it. I only asked to see what he and Alpha knew.

“Still running it down, but I tracked a few potential leads—flights to South America and Mexico. Delta’s sure he’ll be in Mexico. Somewhere interior and remote, most likely a compound, and I’m in agreement. I’m waiting on some satellite imagery.”

Fuck. They were closing in. Ghost needed to hurry the hell up.

“Copy. Text me those security feed links for her hotel and any updates.” I hung up.

Then I headed to my place in Brooklyn to grab my bike so I could go look for an address in Hunts Point that I couldn’t fucking remember.

SIXTY-NINE

Anneliese

Sitting in a suite high above the streets of Manhattan for the second evening in a row, I stared at the skyline as the sun fell behind the skyscrapers.

There were no bright colors.

This was not my landscape.

And a breacher with TBI had been right.

I had run.

Two nights ago, with my hand on my stomach where his had been, I'd lain awake, trying to stay afloat in a possibility that was too farfetched to be my life, and I'd sunk too deep.

Then the clock had ticked down to dawn, and he hadn't returned.

Or kept his promise.

The previous afternoon's scenario played on repeat, and my trust issues, my past, my life, every single person who was supposed to be there for me but wasn't—it all came to a thunderous head. In a state, I'd picked up the fancy new cell phone, and I'd made arrangements for my escape with money as dirty as my circumstances.

I'd told myself I was coming to New York to wrap up business. Respectfully bow out of my show at Gagosian, tell Ami I'd had a change of heart, get any unsold paintings back, fly to Milan, then pay for the storage unit upfront for a year and regroup.

That had been my plan.

I hadn't expected to see a storm-eyed SEAL waiting for me at the airport with his hard truths and blunt honesty.

I didn't think I would be too terrified to leave the hotel, let alone go to the gallery or even call Ami.

I didn't expect that I would feel such horrible guilt for leaving him how I had. I didn't anticipate the suffocating regret. And I never imagined that the punishing heartache would be so consuming that even the idea of painting—my one constant, my substitute family, my life, my solace, my entire reason—would be completely paralyzing.

I had to force myself to go out today to purchase a new phone. Then I'd stopped to get some makeup and a new dress to wear to Gagosian—not only to compel myself to go to the gallery tomorrow, but because the only appropriate dress I'd brought with me was ruined. Except I hadn't purchased a dress. I couldn't even look at them without panicking. So I'd grabbed a different outfit. Still designer, still suitable for a meeting with a curator, but one that would be much more practical if I had to jump off another yacht into a freezing ocean.

An outfit that I'd put on in the store immediately after purchasing it because the fitted leather jacket, tight jeans and knee-high boots somehow made me feel safer... until I'd walked outside into the crush of Manhattan pedestrian traffic.

Then I'd rushed back to the hotel and went straight for my suite.

I hadn't called the gallery to tell them I was coming in.

I hadn't called a SEAL, not even under the guise of asking if I was safe.

I hadn't called a company named AES and asked for an Alpha, Blade or November.

I hadn't called anyone because I didn't have anyone to call—except room service. Who I had called right after I'd taken off my new jacket and boots, covered my bruise with makeup,

applied some mascara and lip gloss, and sat to watch the sun dip.

I was still watching the now-darkened skyline when the knock came.

Already unenthusiastic about my dinner salad, I got up and walked to the door of the suite and opened it without bothering to look through the peephole.

Shock, then crushing yearning struck me so hard, my breath caught, and my entire body trembled.

Kilo.

Wearing his black leather jacket, dark jeans and heavy black boots, the man I didn't think of as Kavan—except for in rare moments when he displayed a staggeringly unexpected act of gentleness—stood with one hand in his pocket as his slate-eyed gaze zeroed in on me, and his inky hair spilled over his forehead. Then he did what he had been doing since I'd first laid eyes on him.

He stared intently at me.

Fluttering nerves dropped to my stomach and rioted. “What are you doing here?”

His gaze raked the length of me. Then he stepped forward.

Instantly letting go of the door, I stepped back.

Measured and slow, with his eyes locked on mine, he reached just past the threshold and grabbed my jacket off the small entryway table. “Follow me.” Pivoting, he strode toward the elevator.

I stared.

I stared at every inch of his six-foot-something frame, and I remembered.

Every touch, every stroke of his hands, every kiss and every single moment of his body inside mine.

Heat flushed my face, but I kept staring. I was still staring when he turned and looked back as he hit the elevator call button with the side of his fist.

“You wanna fuck or follow?”

With a sharp inhale of breath, I shut the door. Then I realized my mistake.

My jacket.

With my new phone, suite key and the wallet he'd gotten for me because I now kept things in pockets instead of using my tote for everything.

Shit.

Inhaling, I opened the door and looked at him with what I hoped was no expression at all. “I need my jacket.”

The elevator doors opened. “Come and get it.” He stepped onto the lift.

Shit, shit, *shit.*

I shut the door. Again.

Then I inhaled and considered my options.

Except that was the problem. It was always the problem.

I didn't want options.

Not all the time, not like this, and definitely not when I was with him. I wanted—

I inhaled.

I wasn't going there.

But hadn't I already? Didn't I intimately know every aggressive, dominant, mind-bending, earth-shattering way he touched and controlled and consumed me without hesitation or permission?

I have the controls.

I sucked in a breath as the swirling intensity grew low in my belly and pulsed between my legs. Then I looked in the mirror.

Face flushed, hair disheveled, eyes wide.

I wanted this.

I wanted him.

I wanted to know why he was here, and I wanted to go with him. Badly.

Screw it.

I pulled my brown Saint Laurent Vendome glazed leather boots back on over my Lafayette stretch skinny jeans in camello. Then I quickly ran my hands through my hair and looked once more in the mirror.

My face was even more flushed.

Inhaling, I opened the door.

Standing half in the elevator, half in the hall, the SEAL with ink black hair leaned against the open lift with one leg bent, his large, booted foot keeping the door open as he held my jacket.

With his gaze locked on mine, he raised an eyebrow.

I felt the flush in my cheeks cover my whole face. Without comment, I walked past him and into the elevator.

Casually pushing off the door, he let his gaze wander the length of me, then he stepped in behind me.

Instant pinpricks crawled up my spine and spread across my neck. “Aren’t you going to push the button?”

“No.”

Unnerved, I spun around on my four-inch-high heels that did nothing to bring me even close to his height.

With that maddeningly sexy lock of wavy black silk hanging over one eye, he held up my jacket and gave a low, dark command. “Turn around.”

My heart fell to this man’s mercy, and my breath followed. Then all of a sudden, I was back in that safe house in Salerno, with the same panting, needy desperation crawling through my soul that was reaching for what only he could give me.

Ashamed, aroused, unsure, wanting him to touch me as much as I wanted to kneel at his feet and part my lips—I

couldn't think.

I couldn't speak.

So I did what any self-respecting lady would do.

I straightened my posture, held my head high and turned with my arms out behind me.

My jacket slid on.

Then muscular arms slipped around me, and long fingers deftly threaded the zipper of my LaMarque Mellie jacket. With his intoxicating, unique scent of metal, musk, soap and dominance, a silent SEAL with measured breaths that feathered over my neck zipped up the butter-soft mocha-colored leather.

Looking down at the scene that was more provocative than any single piece of art I had ever seen, I didn't realize I'd spoken until my breathless whisper landed on his dominant gesture and slid across my landscape of nerves. "Thank you."

Saying nothing, he freed my hair from my jacket, and the back of his hand barely skimmed my nape.

Awareness shot across my heated skin. A swallow stuck in my throat, and desire like I'd never known cast a hue over our bodies, his actions, and this entire scene that I wanted on canvas but could never paint. Inhaling small breaths that were useless, I tried to regain my composure as his heat left my back.

Reaching past me, he pressed the button for the lobby, and suddenly I was jealous of an inanimate object.

I wanted his touch.

I wanted to feel the pads of his fingers on my skin.

Lost in my thoughts, lost in the thick haze of his powerful sexuality, I belatedly registered the descent of the elevator that hadn't moved before he'd commanded it.

I stole a glance at his profile. "How did you hold the elevator without the alarm going off?" More than when he touched the elevator button, a new color of jealousy flared

bright as I wondered if anyone had ever drawn or painted his profile.

“Hacked security system.”

His answer startling me out of my spiral into a dangerous chasm between what I was feeling and who this man actually was—breacher, SEAL, pilot, unwavering dominant—I now had to add hacker to his list. “You did that?”

Staring straight ahead, focused on something I was sure I would never reach, nor probably grasp, he didn’t reply.

The floors ticked by, and I didn’t say anything else.

Only half my mind was here.

The other half was standing back at the entrance to my suite, watching him walk to the elevator.

You wanna fuck or follow?

There’d been a third option, one where I could’ve stayed behind that door.

But I hadn’t.

I didn’t know if I’d made the right decision.

SEVENTY

Kilo

She was fucking thinking about it.

Same as when I gave her a choice upstairs.

Her cheeks were flushed, she was nervous as hell, and she'd subconsciously leaned into me when I'd put her jacket on.

I told myself to fucking ignore it.

I didn't come here to fill that tight cunt with my cum. I needed to tap out of that shit in my headspace right now, and focus the fuck up. Which didn't include hijacking her leather, and zipping her into the chick version of a biker jacket.

A fucking biker jacket.

Not black, but some color I couldn't name. A shade that reminded me of the skintight dress she'd been wearing when I'd first laid eyes on her. Neutral, almost the same as her skin tone, it'd made her hair stand out like fire. The damn jacket was doing the same thing, and fuck, we'd be noticeable on the bike with her red hair and dark beige jacket. Hell, her whole damn outfit, from those skintight pants to her knee-high boots with spiked heels, was shades of beige.

A fucking beige biker chick.

Cultured, well-bred, and educated. Standing next to a SEAL with Breacher Syndrome who'd come up in the system. *Christ*. What the fuck was she doing with me? No wonder she'd fucking left.

I glanced down at her before we hit the lobby. “You got a hair tie?”

She looked up, and her sad, dark eyes kicked me in the gut. “You don’t like my hair down?”

“Never said that and not why I asked.” Fuck, she was submissive. Raw and untapped, and I wanted to corrupt every goddamn inch of her.

Proving my point, her gaze dropped back down. Then she picked the pattern back up, the one I’d caught that first night. Every time she let the layer beneath all those bullshit pretenses show, she had to dig back in with the attitude and go flipside.

“No, I don’t have a hair tie on me. If whatever this is requires one, you should’ve thought of that before you kidnapped me.”

The doors opened, and she strode out ahead of me.

I checked out her ass.

Then I fell in on her six, scanned the lobby and watched every fuck with a heartbeat check her out.

Three paces from the exit, she spun and gave me more attitude. “Do you have a problem walking next to me?”

“No.” She was fucking gorgeous. But after that bullshit at the airport, the fucking info dump of my background I’d laid on her, the fact that I wanted to fuck the attitude and pretenses out of her so goddamn bad that I could taste her submission—walking beside her right now would’ve been detrimental to her health. I also had a newfound addiction of watching every step this woman took.

Her leather tight, her chest rose with an inhale. “You specifically said to follow you. Now you’re following me.” She paused like she expected a response.

My gaze dropped to her mouth. I thought about those lips wrapped around my cock.

“Where are we going?” she demanded.

I met her eyes again. “Out.”

“I surmised as much when you stole my jacket.”

“Also put it on you,” I reminded her, not digging the attention we were attracting. “You want to hit it, or stand here and fight?”

“This isn’t fighting.”

Emphasis on her first word, I tuned in to the shit she wasn’t saying. “You used to fighting, woman?”

“No, I’m not.”

“You sure about that?” I wasn’t like November, or any of the other Team guys at AES. I didn’t dive deep. I’d never given a fuck about backgrounds on marks, clients, or missions. I’d always had one job. I didn’t need to fill my already fucked headspace with noise. But now I was wondering exactly what kind of fucked this woman had come from outside the shit with Carlos and that dead motherfucker. Because her attitude was starting to look less like denial of who she was, and a hell of a lot closer to someone who’d had to fight for every damn second of stillness.

“I don’t know what you think that means, and I don’t appreciate what you’re implying. Are we leaving the hotel or not?”

I wasn’t implying shit. I’d outright asked. “Up to you.”

“Now I have a choice?”

“Always did.” Even before her breathless thank-you in the elevator, I saw the way she still looked at me. Despite my real intention tonight, I would’ve fucked her in her suite. We could’ve danced around her flipside until she had her first orgasm. I would’ve fingered her ass and had her suck my cock while she tried to deny she hadn’t been thinking about me putting my baby in her. Then I would’ve fucked her raw and filled that perfect cunt.

Or I would’ve returned her leather.

Another fifteen seconds. If she hadn’t shown up at that elevator, I’d have dumped the expensive excuse for a biker jacket outside her suite door and tapped out.

Crossing her arms, then quickly uncrossing them, she swore under her breath in French. “Somehow, I find that hard to believe.”

Done with her flipside, I leaned down and lowered my voice, but I didn’t fucking touch her like I wanted because we were in a goddamn hotel lobby. “You carrying my kid?” I didn’t wait for an answer. “You wearing my ring?”

She went stock-fucking-still. Then her whisper was so damn quiet, I barely heard her. “No.”

“Then I don’t own you.” If I lived through the week, I’d fucking change that.

Her face flushed, and her eyes went wide. “Own m—”

“Free will.” I cut her off because I wasn’t having this conversation here. And I sure as fuck wasn’t having it now. “You have it. No wires crossed. I came to take you somewhere and show you something. You want in, move out. You want to bail, elevator’s behind me.” She’d be better off if she turned tail. We both knew it. But my new addiction was already wrapped so damn tight around my headspace, it was fucking with my every move. Then I saw the exact moment it fucked with her.

Her expression shut down, she pivoted and aimed for the lobby exit.

My gaze dropped.

Her ass moved with her high-class walk.

I fell back in on her six. But this time, I didn’t leave distance between us. Landing a palm between her shoulder blades, I ignored her slight flinch and the added tension in her spine. Leading her past the valet, I acknowledged the young kid with a C-note when I saw my MTT 420RR was untouched, exactly where I left it on the sidewalk.

“Thank you, sir.”

I didn’t comment as I grabbed one of the two helmets I’d brought and handed it to her.

“A motorcycle,” she stated, taking the helmet.

“Superbike.” Technically. This beast could push two-fifty. I’d only had it up to one-ninety.

“What makes it super?”

The jet fucking engine, for one. “Speed. You ever ridden?”

“I’m half French.”

I didn’t know what the fuck that was supposed to mean, but this wasn’t Paris, and we weren’t in France. “Not a Vespa.”

“No kidding.” She stared at the bike.

Shoving my hair back, I threw my helmet on, then flipped up the visor before taking hers back. Holding it under my arm, I quickly twisted her hair into a knot, then fit the helmet over her head.

She didn’t flinch.

I flipped up her visor so I could see her eyes.

The woman gave me a look. “I could’ve done that.”

“You weren’t doing that.” I secured the chin strap. “You ever ridden? Answer this time,” I warned.

“Yes.”

One word and another fucking thread of the addiction surfaced. “With who?”

Her gaze drifted. “Does it matter?”

It sure as fuck did now. “Who?”

“Someone.” She turned her head.

Grabbing the front of the helmet, I brought her gaze back to mine. “Recently?”

“No.”

“More than five years ago?” If it was that grunge motherfucker, I was going to kill him again.

“No. I was a teenager.”

Air exhaled from my lungs. “Type of bike?”

“I’m not seeing the relevance of these questions.”

“This is a racing bike.” It fucking flew. “You sit higher than me, and we’re gonna go fast.” I checked the zipper on her jacket. “You’ll need to keep your balance.” She wouldn’t. All she’d need to do was hold the fuck on.

She called me on my bullshit. “Only if you aren’t an adept driver.”

“I can drive, woman.” Did she forget already?

Heat flamed her cheeks.

She didn’t fucking forget. Good. “Helmets have audio.” I flipped her visor down, then mine. “Mic check. Copy?”

I heard her sharp inhale. Then my little sub came back. Soft and quiet, her voice filled my head. “I can hear you.”

“Good. Wait.” I started the bike, straddled it, and toed the kickstand before bringing it level and tipping my helmet at her. “Your foot pegs are down.”

Right-stepping on one, she gracefully swung her left leg over and mounted my bike.

My cock came to life.

She widened her thighs.

My heart rate kicked.

Her arms went around my waist.

I fucking transcended addiction and revved the engine. “Don’t fight me or the bike. Don’t let go of me. Ready?”

“No.”

Fuck. Leaning up, I held the bike steady, but I didn’t cut the engine. “Talk to me.”

“I...” Her voice went quiet as hell. “You said almost the very same thing to me right before we went over the side of the yacht.”

Didn’t remember those exact words. “Wasn’t a good night for you.” That, I sure as fuck remembered.

“Nor for you. Or... maybe it was? Maybe that’s normal for you.”

“It wasn’t.” I scanned the alley and the front of the hotel.

“Normal or good? Or both?”

We were drawing attention again. Her in those boots and my bike were turning the heads of every fucker coming and going from the valet. “You want to have a conversation, let’s take this somewhere else.” Busy fucking hotels weren’t good for my headspace.

“I’m sorry. Forget it.”

“Not forgetting it, just relocating this tea party. You good with that?”

“Yes, but never mind. I’m okay. We can go to wherever you had planned.”

“Copy.” I revved the engine and checked in one more time. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

I shifted into first, and muscle memory took over.

Weaving in and out of traffic, pushing it past the speed limit every chance I got, I tried to hit that headspace. The one where nothing was gray.

Where I didn’t have to think.

No thoughts. No second-guessing. Actions, reactions, synapses all fucking firing like they should.

The zone.

The escape I sank into every time I rode, dived or blew shit up.

But this time I didn’t escape.

With a redheaded siren pressed to my back and her hands dangerously close to my cock, I didn’t check out.

I listened to her rapid breathing and questioned what the fuck I was doing.

SEVENTY-ONE

Anneliese

He drove how he looked. Dangerous and fast.

Within the first minute, my life flashed before my eyes six times as fear choked all reason and ability to speak. The moment he stopped at the first red light, I opened my mouth to tell him to go to hell and let me off.

But then the light changed to green, and he did something before he launched us into traffic like a missile.

He let go of the throttle for a split second and squeezed my thigh.

Desire shot through my body as we shot forward, and all self-preservation left.

A harrowing twenty minutes later, we were pulling up to a creepy, decrepit, abandoned-looking warehouse in an industrial complex fronting the docks that was not only void of any signs of life, but looked more dangerous than his superbike.

“This area doesn’t look safe.”

“It’s not.” He cut the engine. “But you’re with me. Get off first.”

For a split second, I hesitated. I knew he’d never leave me here, but the fear came anyway.

He immediately sensed it. “Not leaving you here. Not gonna let anything happen to you.”

I got off the bike. “Should I leave my helmet on?” I wanted to. In fact, I wanted to get back on the bike and leave.

He didn’t answer. Not verbally.

Grabbing the front bottom of my helmet like he had outside the hotel, he pulled me toward him. Then his fingers were brushing against my skin as he deftly loosened the chin strap and carefully pulled my helmet off.

My hair fell down, and I got self-conscious. Even though it was so dark I could barely see him, I ran my fingers through the strands.

Watching me as he swung his leg over his bike, he took off his own helmet. “Don’t do that shit with me.”

“Pardon?”

“Stop worrying about your hair. You’re fucking gorgeous.” His gaze briefly went to my temple. “You covered up with makeup.”

“I... Yes, I did.”

“How’s the head?”

“Fine.” I nervously glanced around. “Why are we here?”

Seemingly unconcerned about theft, he set the helmets on his bike and turned toward the warehouse that was a few yards away from where we were standing. “Come on.”

His long strides eating up the distance, he aimed for a door, grabbed the handle and turned it without having to unlock it. Then he used the toe of his boot to half kick, half push open the rusty entrance before walking into complete blackness and disappearing.

A couple seconds later, a few dim lights turned on inside.

Then he reappeared in the doorway with his tall, muscular silhouette outlined like an avenger and tipped his chin toward the interior of the space before stepping back enough to allow me to walk inside.

Feeling as if I were on the precipice of something very, very bad, I walked toward the warehouse.

Then I stepped inside and froze.

SEVENTY-TWO

Anneliese

I stared at the mess.

Carnage, really.

If art was a living being, its death was forklift tire tracks, broken stretchers, ripped canvas and discarded debris in a haphazard pile on a filthy warehouse floor.

I finally, truly understood the saying full circle.

My life had come full circle.

My career had become its shattered beginning.

My life's work in a strewn pile of ruin in a cold, cavernous space.

I inhaled. "What are we doing here?"

A callous breacher stood behind me like my executioner. "Thought you should see it."

"Why?" So I could crush even further? So breathing became more impossible? So I could pull up my bootstraps and begin anew again with a nonexistent sense of purpose?

"So you don't have an excuse."

I stupidly asked the question. "An excuse for what?"

"Hanging on."

"What am I hanging on to?" The truth was staring at me. The paintings had been gone the moment a notorious cartel leader had walked into a gallery in Manhattan.

"Fear. Shit that doesn't matter."

I bothered to glance up at him. “Do you fall into that last category?” *Shit that doesn't matter.*

“Never said I was something I wasn't, woman.”

“Of course you didn't. No one ever does. Then they would have to be accountable.” The second the last two sentences left my mouth, I knew it was a horrible, cruel thing to say to him. Especially him. But I was feeling horrible, the world was cruel, and none of this was even remotely alleviating my fears.

“You're still breathing.” His tone didn't change. He didn't get angry. He didn't hold me accountable for my implied insult. He simply said his three words as if it were an entire conversation.

I stared at him a moment longer.

Then I looked back at the bloodshed of desecrated vibrant hues, and habit filtered in. Squinting through the numbing shock of rage and despair, I tilted my head and looked at the detritus from another angle. Then another.

I stepped to the side, narrowed my eyes further, and peered at the mess again.

It didn't make a difference.

No matter how I looked at it, it was still carnage. In a landscape.

Fuck you, irony.

His always quiet, always measured, provocatively deep voice both prickled across my skin and blanketed my melancholy. “You wanna salvage anything?”

“You don't salvage art.” Not with a defilement like this.

“Copy. Time to move.” He turned toward the door.

I took one last look at what'd become of my life, then asked the question that hurt more than what I was looking at. “Can we burn it?”

He didn't hesitate with his response. “The paintings or the building?”

“I....” Five simple words and destructive thoughts took hold. I tried to stifle them, but goose bumps had already raced across my chilled soul with dangerous yearning. “I have a choice?”

He tipped his chin.

I didn't think about consequences. “The building.”

As if my answer were a foregone conclusion, a Navy SEAL breacher reached into his pants pocket and pulled out four small white squares of plastic-looking putty. His almost colorless slate-eyed gaze met mine as he held them out to me.

I took the pieces that smelled like metal and motor oil. “I'm doing this?”

“Your art, your show.”

My art, my show. A new kind of irony spread. “You'll need to walk me through it.”

Keeping his stark gaze locked on mine, he reached into his other pocket and pulled out the very device I'd seen him working on days ago in a safe house. Except this time it had thin wires wrapped around it.

Without speaking, he unwound the wires until there was a falling pile between us. Then he took the ends of the wires and, one by one, shoved what looked like probes into each of the malleable squares in my hands.

Stepping back, careful of the wires, unwinding them further, he nodded toward my ruined paintings. “Place the explosives equidistant around the pile. Watch the wires. Mold each portion around a piece of debris.”

Looking down at my hands, belated alarm spread. “Explosives?” I was holding explosives.

“C-4. You're safe.” He walked toward the forklift and started unscrewing what looked like the cap of a gas tank on the back. “Bring me a piece of canvas.”

Safe.

Explosives.

Bring me a piece of canvas.

I sucked in a breath that gave me no air, but I did as he instructed.

Quickly moving around the pile, I placed the small squares equal distance from each other and molded them to pieces of broken stretchers. Then I picked up one of the Antigua paintings that was torn in half, and I stared at it a moment, knowing I would never go back there. I couldn't. I'd never see a sunset from that Caribbean island again as anything other than this violation of my art, of me.

A violation I was going to fucking burn.

Yanking half the canvas away from the section of wooden stretcher that it was still attached to, I pulled it free from the staples. The once vibrant colors of a tropical landscape hung in my hand like a perfect painting of surrealism that had come to life. Like Dali's melting clock, like the insignificant passage of time, like every landscape I'd ever brought to life, the irony only grew. It grew so much that all of a sudden, I wasn't just holding half of a ruined sunset.

I was ripping the canvas to shreds.

Violently tearing piece after piece, the painted material shredded into strips of anger and grief and pieces of me that I would never get back.

Before I knew it, the half of the large painting had been reduced to a pile of colored ribbons at my feet, and a silent SEAL was standing next to me.

My heart racing, my chest heaving, I fought tears as I let the last strip fall from my hand and spiral to the ground to join the others. "Sorry," I whispered.

His silence I was expecting. I'd missed his quiet stillness. What I wasn't expecting was his touch.

Gentle but with purpose, his knuckle touched under my chin and lifted.

I met his gaze.

His eyes almost colorless in the dim lighting of the warehouse, he held me in his intense stare, but he didn't speak.

I didn't need him to.

This man said more with his silent understanding than everyone I had ever known.

Dropping his hand but not his stare, he held my gaze a moment longer. Then he grabbed the shredded ribbons of my life off the ground and began tying them end to end.

Inhaling past the lump in my throat and the fluttering of awareness in my stomach, I had to ask. "What are you doing?"

"Creating a chain reaction." The strips now a long rope of knotted ribbons, he strode back to the forklift and fed the entire thing, minus the end he was holding, into the gas tank.

I didn't question a breacher executing his craft.

I stood there and stared as the reality of the situation, of what he was doing, fell around me like a house of cards. "Coming to the hotel, bringing me here, doing what you are now—you did all of this for me."

No nod, no shrug, no words, no change in his expression, he simply spared me a glance as he fished out the now gasoline-soaked makeshift rope.

"Thank you." Two words weren't enough, but that was all I had in that moment.

Ignoring my thanks, moving with practiced precision, he pulled the end of the rope he was holding toward the pile of paintings and laid it across the filthy concrete floor while carefully leaving the other end in the gas tank of the forklift.

Then he gave me a single-word command. "Exfil."

"Pardon?"

"Head out," he amended, scanning the macabre scene of dead art and arson intent.

I went to the door we'd come through but stopped just shy of walking out into the briny, putrid-smelling night air.

Holding the detonation device, minding the wires, he backed toward me and issued orders. “Clear the door. Move five meters west. Then face south, back to the warehouse.”

Crossing my arms, too afraid to glance around me, I did what he told me to.

A moment later, without me hearing his approach, his chest came into contact with my back, and I flinched.

Ignoring my reaction and stepping even closer into me, the heat of his body covered my entire back side as he grasped my wrists and brought my hands out in front of me. Placing one under the other with both of my palms facing up as if I were preparing to receive communion, he then cupped the bottom of my hands with one of his and placed the device in them.

“Hold position.” He flipped a switch on the detonator, and a tiny green light came on. Then he gave a string of commands. “Keep your mouth open. Take short breaths. When you’re ready, hit the trigger. Then we’re Oscar Tango Mike, double-timing it to the MTT before the initial explosion triggers the second. Copy?”

By now, I understood his military speak. “Yes.”

“Standing down.” Dropping his hand from under mine, he momentarily grabbed my waist as he widened his stance and braced his legs on either side of mine. “We’re a go. You have the controls.” His huge palms covered my ears and pressed firmly. Then he curled his tall frame protectively around me.

I sucked in a breath of pure masculine musk, metal, and adrenaline as something alarmingly close to lust shot into my veins like an addiction while his voice replayed in my mind like the drug.

You have the controls.

My thumb caressed the black plastic.

My lips parted.

My breaths came shallow.

This was control.

I depressed the trigger.

An unimaginable explosive sound struck a fraction of a second before a massive thump, then all the high-set windows in the warehouse blew outward. As if a giant had stomped on the earth, the ground shook, my ears popped, my body decompressed, and air was sucked from my lungs. Then roaring fire licked its way out of every shattered window.

Dropping his hands from my ears, a breacher took the detonator from me and quickly ripped the wires from it. Tossing them toward the now blown-out doorway of the warehouse before pocketing the device, he grasped my shoulders and physically turned me.

Dumbstruck, I stared.

Where my paintings had been, there was now a giant raging fire billowing smoke and black soot as burning pieces of debris rained down like flaming confetti.

I barely had time to take in the beautiful destruction before an artist of explosions was pulling me back and aiming us for his motorcycle.

“Move, move, move,” he ordered in a succinct, controlled succession of words that was at complete odds with the blazing chaos that was now the warehouse.

Except I didn't move.

My ears ringing, my legs unsteady, I stumbled.

Large, firm hands gripped me around the waist, then I was airborne.

Covering the distance to the motorcycle before I had time to draw in a shocked breath, he hoisted me up and set me on the back with surprising gentleness—right before he slammed a helmet over my head.

In the next second, he was straddling the bike and making it come to life. Kicking the stand up as he put on his own helmet, he leaned the beast upright and revved the engine.

Instinct defeated shock, and I grabbed him around the waist as a shrieking screech of bending metal pierced the

muted refuge of my helmet right before a second deafening boom.

The entire building exploded.

A three-story-high deluge of bright Cadmium Orange flames shot into the night sky as giant chunks of burning metal roof crashed to the ground.

We were already flying.

SEVENTY-THREE

Anneliese

I understood it now.

The rush.

The feeling of the explosion—the sound, the impact, the vibration, the very physical jolt to your body—it was addicting, it'd been over in less than a second, and I wanted to relive it.

The fire afterwards, that was different.

That had been my landscape.

But I didn't have a title for it.

I didn't feel purged or vindicated or less fearful, and I hadn't let anything go—but that fire. It'd been... astonishing.

Lost in my own thoughts, holding on to a breacher who I now saw as an artist in his own right, I didn't realize that neither of us had spoken. Nor had I paid attention to where we were going until he slowed down. Pulling his superbike up to a trendy French bistro in the West Village, angling the motorcycle with skill, he lined it up perpendicular to the curb, and walked us backward into a parking spot he created between two other vehicles.

I didn't know what I was expecting we would do after committing at least several crimes, but returning to the city, to a very public place, wasn't it.

I glanced at the outdoor dining area and the few patrons braving the nighttime chill who were all looking at us. “What are we doing?”

“Eating.” He cut the engine. “Off first.”

“I don’t think this is—”

“Off the MTT, woman, or I’ll do it for you.”

Bracing my hands on his shoulders, I swung my leg over, hyperaware of the audience of diners, but I didn’t remove my helmet. “Should we be in public after we just... after what just happened?”

Grabbing the front bottom of my helmet again, he pulled me toward him and held me captive while he spoke through the embedded microphone so no one could hear him except me. “No security cams, no alarm system, disabled traffic cams in the area, no plates on the bike. We’re good. I wouldn’t have taken you otherwise.”

I had to ask. “Was that Carlos’s warehouse?”

I couldn’t see his eyes through both of our tinted visors in the dark, but I could feel his stare as he remained silent. “You’re not going to answer that, are you?”

“No. You good?”

I didn’t know what I was, but I took it to mean, was I done asking questions. “Yes.”

Without warning, he removed my helmet. Then he quickly took off his, grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me against him while still straddling his bike. “Asking again. You good?”

Suddenly overcome, I was all at once fighting tears and a wave of emotion so strong, I didn’t know what to do with it. “May I touch you?” I needed to touch him. I needed my arms around his neck. I needed my hands in his hair. Me, needing to touch him, the breacher SEAL who said he didn’t *do audiences*. The irony only grew.

Searching my eyes, he didn’t immediately answer.

Embarrassment blanketed the irony, and I tried to pull away. “Never mind.”

His grip tightened. “The pull or adrenaline?”

“Pardon?”

“You asking to touch me because you’re done running or because you’re coming down from the adrenaline kick?”

“I...” Suddenly feeling like cement had been poured down my throat, I looked away. “I wanted to thank you.”

“Already did that.”

I looked back at him, and that was when I thought I understood. “You’re angry with me for leaving.”

“I’m a lot of shit, but anger’s not on my radar right now.”

“Then what is?”

“Fucking you down from that adrenaline rush, making you scream my name, filling that perfect cunt with my cum. Making you crawl for a taste of my cock.”

Sucking in a sharp breath, I tried to look to see if anyone had heard him.

His grip only tightened. “Eyes on me. I’m talking. That’s all you need to worry about.”

“Kilo—”

“Kavan,” he corrected.

“You’re not Kavan right now. Not to me.”

“Context,” he demanded.

“When you’re like this, you’re Kilo.” He accused me of having a flipside, but so did he.

“Like what?”

Practically feeling the people behind us watching our exchange, I wanted to do anything but answer him. Causing a scene or drawing attention like this, it went against every lesson my mother had ever imparted about how to be the perfectly poised, put-together, dignified but aloof French woman. “I don’t want to have this conversation here.”

“You wouldn’t want to have it if we were alone. Talk.”

In that moment, I hated how he saw through my defenses.
“Is anyone listening?”

“Would I tell you to talk if there was?”

“It’s New York,” I argued. “We’re in front of a bistro.”

He stared.

I relented. “Fine. When you’re being sexual, aggressive, dominant, a SEAL, a breacher, a diver”—I lowered my voice—“when you’re shooting, killing, blowing things up, talking about what you want to do to my body and issuing orders, when you’re being the storm, you’re Kilo. You’ll always be Kilo first to me, because that’s who I met first.”

Darkness fell over his expression, and he became the storm. Then he spoke so low and so controlled, there was no mistaking his anger. “When am I Kavan, Anneliese?”

“When you told me you were content.” I repeated his own words, ones I would never forget. “*Content. Like this. With you.*”

SEVENTY-FOUR

Anneliese

Releasing his hold on me, he didn't say anything.

I shouldn't have expected him to, but I did.

Instead, he got off his motorcycle with powerful, fluid movements that stretched the material of his jeans over his muscular thighs. And same as when he'd parked in front of that warehouse, he set the helmets on the bike.

Then he simply gave me a command before striding toward the hostess station. "Come on."

I followed.

Barely glancing at the young woman who was openly staring at him, he said two words. "Table outside."

The bubbly hostess smiled. "Of course. Which one would you like?"

He didn't answer her.

He walked to a table in the corner of the outdoor dining area. Then he pulled out a chair and looked at me.

Caught off guard by the gesture, especially from a man who was as rough as he was, I flushed. "Thank you." I took the seat.

"Good choice." The hostess smiled at him and dropped the menus. "Enjoy your meal." She bounced off.

The man who was definitely being Kilo right now took the seat across from me.

“Outside?” It wasn’t outright cold, but it wasn’t mild either.

He picked up a menu and handed it to me. “Don’t like confined spaces, and I can hear you better.”

What was left of my heart broke. “My apologies.” I should have realized.

“For?”

The waiter came by. “Good evening. Can I start you off with a drink tonight?”

“We’re ready to order.” A SEAL tipped his chin at me.

Taking the hint, I quickly glanced at the menu. “The spinach salad, please. And water’s fine.”

“Excellent choice.” The waiter looked at Kilo. “And for you, sir?”

“Burger. Water.”

“Got it.” The waiter picked up the menus. “I’ll be back with your waters after I put in your order.”

It wasn’t until he retreated that I realized Kilo hadn’t looked at the menu once. A sudden flare of jealousy gnawed at me. “Have you eaten here before?”

“You ready to talk?” he countered.

I inhaled the cool night that wasn’t nearly as pungent as the air by that warehouse, but it was still New York. “How did you know which hotel I was at?” It was a throwaway question meant to stall, and he called me on it.

“Real talk.”

“All right.” I gathered my courage. “I’m sorry I left.” I glanced at my lap, but then I looked back up at him and said the hard words. The truth I didn’t want to admit. “I’m more sorry that I left without telling you. But most of all, I regret not trusting you. I didn’t see your text before I tossed the cell phone at Blade. I’m sorry.”

For a long moment, he searched my face. Then he only said one word. “Okay.”

The waiter brought our waters.

I didn’t know what his okay meant. Okay, I was forgiven? Okay, he understood? Okay, he heard me? I didn’t ask, and he didn’t offer more.

We fell into silence as the city moved around us, and I stared at the angular planes of his face. The need to reduce every surface to an identifiable shape wasn’t new. But the inability to figure out how each strikingly attractive part of him was constructed, or why they only grew in intensity every time I looked at him—it made me crave touch.

I wanted to run my fingers over every masculine inch of him, from his hard, shadowed jaw to his impossibly long eyelashes to the black silk hanging over his right eye. I wanted to feel how this impossibly stoic, unwaveringly dominant man had been constructed. Then maybe I could take his elusive, majestic beauty and reduce him to colors, new ones I could create and blend from all the hues on my palette.

Except I knew I couldn’t.

I’d never be able to capture the vortex that surrounded him. His silence, his scent, his walk, his voice, his eyes. I’d never be able to paint the color of his eyes. Not with any pigment that would come close to their haunted depth and isolation. His very presence stole the air out of every space he moved through. But his eyes? They robbed all the light and refracted it back with the very absence of color. Even in the sunlight, when warmth spread over his face, they’d been downright translucent.

I couldn’t paint that.

No one could.

Not with any amount of justice.

Staring at me as I was him, he kept up his silence. It was a part of his vortex.

Suddenly, it made me wonder... “What did your parents look like?”

“What did yours look like?” he countered.

He was right when he said there was a pull between us. It was like tension wire tightening with every elusive word, dragging me further under. I’d never experienced anything like it. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Avoid my questions?”

“I didn’t. Had one of my own. I don’t avoid anything with you. I look like my father. He gave me my name. He was a son of a bitch. He’s dead. Who do you look like?”

“People used to tell me I looked like my mother.”

“But you don’t think so.”

It wasn’t a question, but I answered it anyway. “No.”

“We done with the bullshit questions?”

“What would you prefer we talk about?”

“I wouldn’t.” His gaze dipped with intent to my mouth.

The implication, both subtle and with the force of a derailed train, slammed into what was left of my composure and sent sparks along my spine. “Then why did you bring me to a bistro?”

“Restaurant,” he corrected, as if there were some hidden meaning behind the distinction.

“Restaurant,” I repeated. “Why did you bring me here?”

He glanced past me for a brief moment. “You were given a choice.”

I dared to say it. “Fuck or follow.”

He didn’t reply.

The waiter appeared. “Here we go.” He set our plates down. “The spinach salad and the steak burger. Can I get you anything else right now?”

“No,” Kilo replied without a hint of politeness.

“Enjoy.” The waiter disappeared.

I picked up my fork.

A large, warm hand clamped over my wrist and squeezed with intent.

Startled, I looked up.

His eyes a sudden storm, he pressed my arm down to the table and applied even more pressure.

Awareness shot through my body and chill bumps erupted, hardening my nipples and making heat flush between my legs. My lips parted, but no words came.

He let go of me.

The abrupt untethering, the rapid loss of his heat—the sensation made my body feel as if I were suddenly floating out of my chair.

Holding my gaze, he switched our plates. Then he picked up his fork and took a bite. His jaw flexed, and his Adam’s apple hitched with a swallow.

The aroma of grilled meat and fried potatoes drifted up, and my mouth watered. I fought a losing battle against my traitorous body that had nothing to do with food. “I ordered a salad.”

“I ordered you the burger.” He stabbed another bite. “Eat.”

“Is this a control thing or a not-so-subtle message?”

“Do you think you need the control?”

The control. “What does that mean?”

“What do you think it means?”

“Something sexual.”

“And more.”

More. “More what?”

“Control. Eat.”

God help me, I picked up the burger and took a bite.

Watching me intently, his eyes heated.

My pussy wept.

SEVENTY-FIVE

Kilo

She ate how she'd fucked me. With reservation. But she fucking ate.

I waited until she'd polished off the burger. "Your submission. How you like to be fucked rough. Did assault trigger that?"

She fucking blinked with shock, then scanned the restaurant before giving me those damn fearful eyes again. Lowering her voice, she denied all of it. "I do not prefer rough sex, and this has nothing to do with.... I was not.... You're wrong." She crossed her arms.

I was right. "You always lie to yourself? Or only about what you want?" I pointedly looked at her plate where the burger had been.

"You're the one who came to my hotel. You're the one who walked away at the airport after telling me to live my life like you had no intent of ever stepping foot back into it. I don't think you're in any position to talk."

"I know exactly what position I'm in." Sitting across from a woman who hid more than I did. "Do you need it rough because you're chasing trauma?" I could read between the lines. But I wanted to make sure. I needed to before I fucked her again, because the parameters had changed. I'd changed. My fucking headspace had changed. I wasn't gonna just kick it with this woman. I was going to keep her.

But keeping her meant knowing what the fuck I was dealing with. I was rough. That wasn't gonna change. But I'd

ease her into it if I had to. Assuming I lived through whatever bullshit Ghost was putting together. Which was a whole other fucking convo that I wasn't gonna have with her yet. Not before I got her on board. Then I'd let her know I was leaving again. If she ran, she ran. I'd find her.

“I don't need anything from you.”

Keeping telling yourself that, woman. “Except my cock when you're feeling powerless and pissed off.”

Her cheeks flamed, and she did the restaurant scan again. “We're in public.”

“You gonna be more comfortable talking about fucking if you're on your knees with my cock driving into your ass?”

Her entire face flushed. “You're doing this on purpose.”

“I'm just talking.”

“With an ulterior motive.”

“No motive right this minute.” Unless it got her on all fours with me fisting that fire-red hair in the time it took to get her back to my place.

She crossed her legs. “Then what do you care?”

“You want me to care.” Submissive and lost. I fucking see you, woman.

“I want—” Cutting herself off, she pushed her chair back and stood. “Thank you for... the motorcycle ride and the meal.” She turned to angle her way out of the corner I'd purposely put her in because this woman was a runner.

“How long?” I didn't ask. Reins off, full dominance out, I demanded the answer.

Pausing, she looked down at me. “Pardon?”

Purposely dragging my gaze from her covered cunt to her full tits and lush lips, I took my time meeting her eyes. “How long have you been denying yourself what you want?”

“I'm not denying anything.”

Lie. “You got a problem with the narrative or the act?” This was more than that grunge piece of shit who’d taken those photos and sold her out.

“Act of what?”

“Submission.” Complete fucking submission.

She sucked in a breath as that telling blush came back. “Good night, Kilo.” Breaking eye contact, she turned.

“Use my name,” I ordered.

She stopped, and her shoulders rose and fell with a frustrated breath in that designer biker jacket. For ten seconds, she stood there, her back to me.

Then she turned around, quieted her voice and gave me a hint of that flipside. “Good night, Mr. Kavan Darach King.”

“I see you. I fucking care, and I’m only one man with you. We’re not done talking.” Tipping my chin toward the chair she’d vacated, I tested her. “Sit down, Anneliese Mylene Laurent.”

“How do you know—”

“I said sit down.”

The woman sat.

My cock took note. “Tell me again how you take your coffee.” I couldn’t fucking remember the way she’d said it. Hot milk or some shit.

“With steamed milk foam.”

I wasn’t saying that bullshit to a waiter. “In normal English.”

“Cappuccino.”

I nodded at the asshole waiter who’d been checking her out.

He came over and grabbed our empty plates. “Can I get you some dessert?”

Behind her, near a service alley, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. “Cappuccino and the check.”

“Of course, sir. Coming right up.” He took off.

“How do you know my middle name?”

Scanning the perimeter, I saw them as they got in an SUV. Black. Tinted windows. I looked back at her. Perched on the edge of her chair like she was ready to bolt, I debated.

Distance to the MTT.

Traffic on the street.

Position of the SUV.

Speed of the bike.

Holding her gaze, I gave the order first. “Sit back in your chair.”

She frowned. Then she repositioned and crossed her legs.

“Comfortable?” I briefly scanned the street, alley and SUV behind her.

“No.”

“Good. We’re not gonna be here long.”

SEVENTY-SIX

Anneliese

My mind was still reeling from every crude, truthful word he'd said when he glanced behind me. "Comfortable?"

Not even a little. "No."

"Good. We're not gonna be here long."

I didn't have time to ask what he meant.

The waiter returned with my cappuccino and set it down in front of me with a flourish, turning the saucer so the heart-shaped design in the steamed foam was point down, towards me. "Enjoy, ma'am." Stealing a glance at my breasts, he smiled salaciously before wiping his expression and handing Kavan the check. "I can take that whenever you're ready."

Kavan slapped a hundred-dollar bill on the leatherette check presenter. "Halt."

The waiter paused and looked nervously at Kavan. "Sir?"

Alarm spreading, praying what I thought was about to happen wasn't, I picked up my coffee.

Staring at me, his hand still on the check presenter that the waiter was also still holding, Kilo, not Kavan, addressed me. "Want me to handle that?"

The cup almost to my lips, the familiar scent of darkly roasted beans that was usually more comforting than any childhood memory suddenly smelled bitter. "Pardon?"

"The way he just eye-fucked you. Want it handled?"

My body froze while my stomach plummeted. “I can handle my own matters.”

“Not what I asked.”

Oh God, was this how he was? Was this some sort of test? Was he purposely trying to make a scene? Is this what he meant by owning me? I didn’t care what he’d said—he wasn’t only one man. He was a whole host of things, all of them dominant, and now I was seeing it in the full spectrum of color.

I was also feeling it. Inside every cell of my being, because irony, she was a ruthless, treacherous bitch.

Half of me was melting. In my cold seat on a cold night in an unforgiving city that had stolen so much of my life, I was staring down the bright color of that S-word he used without shame, judgment or condemnation. I was staring it down, and I was drowning in his arms as he’d launched us over the railing into that storm.

The other half of me stared at the threatening storm.

SEAL, breacher, dominant. Killer.

Then the man who I thought was two totally different entities raised an eyebrow, and it happened.

The vortex became the Coriolis effect, and the world beyond the storm sitting across from me slipped away. “I’m fine.”

He dropped his hand. The waiter took off, and I sipped my cappuccino.

When I set my cup down, I asked, “Are you always going to be like that?”

“Like what?” He glanced behind me.

“Overly reactive.”

His gaze immediately came back to mine. “Did that asshole make you uncomfortable when he eye-fucked your tits? Did you enjoy him getting close enough to touch you when he set your shit down?” He didn’t wait for my answer. “I

saw you. You weren't fucking comfortable. Wasn't an overreaction, and I gave you a choice." He tipped his chin at my coffee. "Drink up. We're moving out."

My hands on the warm cup suddenly felt chilled, and I started to turn my head to see what he'd been glancing at since he'd asked for the check.

Kavan stood so fast, I barely had time to look up at him before he gripped my chin and lowered his voice. "Do not look back. Do not glance toward the alley. Do not make any eye contact with anyone. You're going to stand up, about-face, and walk directly to the MTT. Put your helmet on, secure it, and get the fuck on the bike."

Alarm didn't just spread—it overtook my entire body. "You're scaring me."

"I'll be on your six. I'm armed, and I'm not gonna let anything happen to you. But you're not looking back. Copy?"

Oh God. "Yes. Is it him? Is he here?"

Ignoring my questions, he leaned even closer and brought his lips close to mine. "If shit goes south, immediately retreat into the restaurant. Call AES's main number. State your name, location, and say it's a priority one. Time to move. Let's go." He kissed me once, quick and with barely a touch, then he stood to his full height and stepped back only enough to give me room to stand.

I stood up and turned.

His hand landed on the small of my back, his voice dropped until it was barely audible, and he issued the same command he'd given at the warehouse. "Move, move, move."

SEVENTY-SEVEN

Anneliese

I didn't walk to his motorcycle.

I practically ran.

Then I fumbled with the helmet.

He took it from my hands, shoved it over my head, threw his leg over his bike and started the engine while he put his own helmet on.

I was holding one of his shoulders and getting on behind him while trying to secure the helmet with my other trembling hand when his voice came through the built-in speaker. "Chin strap's already threaded. Left side. Pull it secure. Now." He revved the engine.

I did as he said, and we shot into traffic, narrowly missing two other vehicles.

My scream was involuntary as I grabbed him around the waist. "Kilo!"

"Know what I'm doing, beautiful. Hang on tight."

Literally cutting sideways across oncoming traffic, he wove in between speeding cars as horns blared. Like we were on a rapid seesaw, the bike, our bodies, they angled back and forth as he took on even more speed.

Then he did the last thing I was expecting.

He started talking. Casually.

"You dress like money. Well-bred. Sexy as fuck, but reserved. Dig the beige biker chick outfit. Looks good. But

wouldn't have known you were a city cat unless I saw it on you." Glancing over his shoulder, he changed lanes. "The bike too." He accelerated. "Those landscapes painted a different picture."

My heart racing, my hands clammy, resisting the urge to look behind us, I barely managed a reply. "Of?"

"Not a woman who'd been drugged, kidnapped, beaten, and was hypothermic, not asking for shit except a toothbrush." He took an on-ramp for one of the highways.

"I'd vomited."

He cut across traffic to the fast lane. "That was the least of your problems."

Horns blared. "It didn't feel like it."

"Like I said, different picture." He checked his rearview mirrors. Then he sped around a sedan, cut in front of it and dropped back on its opposite side, effectively using it for cover as he looked behind us again.

I couldn't take it anymore. I followed his glance.

Three cars back, gunning its engine, a big black SUV was aiming right for us. Then it passed under one of the highway lights, and for a brief half of a second, I got a glance at a dark-haired driver.

Oh my God, the driver.

Was that the henchman? No. *No, no, no.* "Kilo, the SUV, the driver—"

"Ready to trust me?"

Oh God. "Please, stop." If that was the henchman, we needed help. *We needed help.*

"Why? You gonna get off and walk?"

Was he insane? "No, I meant—"

"Then hang on."

I looked back again. "*Kilo!*" No, no, NO. "He's gaining on us." My pounding heart started to physically hurt. "*Go faster.*"

“Stop turning around. If there’s something to worry about, I’ll tell you. Trust me.” He eased off the throttle. *On the highway.*

I seriously panicked. “Don’t slow down! *He’s chasing us.*”

“I got that.”

No, he didn’t. “You *don’t* understand.” My voice climbed with my fear. “You don’t know who that is.”

“I know exactly who that fuck is.” Something coated his tone.

“Then please, *please*, call the police, the people you work with—someone.” *Anyone.* “You don’t understand. There’ll be more of them.”

“Handling it.”

He gunned it, cut across two lanes, and we flew off the exit ramp.

I couldn’t not look back.

The black SUV missed the exit.

A fraction of relief came, but it was short-lived.

He sped through the intersection, narrowly avoiding oncoming traffic, and immediately took the highway’s entrance ramp across the street.

Flying up the incline, going twice the speed limit, a Navy SEAL revved the superbike’s engine as he wove in and out of traffic like a pendulum and caught up to the SUV.

Fear constricting my throat, terrified we would crash, clutching an insane breacher who jumped off yachts and played chicken with cartel henchmen, I didn’t have time to find my voice to scream.

Watching in horror, powerless to stop it, I held on as he accelerated right up to the rear of the black SUV.

Then he did four things in rapid, precise succession.

Swerving into the SUV’s blind spot on its left side, reaching out with his right hand, he slapped a familiar white

putty on the rear quarter panel, then he revved the bike.

We came up alongside the driver's window, and everything turned into slow motion.

Furious, Andros glared at us.

Fear escaped my throat.

A SEAL issued an order. "Hold on." He went full throttle.

We shot past them.

The SUV gunned it.

We cut across three lanes.

The SUV followed.

We exited onto a two-lane road.

Andros kept coming.

We flew past other cars.

Then a breacher did what he did best.

Holding the bike steady, he grabbed a cell from his pocket and swiped three times before shoving the phone back into his jacket.

The explosion lit up the night sky. The force shoved at the bike. The SUV flew end over end in a giant ball of flames.

For the second time that night, a blast wave went through my body.

SEVENTY-EIGHT

Kilo

Slowing down to the speed limit, I pulled out one of November's standard-issue burners and gave her a heads-up. "Making a call."

She didn't say shit.

Linking the cell to the speakers in the helmets, I dialed a number I somehow managed to remember.

It was picked up on the second ring. "Housekeeping."

I stuck to the script. "I need service."

"Of course, sir. Room number?"

I recited my AES ID number. "Seven-seven-zero-one-three."

"One moment, please."

The call was silent for a couple seconds, then November answered. "Line secure. You're a go, Kilo."

"Negative. Open line. I need a full sweep."

November paused. "Open?"

I forgot I'd disabled the GPS tracking on my bike that he'd installed. "Mic'd up on the MTT with company. You're coming through both helmets."

"Copy. Sitrep?"

"Caught a shadow at Pastis in the West Village. Carlos's second. He had company. Evasive maneuvers until twenty miles outside the city, then took offensive action. Tangos

down. Black SUV detonated. Witnesses to chase, potential witnesses to explosion. Need security and traffic cams scrubbed, starting from the Omni to current location. MTT is now hot. Need immediate extraction. Small aircraft. No public airfields. Contact Romeo for support. See if the Cessna's available." I purposely left out where we'd been between her hotel and the restaurant. Those security and traffic cams, I'd hacked myself.

"Copy. Pinging current location from your burner. Scrubbing digital footprint now. Sweep team notified, but police scanners already picked up the incident. Authorities en route."

Fuck. "Can you get our team there first?"

"Negative. Is the restaurant where you first spotted the tail?"

"Affirmative, but could've been prior." There was no could've about it. They'd been tracking her, and I hadn't fucking spotted them. Or I'd brought them to her doorstep. Which unlocked a new level of rage. It'd taken me a couple hours to find that address in Hunts Point two days ago. Then I'd sat on the place. No activity. No security. And I'd wiped all traffic cams of me coming and going. The only other place I'd been was trailing her six when she'd left the hotel. I hadn't had a fucking tail then either. "I want the source, November." He'd know what I meant.

"Understood. Scanning the hotel's security feeds, starting with a reverse search. Looping in Romeo now. Hold."

I turned down another deserted back road and drove the bike onto the shoulder before pulling through a break in the tree line.

November came back on the line. "Kilo, Romeo's patched in. We're looking for the closest private airstrip."

"Negative on closest. Seclusion over proximity." We'd been tracked somehow, but I didn't want to fucking point that out with her listening in.

Roark spoke up. “There’s Goodspeed in East Haddam. I can pick you up on the river, or there’s a private airstrip at a seasonal residence in Bristol.” He rattled off the coordinates.

“Hang on.” I pulled up the map app on my cell and plugged in the residential address. An hour on the bike. Not ideal for her, but I could stay off major interstates and avoid the small airport in East Haddam. “Private airstrip in Bristol. Sixty minutes.”

“I’ll be by the hangar. Have November give me the destination before pickup.” Roark hung up.

“November?” I had to fully read him in.

“Still here. Digital footprint wiped.”

“Copy. Calling you back.” I hung up.

Her voice came through the helmet, and the first question out of her mouth was the exact shit I was trying to keep her from worrying about. “How did Andros find us?”

“Good fucking question.” That grunge fuck said they were all in Mexico. “I’m gonna find out. Getting off the bike a minute to make a call. Toeing the kickstand now. The bike will lean, but you’ll be secure. Stay.” I wanted her on the back in case we needed to make a quick exfil.

Dismounting, I pulled off my helmet, disabled the Bluetooth on the burner and called November back.

He answered immediately. “Line secure?”

“Yeah, but shit’s off. I’ve been off the grid. I thought I was clean going to her. Didn’t spot a tail all day. Didn’t see shit until I had her at the restaurant, which means they were already on to one of us before we got there.”

“I’m looking now, but my guess is her. She checked in to the hotel using her own name.”

“I didn’t think Carlos’s MO was hacking.” I’d been counting on it. His tactics had always been fear and volume of soldiers.

“It didn’t used to be, but who knows who Carlos has working for him now.” I heard November typing. “Hotel’s system looks intact. No breaches since she checked in.”

Fuck, *fuck*. Then it was me. And I had an idea of how. *Goddamn it*. Scanning the road, I downloaded to November the shit I’d left out. “We made a stop before the restaurant.”

“Location?”

“Hunts Point.”

November paused. “There was a warehouse explosion by the docks. All security cams in the area were disabled.”

“Yeah.”

I heard him typing again. “The warehouse ownership is buried under layers of shell corporations. The sole rental occupant is listed as a produce distributor.” November put it together. “What was actually in the warehouse?”

“Not fucking produce.”

November didn’t comment.

I scanned the road again, then gave him the intel, but it felt like I was betraying her. “Paintings.”

“Belonging to the artist,” he stated.

I didn’t deny it.

November zeroed in on my problem. “Delta or Ghost?”

I still didn’t say shit.

“If you don’t tell me what you’re thinking, Kilo, I can’t help.”

“I’m thinking my intel was compromised.” By the fucking source who gave me the address in the first place. I just couldn’t figure out why.

November pointed out the obvious. “Delta wouldn’t be party to that.”

“Agree.” *Motherfucking* Ghost.

“What was the exact intel you received?”

“Which time?”

November paused, which was equivalent to him telling you that you fucking fucked up. “Does Alpha know you brought in Ghost?”

“No.”

“Kilo.”

“I know.” I fucking knew. “Not looking for a lecture. Need a solution.”

“Download all intel you received, exactly as he gave it to you.”

“Not interested in involving Alpha or AES in this. It was me and the redhead on that boat. We were both made. You know she won’t be safe until Carlos is taken out—not taken into custody. I don’t give a single fuck what intel he has to trade to the alphabet soup assholes. He needs to be put down, and that’s what I’m doing.”

November didn’t say shit for ten goddamn seconds. Then he surprised me. “I won’t read Alpha in unless the situation becomes critical.”

“Making myself clear. Me dead isn’t critical. Not unless Carlos is still breathing. Then you better fucking protect her.”

“Understood. What intel did Ghost give you?”

I exhaled, then downloaded what I had. “Two addresses in New York and a video. Short version—warehouse ties back to a photog fuck who was in bed with Carlos. Distribution. Photog was the redhead’s ex. Jilted or fucking psycho, doesn’t matter. He sold her out. Wanted her art, exclusive shit. Held Carlos to the fire to get it. Threatened to walk away from a five-year setup of trafficking to get it. Photog’s dead as of three nights ago. That was the first address. Second address was the warehouse in Hunts Point. Owned by the photog, apparently used by Carlos as a drop location for product. I’d asked Ghost to find the paintings that Carlos had purchased from the redhead. She wanted them back. The warehouse was the address Ghost gave me. I sat on the place before I

breached. No security, no activity. Only thing inside were the paintings. All destroyed.”

Rapidly clicking keys filled the background. “Was the photographer a professor from Parsons?”

“Don’t know.”

“Greenwich Village loft?” November recited the address.

That was the place. “Yeah.”

“Death was ruled an accident. Combination of photo-processing chemicals, smoking, and witnesses said the subject was intoxicated shortly before the explosion.”

“Fucking great.” Didn’t care. The piece of shit was dead. “Still doesn’t explain how we were tracked tonight. That fucking photog said Carlos and his men are in Mexico. So how the hell did they get a beat on us?”

“I’ll find out. In the meantime, does Ghost know about your property?”

I had the condo in Miami Beach near AES Headquarters, but that wasn’t what November was talking about. “No. Only you and Alpha.”

“Copy. Head there. I’ll give Romeo the coordinates. He’ll fly you in under the radar. Immediately dump all devices you currently have on you. Disable your in-helmet comms and scan your bike for a tracker. Don’t power up anything once you get home. Romeo will give you one of his burners. I’ll make sure it’s clean. If you run into trouble before you hear back from me, follow protocol and call it in.”

“I’m not dumping my detonators.”

“How many do you have on you?”

“Excluding the one I used on the SUV, a couple.”

“Have the two remaining ones been used before?”

“No, and I’m not tossing them.” The detonators and remaining C-4 I had on me was my insurance policy.

“Copy. Destroy the one you used, keep your GPS disabled on the bike, and get on the road. Romeo’s en route. I’ll be in touch.”

“Roger that.” I started to hang up.

“Kilo.”

“What?”

“Don’t go after Carlos solo, not with Ghost’s intel and not with him as overwatch.”

Too fucking late. “Keep your promise. The redhead stays safe. No matter what.” I hung up, took the SIM out of the burner, broke it and tossed it and the cell into the woods. Then I did the same with the detonator before ripping the comms out of my helmet.

I scanned the bike for a tracker, didn’t find shit, and reached for the chin strap of her helmet.

She flinched.

I lifted her visor. “Just need your helmet for a minute. I’m disabling the comms.”

“I’m sorry.” Averting her gaze, she undid her own strap.

“One day, you’re gonna tell me what that motherfucker did to you.”

She pulled off her helmet, and her hair fell around her like a goddamn beacon for my cock. “So you can blow him up too?”

“No comment.” Christ, she was beautiful.

She handed me the helmet, then her eyes went wide. “Wait. *Oh my God*, did you...?” She shook her head. “No, I’ve never told you about my past. You don’t know his—” She stopped herself. “You don’t know names or locations.”

I didn’t say shit.

She stared.

I stared back.

She broke first. “You are a violent man.”

“I’m a breacher.” It was in the fucking job description.

“And a SEAL,” she added.

“Good to know you get me.” I started ripping the comms out of her helmet.

“Would you really, you know... *do that?*”

“Kill the motherfucker who assaulted you, made you afraid of my touch, and got in your head that being submissive is weak?” And took a fuck ton of pictures of her in compromising positions while she’d looked terrified and taken advantage of. But that shit I didn’t say. Finished with my task, I zeroed in on her haunted gaze. “Without hesitation.” I held out the helmet because now wasn’t the time to put my hands on her.

But I would.

Over and over until I fucked that fear and that asshole’s memory out of her, and the only trepidation she’d have left would be a hefty dose of sexually induced submissive apprehension from me.

Taking the helmet, her voice dropped to a whisper soaked in the very fear I was going to eliminate from her life if it was the last goddamn thing I did. “What about Carlos?”

“What about him?” I knew what she was after, but I made her work for it. She needed to ask outright. She needed that fucking ownership and power for herself.

She swallowed hard, and her voice got quiet as hell, but she did it. She asked. “Is he still alive?”

“Not for long.”

She exhaled, and I saw it. She let some of the fucking fear go.

I tipped my chin at her helmet. “Gear up and hold on.”

This was gonna be a hell of a ride.

SEVENTY-NINE

Anneliese

He didn't drive.

He flew.

We flew.

Down every back road at three times what would've been a safe speed limit, leaning steeply around every curve as he accelerated through them, he put his knee out mere inches above the pavement as if we were on a racetrack.

It was reckless, dangerous and outright suicidal.

My heart sang.

Colors screamed by—dark and elusive and too blurred to be distinctive but not synonymous either—they breathed life, and I felt alive.

I felt living.

I felt it because Andros was gone and we were not, and I shouldn't have been high on adrenaline, but I was.

Crisp air, wet leaves, pine trees, fresh dirt, cold asphalt and metallic engine—as if its very sound was the scent of speed—it all came together in a nearly perfect landscape.

Then I felt him.

Solid, controlled, aggressive, and yet... relaxed. Like this was his love language. Like he could breathe. Like this was his element as much as that freezing depth of hell in the Tyrrhenian Sea.

And that was when it struck me. That was when I saw the perfect landscape.

Him. In his element.

And he was right.

I did get him.

Every lethal, dangerous, dominant, crude, provocative, sexual inch.

He was a breacher and a SEAL and a testament to war with his brain injury, but he wasn't a survivor. He was a true warrior, plunging us toward his version of living that left no room for fear.

Hanging on to him for dear life, willing his strength to seep into my soul, I was almost sad when he turned onto a long private driveway, and the harrowing ride of fate-defying speed slowed until he came to a complete stop next to an amphibious plane.

A man who was even taller than Kavan stood by the plane as a beautiful golden dog in what looked like a military vest sat dutifully next to him, wagging its tail excitedly.

A ruthless breacher turned off his superbike, nodded at me to get off, then dismounted and pulled his helmet off before giving a short whistle and squatting.

The dog ran over.

Affectionately scratching her ears, a slate-eyed warrior looked up at me as I took my helmet off. "Missy, meet Anneliese. Say hi."

The dog nudged my hand with her muzzle, but then excitedly returned to Kavan and danced in front of him until he scratched her ears again and patted her side.

Completely thrown and mesmerized by the beautiful dog and Kavan's interaction with her, I reached to pet her, but she ignored me in favor of him. Distracted, I didn't hear the dog owner's approach until he was right in front of us.

Even taller up close, his arms bulging with muscles, he tipped his chin at Missy as he addressed me. “Don’t be offended. She prefers sullen assholes over women.”

Kavan stood up to his full height. “Romeo.”

The imposing man looked at me. “Roark.”

“Anneliese,” I offered back.

Without further acknowledgment, he glanced at Kavan. “Sweep team will take care of the bike.” He held out a cell. “Per November’s instructions.”

“Thanks.” Kavan pocketed the phone before relieving me of my helmet and setting it on the bike. “Flight time?”

“Four and half hours with one refuel outside Charlotte,” Roark answered. “You want second chair?”

“Yeah. I’ll navigate us in on landing.” Kavan petted the sweet dog one more time.

“Copy,” Roark answered before giving his dog a command. “Missy, plane.”

The canine ran to the plane, jumped up on one of the floats, then stepped up a ladder to an open door at the cockpit and hopped into the pilot’s seat, where she sat.

Kavan almost smirked. “I see she hasn’t changed.”

Already following her, Roark called out. “Missy, retreat!”

The dog looked at her owner with what I could only imagine was disappointment, but then she hopped off the chair and disappeared into the back of the plane.

I glanced at Kavan. “She’s well trained.”

“She is.”

“Is she a military or service dog?”

“She’s Missy.” His hand landed on the small of my back. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” Four and a half hours away by plane could be a lot of different places.

A breacher looked down at me. "My house."

EIGHTY

Kilo

Roark gave me the controls, and I set his amphibian Cessna Grand Caravan down in the ocean fronting my property.

Pulling the turbo prop in as close to shore as I was comfortable with, I cut the engine and glanced at Roark. “Not tying her down. Using the rear exit. Give me a second to get us off the sand before you fire her up again.” I didn’t want shit kicking up in our faces.

“Copy. I’ll close up after you deplane.” Roark glanced back at my redhead and tipped his chin.

Angling out of second chair, I unbuckled her seat belt as she stared at me with a look I hadn’t seen before.

Letting it slide, absently giving Missy a scratch behind her ears, I downloaded instructions. “I’m going out first. Once I hit the float, come down the ladder, then I’ll carry you to shore. Copy?”

“Yes, thank you.” She glanced at the dog, then at the shoreline behind me.

Thirty seconds later, after scanning my property twice, I had her in my arms, Missy and Roark were at the open hatch, and I was about to step off the float when Missy let out a small yelp.

My gaze cut to Roark.

He frowned.

I glanced behind us before looking back at him. Missy was trained for all sorts of shit. Patrol being one.

“You’re clear.” Roark put his hand on his bitch. “She didn’t bark. She whined.” He looked pointedly at me. “She wasn’t alerting.”

I fucking got it. His dog was reacting, and Missy only reacted to two things—Roark and trauma. Who she was reacting to, me or the redhead, I didn’t fucking know. Right then, I didn’t want to. I wanted us off the plane and secure in my house.

“Thanks for the lift.” I stepped off the float, waded through ankle-deep water and crossed the sand to my beach access.

After I hit the steps and got us on the walkway, Roark fired up the Cessna, and I reluctantly set the redhead down.

Murmuring a thank-you as she stared at the back of my property, she looked from the pool to the house to the ocean and back again.

“This way.” I led her to the side entry, punching in the six-digit security code I used for all my shit, and opened the door for her.

She silently stepped inside, and the lights I had programmed came on.

Entering behind her, I kicked off my wet boots, then shed my jacket and tossed it onto a kitchen stool as she walked into the middle of the two-story-tall open-plan living space.

Eyes wide, she looked around once. Then looked again.

Seeing her in my space, it hit. Possession, obsession, addiction—they all sank into my headspace, and my axis shifted. I wanted to fuck her underwater. I wanted Carlos and every one of his soldiers dead. I wanted to hear her laugh. I wanted those lips around my cock. I wanted to wake up to that fire-red hair every goddamn morning.

But I was also watching her.

And she was uncomfortable as shit.

“This is your house?” she asked, emphasizing the first word as she looked around again and crossed her arms tight, like she was cold.

She wasn't fucking cold. This was South Florida.

"Jacket off," I ordered.

She turned and looked at me. "Pardon?"

"You heard me."

"Kavan—"

"I see you." I fucking saw her. "You running?"

"Am I... what? No." She shook her head.

"It's a house. You're safe. You got a problem with money?" I grew up with nothing. I knew what I was looking at. Years ago, before I made bank at AES and some contract gigs, I would've had the same reaction to an eight-thousand-square-foot oceanfront pad.

"It's a very large, very nice house." Ignoring the money comment, she glanced up. "With high ceilings and large empty walls."

"You gonna fill them?"

"Pardon?"

"The walls. With your paintings."

She looked back at me with wide eyes. "Mine?"

"Yours."

"Kav—"

"You want to fuck, dance around shit or actually talk?"

She stared at me.

I stared back.

She broke first. "What's the fourth option?"

Dominance. "Take your jacket off." We'd see which fucking option she chose.

"Why?"

"You want me?" Because I was only gonna do this one way.

She didn't answer, but her face flushed.

Then slow, like she was standing in front of a wild animal, keeping her eyes on mine, she took off her jacket and placed it on the back of one of the couches near her.

I looked at her tits in her tight white top. Then I issued my next order. "Shirt."

She didn't ask *pardon* this time. She didn't have to. She saw me.

With the same deliberate movements, she unbuttoned her shirt slowly. Not a strip tease, but not hiding her natural submission either. Refined. Fucking sexy. Her. Keeping that dark gaze trained on me, she took off her shirt and draped it over her jacket.

Lace bra. Beige, see-through. Hard nipples.

My mouth watered. "Boots."

One after the other, she took off the knee-high leather heels and dropped them at her feet.

Sexier.

"Jeans," I ordered.

Slower than she took off the rest of her clothes, her breath coming faster, she peeled down her skintight pants and stepped out of them.

Lace thong.

My cock got fucking harder. "Turn around."

She turned.

Her ass. *Goddamn*. "Face me."

She turned back. Cheeks flushed, arms at her sides, my little sub waited.

Taking my eyes off her, I strode to the fridge and grabbed a water. Catching her gaze again, I opened the bottle and drank.

Like I knew it would, like it had all the other times I'd eaten or drank in front of her, her gaze went to my throat.

That's it, little sub. Watch me. Want me. Stand there and get wet.

Capping the water, I took it to the couch furthest from her position and sat down.

Then I dropped the fucking reins. "On your knees."

For a single beat, my redhead stared at me, and I saw it—doubt, insecurity, turmoil. Her two sides. They warred.

I upped the ante. "You want me?"

She nodded once.

I took the decision away from her. "Then get on your knees."

Graceful as hell, she dropped. Back straight, legs together, fire-red hair covering her shoulders, she rested that sweet ass on her heels, and put her hands on her thighs.

My cock surged, and I could fucking taste it.

I had the controls.

And I was gonna corrupt the fuck out of her starting right goddamn now.

"Crawl to me," I ordered.

EIGHTY-ONE

Kilo

She fucking crawled.

Right to me.

My legs spaced wide enough to make room for her, she stopped at my feet and looked up with a flushed face full of both hunger and flipside anger.

I asked again. “You want me?”

No hesitation, she answered. “Yes.”

“You wet?”

Her face flushed brighter, but her voice got quieter. “Yes.”

“Did you enjoy crawling?”

Immediate and unwavering, she gave me a hard negative. “No.”

“Sit up,” I ordered.

She leaned back on her heels.

I let my gaze take in every sexy inch of her before I asked. “Still think you’re not one hundred percent submissive?”

Her head dipped along with her voice. “No.”

“Look at me, and try that again.”

She lifted her head. “No.”

“Good. Then you never have to crawl to me again. Unbutton my jeans.”

She reached for my fly, and her hands trembled.

I whipped my shirt over my head. “You nervous, beautiful?”

“Yes.” Quiet, sub side, her reply went straight to my cock.

“Rules. Remember them?” Commando, my cock heavy, I watched her hit the last button and tug open my fly.

My cock sprang free.

“Yes,” she whispered, licking her lips.

I fucking pulsed. “Wrap those lush lips around me, beautiful.”

She didn’t just wrap her mouth around my cock. She fucking went for it like a starved woman. Licking, sucking, stroking my shaft, thumbing the underside of my head, deep throating—she fucking wrecked me.

In twenty goddamn seconds.

Twenty fucking seconds I let it happen.

I could’ve come on the fucking spot.

Instead, I gripped her hair, slowed her down, and took control. “You like my cock in your mouth, little sub?”

Her gaze locked on mine, she sucked me in deep.

Fuck me.

“You getting wetter?” Christ, I was gonna come.

Licking my head, tonguing my piercing, then sucking me back into her mouth that was even smaller than her cunt, she hummed. “Mm-hmm.”

Good. “I’m gonna eat the fuck out of your cunt after this.”

Her hum turned into a groan, and my headspace went to hell.

Two more minutes, and I was done.

“I’m coming.” *Fuck*, I was gonna go off hard. “You swallowing me, little sub?” I gave her a choice. “If not, pull off.” I’d paint those gorgeous tits with my cum.

She didn’t pull back.

My redhead doubled down.

Grabbing me harder, twisting, sucking, she swirled her tongue over my piercing, and I was done.

Fisting her hair, I shoved deep and fucking exploded.

Pulse after pulse, streams of my cum hit the back of her throat.

With a tremor, she fucking gagged. But then my redhead swallowed.

I pulsed harder.

Groaning, eyes fluttering shut, tears hit her cheeks, and she lost her grip on my shaft as her head tipped back.

My cum gushed out the sides of her mouth and dripped onto her chest.

Yanking the cups of her bra down, I smeared my seed on her tits.

A moan rattled from her throat. She swallowed again, and my cock and piercing wedged deep.

Jesus fuck.

I'd never felt or seen anything so goddamn hot in my life.

"That's it, beautiful." Releasing my grip from her hair to palm the top of her head, I fisted my cock. Making sure she didn't swallow me deeper and hurt herself on my piercing, I gave my redhead the praise she deserved. "Good, girl. Swallow me down, little sub."

She swallowed again.

My head fucking spun, and another stream of cum came, catching me off guard as it shot down her throat.

Gagging hard, her moan turned into a sound of distress.

I focused the fuck up. "Easy, easy," I commanded, pulsing like hell. "Breathe through your nose." I started to pull back, and her throat closed up.

Gripping my thighs in a panic, she did the opposite. She stopped fucking breathing.

“Inhale through your nose,” I ordered. “Now.”

She tried to jerk back.

I grabbed her jaw hard before she ripped both of us. “I have the controls. Breathe.” Angling my cock so the piercing was at a forty-five, I pushed her back as I carefully pulled out.

My cock fell free, cum gushed down her chin, and she sucked in a breath. Then she was fucking apologizing.

“I’m sorry. I—”

“Halt.” *Fuck no.* Leaning over, gripping the lower half of her face hard, I made sure she was looking at me. “That was fucking perfect. You were perfect. Hear me?” Bringing my mouth to hers, I repeated myself. “Fucking. *Perfect.*” I drove my tongue in and kissed her.

Her sweet moan came back, along with the tremor, and I knew what she really fucking needed.

Pulling back, I issued orders. “Stand.”

Unsteady, cheeks wet, my release all over her chin, chest and tits, she stood up.

I smeared my cum over her tits and stomach, then pinched her hard-as-fuck nipples. “Do you know how beautiful you look?”

Her face went hot.

I shoved her wet underwear down her legs, then grabbed her wrists to steady her. “Step out of that thong and onto the couch. Feet on either side of me.”

Glancing at my arms, abs, then cock, she bit her lip.

That’s it, little sub. Fucking look. “We’re just getting started. Step the fuck up and bring me that cunt.”

Hesitant, she obeyed, but she didn’t bring it in.

“Closer,” I ordered, tugging her wrists.

She leaned in.

Inhaling her sweet cunt, I licked her clit once. Then I issued an order. “Spread.” Dragging my tongue up her wet

thigh where her cunt had dripped, I tortured myself with the small tease of her taste.

Trembling, she looked down at me with apprehension. “Pardon?”

Fucking salivating for a real taste of her, I grabbed my cock. “Spread that cunt open for me.” Already hard again, I jerked myself twice. “I’m gonna taste the fuck out of you.” Right before I plunged my tongue into her.

“Kavan,” she whispered.

Grabbing her wrists again, bringing her hands to her cunt, I did it for her—with a warning. “If I tell you to spread, spread.” Covering her fingers with mine, I made her hook her folds. Then I showed her how to spread herself for me. “Hold. Like this. Unless I say so, don’t let go.”

Her face flaming, her cunt dripping, her eyes panicked, I didn’t give her time to think.

Grabbing her ass, I fucking dove in.

Her high-pitched moan hit with my first full lick.

Then I was sucking her clit, tongue-fucking her cunt and spreading her ass.

Her trembling turned into a full-blown shake, and she started to constrict.

Instantly pulling back, I grabbed her nipple, pinched, then dragged my hand through my cum on her tits and stomach. “You want to come, beautiful?” I shoved two fingers coated in my seed into her cunt.

Her hips thrust, and she let go of herself to fucking fist my hair. “Oh my God. *Please.*”

Going breacher still, I gave her one warning. “Hands.” She wasn’t gonna goddamn top me ever again. “What did I tell you?”

She fucking froze. Then a tremor crawled up her spine, and she put her hands back, spreading herself again.

Slow as fuck, watching her, not giving her my mouth, I thrust my fingers in and out of her cunt.

Breathing hard, she looked down at me and pulsed.

“Need to come?”

She begged. Sweetly. “Yes, *please.*”

Keeping my fingers in her, grasping her throat, I stood. Abruptly.

Suspended on my hand, at my mercy in my grip, her toes barely on the couch, she gasped.

She was fucking perfect.

“You feel me?” I stroked her.

Eyes wide, startled, still holding her cunt open, she panted. “Y-yes.”

“You gonna let go of yourself again?”

She whispered. “No.”

“Good. Because you’re gonna come on my cock while you spread that tight cunt open for me. Understood?”

She tried to nod.

“Verbal,” I ordered.

She gave me the whisper again. This time it was all sub side. “*Oui*, I understand.”

Now she got me. “Good girl.” I stroked her again, then downloaded. “I’m putting you back on the couch.” Where this whole fucking obsession started. Different couch, different country, same fucking pull. “Knees on the seat, chest against the back, arms under you. You keep that cunt ready for me. Copy?”

She gripped my fingers with a constricting pulse and soaked my hand. “Yes.”

My cock wept with precum.

Then I pulled my fingers out, grabbed her under the arms and issued orders. “Knees up. Hands holding position.”

She brought her legs up, I dumped her on the couch, her chest hit the back, and I was on her.

Bracing one foot on the cushions, grabbing her hips, I fucking drove into her.

Her chest came up, her scream filled the whole goddamn house, and she went rigid.

I paused. “That scream from pleasure or pain, little sub?”

“*Oh my God, oh my God,*” she chanted, shaking, still holding herself open for me.

Easing back, I drove in slow but hard. Bottoming out, I ground my hips. “Pain or pleasure, beautiful?”

“Pl-pl-please.”

I angled my apadravya against her G-spot and stroked in and out. “Please what?”

“I-I need.”

“Take it, little sub. Fucking come.” Then I was dropping the reins. “But as soon as that sweet cunt gives it up for me, you’re gonna grip the couch and hold the fuck on. Because I’m gonna fill both your cunt and ass tonight. You ready?”

“*Kilo,*” she half moaned, half cried.

I drove into her. Fucking hard.

She detonated.

Then I was pounding the hell out of her.

Thrusting into her as her body shook, feeling every pulse of her cunt constricting around me, my headspace spun up, and my second release hit—like a goddamn blast wave.

Filling her cunt with three hard pulses, I jerked out, then spilled the rest of my release all over her ass and back before holding the last pulse to her tight bud. Smearing my cum as lube, I shoved the head of my cock into her ass.

She arched up with a yell, and blindly reached for me.

Shoving her back down and holding firm with my cock just inside her ass, I fingered her clit and gave her one more

order. “Come. Now.”

She didn’t just come.

She fucking let go.

Her yell morphed into a throaty moan, and she fell the hell apart.

Convulsing—her body, her cunt—her arms dropped, her legs went out, and she went under.

For two goddamn beats, I stared down at my redhead covered in my cum, and let it happen.

Headspace. Me. Her. Twisting.

Then I eased out of her ass and kissed that indent.

She didn’t move.

“You with me, beautiful?”

She stirred.

Turning her over, I brushed her hair from her face, then kissed her still-bruised temple and picked her up. “Come on.”

She didn’t open her eyes, but she curled into me.

I carried my spent redhead to my bed and pulled the covers back before setting her down. “You want that bra off?” Seeing her tits still hanging out of the top of the cups, I made a mental note to buy her underwear in bright fucking colors like her paintings.

Turning to her stomach, she buried her face into the pillows. “Hmm?”

The side of my mouth tipped up, and I unhooked her bra. “Arms down.”

Like she’d lost all muscle control, she let her arms flop to her sides.

I yanked the thing off, shucked my jeans, dumped the burner on the nightstand and crawled on top of her. Wedging my still-hard cock between her ass cheeks, I thought about another round. “Your ass sore?”

“You’re an animal.”

I fucking laughed.

Instantly picking her head up, she looked over her shoulder and gave me those dark eyes, wide with shock.

My expression already on lockdown, I deadpanned, “Animal?”

She stared.

Then I got it again. That fucking giggle.

“Yes.” Wearing my cum, her cunt filled with my seed, she smiled shyly. “Animal.”

“Remembering that.” I thrust against her ass once, then pushed off her and got up. “Grabbing water. You need food?”

“Just sleep,” she murmured, her face already buried back into the pillows.

“Copy.” I strode to the kitchen, grabbed waters, turned off the lights and went back to the bedroom.

She was sacked out.

Downing a water, leaving the other on her side of the bed, I got in on her six, slid an arm under her head and pulled my redhead against my chest.

Curling into me, she breathed in deep.

I closed my eyes and it hit. Contentment.

For two fucking hours.

The text came in on the burner at oh three hundred.

Blocked caller: *Arrangements made. Gear up. Outside your front gate in twenty.*

I silently fucking cursed. Only my house had a front gate. That goddamn motherfucker somehow found out where I lived.

Inhaling twice to calm the fuck down, I looked at my redhead.

Expression eased, no fear, sound asleep.

Leaning over, I brought my mouth to her ear. “Remember my voice.”

She didn't stir.

Sliding my arm out from under her, I got up and tucked the comforter around her to backfill my position.

Then I went to the hidden vault concealed at the rear of my walk-in closet that had steel-reinforced concrete walls thicker than a bomb shelter and geared up.

EIGHTY-TWO

Anneliese

Falling from the edge of consciousness into that brief thunderhead of clapping thoughts that try to grasp hold before you slip into dreams, I heard a whispered memory.

“Remember my voice.”

Warmth enveloped me, and I drifted past the storm into sleep.

What felt like minutes later, with dreams that were still fresh and steeped in a breacher—the frenzy of his mouth and hands and hard length, the thrust of his hips, his body all over mine with both controlled expertise and wild, untamed animalistic ferocity—I drifted into consciousness.

Stretching, I blinked my eyes open.

Sunlight cast across the room in shades of promise right before it landed on the empty half of the bed.

Instantly awake, I sat up and glanced around the huge, modern bedroom with floor-to-ceiling glass that faced the ocean.

I called out, but I knew. I could feel it. “Kavan?”

Silence.

I could feel his absence like a missing limb, but I called out again, this time louder. “Kavan?”

Nothing.

He was gone.

He'd had sex with me, then left.

Not sex.

That was too tame of a word for a man who looked like him and did what he'd done.

He'd painted every inch of my body with his dominance, manipulated all my muscles, and used me to thoroughly, violently, and addictively exorcise his demons.

Covered in his releases, I was sore.

So sore.

My jaw, my vagina, my ass—they all hurt... in the most confounding, spine-tingling, blush-inducing, debaucherous way that made my body weep and my heart want to sing.

But reality was as bright as the morning, and it hadn't been a whispered memory at all.

Remember my voice.

That had been him leaving.

That was his grand exit.

I looked at the empty side of the bed.

His lingering scent as elusive as he was, I knew there wouldn't be warmth there to feel, but I still touched the sheets.

Cool. No indentation. I wondered if he'd purposely tried to erase his presence or if everything had been a dream.

Before I could sink into that thought, a familiar vibration disturbed the otherwise muted silence. Glancing at the nightstand, I saw my cell, plugged into a charging cable, sitting next to a bottle of water. None of the three items had been there last night.

Picking up the phone, I glanced at the display and sighed. I had to face the music sometime, but I still didn't know what to say.

Swiping to answer, I went with the simplest greeting. "Ami. Good morning."

“*Oh my God*, you’re there. A man answered your old number and gave me this one, and I didn’t know if I would reach you, and oh thank God you answered. How are you?”

The concern in her voice was foreign to me. “Tired.”

“*Where* are you?”

I glanced out the large expanse of glass that was only partially covered by half-drawn blackout curtains. The fabric, dark navy velvet, surprised me. “Somewhere with a remarkable view.” Except the view last night had been much more remarkable.

“But you’re okay?”

“I’m—” I almost said alive, but caught myself. “I am.” I wasn’t. A true memory from last night played.

Crawl to me.

His voice, his eyes. I shivered.

Ami exhaled. “Okay, thank God, because I was worried when Jonathan called me and said you’d run off with Carlos. Truth be told, I didn’t believe it. Then when you didn’t answer your phone or return my texts, and days went by, I became more than concerned. Especially when a Kavan Darach phoned the gallery and said he was calling on your behalf. He made it sound like an emergency, and he wanted to know where your paintings were. I checked. They were delivered to the address we were given. I hope there isn’t a problem? And who is Darach?”

“No problem, and he’s... someone I know.” It was the best I could offer.

She clearly didn’t know anything, and I wasn’t about to tell her. I didn’t blame her per se, or think she could’ve prevented what had happened, but I was still conflicted. Short of not flying to New York in the first place, I didn’t think anything could’ve prevented what had happened. For whatever reason, Carlos had targeted me. I didn’t know if I’d ever find out why or if I even wanted to at this point. Wasn’t last night supposed to be my closure anyway? Wasn’t that why a slate-

eyed breacher had come for me? To give me that finality? Right before he killed more people.

That part I was also still trying to work out.

Or rather, find the proper outrage and shock, but I was coming up short. Covered in his seed and dominance, I understood something I hadn't when I'd first stepped onto that elevator and not only saw but felt every shade of the lethally dangerous intent in his eyes.

It was hard-earned.

And I'd done nothing except benefit from his willingness to kill or fuck at the drop of a hat, both with deadly force.

“Okay. Okay,” Ami replied, her tone landing somewhere between self-reassurance and placation.

Momentarily drawn out of my thoughts, I could practically see Ami trying to process what I wouldn't have understood either.

For both our sakes, I changed the subject. “How is the show?” I needed to find the courage to ask for my remaining paintings back, but what had seemed important before I flew back to New York and hid in a hotel suite no longer felt significant.

The concern evaporated from her tone as she confidently slid into her curator role. “Sold out, and I'm fielding daily inquiries.”

The news should have been good or at least financially reassuring, especially given my current situation. But I was looking at an empty half of a bed, and there was not only a sticky mess between my legs, there were also reminders on my breasts, my stomach, my ass and my lower back. It was as if he'd been trying to paint me like I wanted to paint him, and I was feeling anything but elated. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome. Are you coming to the official opening next week?”

I inhaled. Then I tried to convince myself. It would be courteous to go, the show had sold out, I was a professional,

and making an appearance would help my career. It was the right thing to do, and I always did the right thing.

But did I?

I'd walked away from a show five years ago without a word.

I'd walked away from a SEAL without a word.

I'd been in New York for two days and hadn't returned one of her messages.

None of that was professional or the *right thing*.

"Anneliese?"

"I'm sorry."

"Oh. Of course. I understand." Ami misunderstood my response.

I'd only intended to apologize for my pause in response, but I didn't correct her assumption. I took the out. "I think I'd like to focus on new work."

"That would be wonderful. How soon can you give me more pieces?"

I skirted the issue. "I'll reassess once I get back to Milan." Then I remembered the other reality. The current funds I had were from a man known as the Butcher, and I didn't know what would happen if I kept spending it. Would the CIA know about it? Was I breaking the law by spending it? *Oh shit*. Was that money even still in my account? Putting the call on speaker, I quickly brought up my banking information.

"Okay," Ami replied. "How many works do you still have? And are they landscapes?"

The money was still there.

I didn't want to ask Ami for my commission, but if my work had sold, I was due, and I didn't want to spend the dirty money if I didn't have to.

Resigned, I asked, but not before I skirted around her question because that was another dance within the art world

you had to play. Every artist had to have an affair with subtlety off the canvas. Your art needed to be bold, but you needed to be aloof. Supply cheapened demand, but the shelf life of demand was harder to grasp than water running through your fingers.

I evaded with precision. “I may have somewhere around ten paintings.” I had eighteen. “And yes, they’re all landscapes, but from different locales than the ones you have.” I tacked on the indelicate question. “Has payment come through on the remaining sales?”

“That sounds wonderful on the paintings, and yes, the sales transactions have all gone through. I have your commission. I just wanted to... hear your voice before I made the transfer. I’ll do that as soon as we hang up. Are those ten pieces ready to ship? I can arrange for our Rome offices to take care of it. We have some very interested buyers, and now would be a good time to reevaluate and increase our pricing structure.”

“Thank you, and I’ll leave the valuation up to you.”

“You’ll be in good hands. I’m looking forward to seeing the pieces and, of course, continuing to work with you.”

I carefully avoided further commitment in my response in case I changed my mind. “Thank you.”

There was an uncomfortable pause, and I knew I needed to get off the phone. I probably should’ve found an indirect way to warn her about her so-called friend, the manager at the hotel, but even that would’ve revealed too much. It also fell under the category of things I should’ve thought to ask the man I’d let fuck me without protection before he left me.

We both spoke at once.

“Thank you, again.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Suddenly, I wanted off this call. “I’ll be in touch after I’m back in Milan.” Purposely not answering her question, I didn’t pretend I wanted a rapport beyond business.

Ever the professional, she didn't push. "Of course. Safe travels, Anneliese."

"Thank you." I hung up.

My phone rang almost immediately. This time with a blocked number.

The hurt and the certainty that it was him both came at once in a bright crimson-sienna flare of anger.

Feeling him over every inch of my body, I just wanted him to be here. I longed for his voice, his authority. I wanted him to say I didn't make a mistake about the opening. I was aching for one of his dominant commands that would tell me what to do next—kneel, suck, swallow, shower, lie in this bed of filth and rejoice—I didn't care, as long as it was him and he took control.

That was all I wanted.

And everything I didn't want from a storm that came and went, leaving me shattered.

Swiping to answer, I assaulted him with the one thing that hurt the most. "You left."

Background noise that was louder than a hum but quieter than rushing wind filled the dead air for the briefest of moments.

Then he spoke. "Remember my voice."

The line went dead.

EIGHTY-THREE

Kilo

Thirty thousand feet over Zamora, I stared at my cell.

She was in my fucking head.

Her scent, her voice, her tight cunt, the way she'd detonated.

That body. Her hair.

Her.

All of her.

Fuck.

Four minutes ago, I got an alert that she had an incoming call. I saw red. Then I traced the number. The curator.

I hadn't warned her not to talk.

My knee bounced.

My cell lit up with another alert.

She was checking her bank balance.

My thumb hovered over the number to call her.

I let another thirty seconds tick by.

Then another.

Ghost called from the cockpit. "Fifteen minutes to the drop zone. Check equipment."

"Copy."

Thirty more seconds.

Another alert came through. *Call ended.*

I hit her number and held the cell to my right ear.

One ring and that accent she claimed she didn't have was in my head as she threw shade stronger than a lion breathing down my neck. "You left."

Absorbing the accusation, I took the hit. Then I gave her an order. "Remember my voice."

Not waiting for a response, I ended the call and powered down my cell before checking my gear.

Pretending to not have heard me, Ghost glanced back. "Last chance."

"For what?" I needed to fuck her again.

"Avoiding death, for one."

I was already dead. The redhead was killing me. "You're shit for scare tactics."

"That wasn't a scare tactic. He captured a Tier One once."

"Rumor."

"Fact."

I didn't say shit. I double-checked my reserve chute and wondered if she'd jump out of a plane with me if I strapped her to my chest, and told her I had the controls.

Ghost kept fucking talking. "Where do you think the nickname came from?"

I didn't answer. If he was so goddamn concerned, then he shouldn't have set this shit up, given me the intel on the compound, then agreed to fly me in after I'd refused to deal with another one of his pilots that I didn't fucking know.

He answered his own damn question. "Guy was Delta Force. MIA. I was sent in. Three days later, I found the aftermath. Took me two minutes to recognize what I was looking at. Butchered was the most palatable description I had for the after-action review."

I glanced at him. "You gave Carlos his nickname?"

“No.”

This asshole. I checked my oxygen and mask.

“I used a particular verb in debrief. It stuck for a reason.”

If that shit were true, direct action would’ve been taken sooner. “Then how come he’s still breathing? A drone strike would’ve ended him years ago.”

“Think about that.”

Cryptic prick. “Like I told Alpha, I’m not paid to think.”

“Right. Breacher.”

“Breach,” I confirmed. “One fucking job.” That’s all I had to do after his HALO jump. “Set my charges. Exfil. Detonate.” In and out. Done. Except it’d take me three nights to wire the heavily secured compound.

“Seemingly simple, yet never done with this HVT before.”

Not mentioning the boat, drilling my glare into the back of this motherfucker’s head, I waited.

Ghost glanced back. “Three minutes to DZ.”

“Don’t mistake me for one of the Team guys we served with. I’m not your brother. I’m not your fucking subordinate, and I’m sure as hell not gonna bite on that carrot you think you’re dangling. You got actionable intel, then download. Otherwise, save your breath.” I had a fucking mission to complete. Carlos had seen the redhead, and he’d seen me. It was him or us, and I wasn’t letting her go down like that.

Ghost almost smiled. “Do you know what the difference is between you, Delta and Whiskey?”

“Don’t care.” Just because the three of us had been pulled from the Teams a few times while we were active duty for some Black Ops missions at Ghost’s request didn’t make us friends. Conversing with this motherfucker was equivalent to setting your own charge and giving him the detonator. It was only a matter of time before he used whatever you said against you.

“They’re easy to read. Delta can’t leave any threads until they’re unraveled. Whiskey likes the hunt. But you? You claim an affinity for explosives. I think it’s more than that.”

I’d been trying to blow up my life since long before a redhead stepped onto an elevator and into my headspace.

Ignoring Ghost’s bullshit, I checked my altimeter. “Time?”

“One minute. You want me to pass anything along to the artist in case you’re not at the extraction point in seventy-two hours?”

“I’ll fucking be there, and don’t ever go to my goddamn house again. You do, you’re dead.” Not letting this asshole get in my head, I gave him fair warning. “Opening the hatch in ten seconds.”

“Copy.” Ghost pulled his oxygen mask on.

I secured mine, and opened the door.

He gave me the all clear.

I jumped.

EIGHTY-FOUR

Anneliese

The second call came a day later.

Late, almost midnight, blocked number—I knew it was him.

Lying in a new bed in a new place, I told myself not to answer.

By the second ring, I was sitting up and swiping my finger across the screen.

Still hurt, still sore, still angry, but more hurt than mad, I again didn't give him the opportunity to speak first. "I didn't stay."

"I know."

This time, the background noise painted a wide canvas of an outdoor nighttime landscape. Trilling insects, a soft, rustling wind, a distant call of a wild animal. I envisioned a star-studded sky. It hurt more that he was looking at it without me than the fact that he'd left. I didn't know how to process that. "What do you want?" He was living life, and I was... in another nomadic short-term rental.

There was a pause.

It lasted so long, I wasn't sure if he was going to answer.

Then it came.

Lower, deeper, quieter, he gave me his three words, but this time he said them with more significance. "Remember my voice."

“What does that mea—”

The line was already dead.

I lay back down on the too-soft bed in the first short-term rental with immediate occupancy that I’d been able to find yesterday morning.

While he was... doing whatever it was that he was doing wherever it was he was doing it, I’d been pinging my location on my cell so I could torture myself with knowing where his house was. Then I’d quickly showered in his massive bathroom, forced myself not to prowl or snoop through his sprawling, luxury home, and I searched for a rental with immediate occupancy and a view. After pulling on an outfit I’d put on in New York but taken off in an oceanfront mansion north of Miami, I’d arranged for an Uber.

Using the duplicates of my passport and credit card that’d magically been in an envelope when I’d gotten off a private jet from Italy, I’d secured the rental. Then I took the Uber to the agency to pick up the keys before going to the rental itself.

After checking out the small beachfront bungalow that was nothing like his expensive house and didn’t have the sweeping ocean views from the height of a modern home, I’d called the hotel in New York. Checking out, I’d arranged to have my tote—complete with my brush roll and water bottle that held my painting—and my suitcase sent to my new location for a ransom, then I’d hung up.

That’s when I’d panicked.

Was I really renting a place north of Miami? Was I really not going back to Milan to get my paintings out of storage? His voice drifted into my mind.

You wanna fuck or follow?

The events that followed played in my mind like a movie reel. His superbike, blowing up a building, sitting in a bistro, a car chase, another explosion, more dead bodies, another airplane ride and then a night of fucking so thoroughly, I still had his fingerprint marks all over my body.

Unprotected fucking.

And now I was going to stay here?

Near... what?

His house?

So I could wait to see if he came back to drown me, fuck me, blow up my life again?

I rolled to my side and looked out at my slivered view of the nighttime ocean, and I thought of another ocean half a world away.

Then I looked at the stars.

I wondered if he was looking at the same night sky.

EIGHTY-FIVE

Anneliese

The third call came the next night after two a.m.

I was awake.

But I wasn't in the bed with the slivered view.

I was sitting on the dark, deserted beach with my toes in the sand, clutching the cell phone.

I didn't pretend nonchalance and wait for a second ring.

I answered right away, but I didn't speak.

I waited.

And listened.

Insects, light wind, rustling of... dry grass? Closing my eyes, I tried to envision where he was, and I got the distinct feeling he was listening to my background noises as intently as I was his.

Then he gave me four words instead of three.

“Still remember my voice?”

I didn't lie. “I'll never forget it.”

“Good.”

I looked up at the stars and asked. “Are you coming back?”

“Are you waiting?”

I slid my toes through the sand and lied. “I don't know.”

He didn't respond.

I heard his breathing.

My chest ached.

My hope faded.

I held the phone tight but told myself to hang up.

Then he spoke again, but his voice had shifted.

Deep, dominant, resolute, this time he gave me a command. "Remember my voice."

The line went dead.

I swiped to the camera on the cell and took a picture. Then I stood up and took another. Three more and I had it. The perfect angle.

I rushed back to the bungalow.

EIGHTY-SIX

Anneliese

The fourth call came in the early morning, just past four a.m.

Answering immediately, desperate for more than a few words from him, thinking about him constantly, I started talking because that was the plan I'd made—the decision I'd come to after last night's short conversation. I'd told myself that if he called again, I was going to tell him. I was going to answer the question he'd asked me more than once.

I started with the easiest, most straightforward way I knew how to say it. "I was always an accessory."

"For?" he asked, his voice rough.

"My mother."

He didn't comment.

I plunged ahead how he'd plunged us into the Tyrrhenian Sea. "She wanted to show the world that she could have it all, do it all, and be the perfect businesswoman and mother without needing a man. But she couldn't do it all, and I was the fallout. You asked when it all started. You asked if trauma was the source of my... desires. Maybe it was, but not how you think. Long before I made some terrible choices that put me in a horrible situation, I was already feeling lost." I wanted to see his face. I wanted to see him. "Can I see you? Can we video call?"

He hung up.

My heart plunged to my stomach, but a moment later, the phone rang with a video call.

I answered immediately, and when his face filled the screen, I almost gasped. “*Kavan.*” His gaze, his expression, his entire face—he looked drawn out and exhausted. His scruff was longer, there were dark circles under his eyes, and he had a hood or scarf pulled over his head. Alarm didn’t just spread—it gripped at my heart and clutched. “Are you okay?”

“Keep talking, beautiful.”

Oh, God. He knew what it did to my heart when he called me that. “Where are you?” I needed him.

“No comment.”

I held the phone closer, as if I could reach through the image and touch him. “I’m worried about you.” Wherever he was, whatever he was doing, I didn’t want him to be doing it. I didn’t even want to think about it because I suspected what it was. And I vehemently didn’t want him doing that, but I also knew that if he was doing what I suspected, nothing I could say would dissuade him. God, I just needed him to be okay.

“Talk,” he demanded, watching me with those eyes that were like the color of ice at night in a dark kitchen.

I thought about all the times I’d gotten myself a glass of ice water well past the witching hour and never noticed the color. How could I have missed that? I was a dealer, and my drug was color. But I’d missed the one shade that was my addiction.

Giving me his attention, letting me know he was listening but not what he was thinking, he remained silent.

Suddenly realizing that he may very well be risking his life by giving me this video call, I did the only thing I could.

I swept an entire brushstroke of admission across his willing canvas.

“My mother put ninety-nine percent of her focus and attention into her career, image, social standing, and connections. The other one percent she reserved for critiquing me. She was an art dealer. It made for an interesting upbringing. I...” Inhaling, I shook my head.

“You what?”

I exhaled. “I was young when I first felt it. Thirteen.” I glanced from his eyes to his beautiful full lips, then looked back at him. “I’d been taken to see my father. Not so I could spend time with him and certainly not to bond with him. She never left me alone with him for that long. And she only took me to see him because it was another layer of her control tied up with a bow of opportunity. A biannual pilgrimage to show the father of her child that, while working full time in a high-profile position and traveling the world, she’d raised me all on her own, complete with homeschooling. She wanted to make sure my father saw firsthand that I was educated, mannered, cultured, bilingual, and well-adjusted.” I shook my head at a memory of her schooling me before one of my visits.

“Were you?”

“Which one?”

“Adjusted.”

“No.” Definitely not.

His stare didn’t waver.

I made another wide stroke on this canvas of admission I’d started. “I had to be perfect on the outside. Self-contained. Self-taught. Self-amusing, and above all else, never make my mother look bad. I had both no control and no guidance on what to do right, but I had every teaching on what I did wrong, mainly everything a child does. Which ironically, or tragically, depending on how you look at it, gave me all the control over who I was supposed to be. But without proper guidance, without a true mentor of someone I looked up to and wanted to emulate, I was left with nothing except this façade of who I was supposed to be. It made for an unwieldy mountain of daily decisions that frankly buried me.” Staring at him, I admitted the whole truth. “I just wanted someone to tell me what to do.”

“Thirteen,” he both stated and prompted without so much as a hint of judgment.

“Yes.” I inhaled. “I was visiting my father. He was called to work. There was a boy. He was older. He had a certain *je ne*

sais quoi.”

“Dominance.”

I exhaled. “Yes. But I didn’t know that term or its meaning at the time. All I understood was that he was confident and authoritarian. He told me what to do, and I liked it.” I felt my face flame. “A lot.”

“You think there’s something wrong with that.”

I’d thought there was everything wrong with it. I didn’t think it was normal. I didn’t think it was something a strong young woman would do or that I deserved to be so recklessly wanton just because of a shameful desire. I didn’t think I deserved to even think about such a thing, let alone ask for something so pathetic and weak, regardless of wanting—no, needing this one thing—this one part of my life to not be in my control. Because that was all I’d done my whole life.

I stayed in control.

I made every decision. I’d taken care of myself. I’d fended, formed and paved my own path. I’d had to. But something was always missing, always vacant, like a blank spot on a canvas you couldn’t fill with any shade of color because the very essence of the subject matter was missing. Then I’d met an older boy, and that missing part, that vacancy, it’d fallen into place... until I was caught.

“I think my father found me in a compromising position with an older boy, and shame is a powerful emotion.”

“No shame in being submissive.”

“When it makes you weak, there is shame in any emotion.”

He stared at me for a long moment. Then a mercury-eyed SEAL who killed without hesitation and detonated bombs with precision said the most poignant, simplistic thing anyone had ever said to me.

“Submission is strength. Deception is weakness.”

“*Kavan,*” I whispered.

“Remember my voice.” Then he added three more words.
“Live your life.”

The call cut out.

EIGHTY-SEVEN

Kilo

I was out of time.

The fucking night patrols were closing in on my position, daybreak was coming, I'd forgotten to check my last charge, and I hadn't cleared the blast zone.

I needed to exfil STAT. Then level that goddamn compound I'd spent three motherfucking nights commando crawling, avoiding patrols, and digging in the dirt to rig the perimeter.

I had one fucking shot at this, and I was *out* of time.

But I couldn't hang up on her.

Not till I said it.

If I wasn't making it back, I needed this woman to remember me.

I needed her to remember my voice.

Because that's what she'd fucking responded to.

Not my eyes. Not how I looked. Not my fucking Trident.

Me. My voice.

In a fucking hotel lobby.

She'd gasped when she'd heard me after I'd touched her. I saw the fear, I got the fucking touch aversion, but I'd also seen something else.

The shiver. The awareness. The back of her neck.

I'd done that.

Me. Her.

That fucking pull.

Staring, I drank in the sight of my redhead one last goddamn time. Then I fucking said it. “Remember my voice.” Remember me, woman. “Live your life.” In case I’m not in it.

I hung up.

The patrols closed in.

Grabbing my rifle, I flipped on the night vision scope.

“¡Aqui! ¡Aqui!”

I sighted.

The first shots fired, missing my position by inches.

Returning fire, I took out the two patrols closest to me.

Their bodies dropped, the compound lit up with floodlights, and soldiers shouted. Those fuckers ran like ants to their armored patrol vehicles.

I was still in the blast zone. *Too goddamn close.*

The front gate opened, my options went to shit, and I made the call.

Her over me.

I hit the master detonation switch.

Then fucking ran.

I made it five strides.

It wasn’t a blast wave.

It was a fucking sonic boom.

My body flew, my lungs compressed, my eardrums ruptured, and heat hit my six. Then I slammed into the ground headfirst.

Out.

I choked on blood.

Rolling to spit that shit out, pain spiked in my head, dizziness hit, and I fucking vomited.

Then I vomited again.

Heat. So goddamn hot.

Fire. Behind me.

I looked. My head spun. I heaved. Then I fucking remembered.

The goddamn compound—leveled.

Thank fuck.

Spinning, rolling to my back, I tried to fucking breathe.

Shit. SHIT.

Exfil.

I glanced at my watch.

Face cracked, vision shit.

Motherfucking goddamn it.

Exfil, exfil, exfil.

I rolled.

Vomited.

I stood.

Heaved.

Move, fucking breacher. MOVE.

Shit dripping down my face, vision blurred, ears ringing, I fucking moved.

Klicks, miles, sun came up, heat, heaving, fucking thirsty. Where was the goddamn extraction point?

One minute.

Break.

Then keep moving.

One fucking minute.

I dropped. Knees first. Head spun.

Out.

“On your feet, breacher. I’m not carrying you.”

Yanked up.

Shit spun, and I heaved.

“Here.” Bottle hit my hand. “Drink. Move out.”

I focused. Enough. Ghost. “Fuck you.”

“You missed your extraction. We’re on borrowed time. Fucking move.”

It was like trying to listen underwater. “What?”

“MOVE.”

“Moving.” I drank. “Compound?”

“Mission complete.”

Fucking unsteady. Head pounding. “Redhead?”

“She’s fine. Fucking move. Plane’s waiting.”

“Where?”

“Two clicks.” Ghost moved.

I stumbled. Then followed.

I barely remembered getting in the small-as-fuck Cessna. I didn’t hear the engine start up. But I fucking felt the altitude when my ears popped. Pain hit, and I was out.

Next thing I knew, Talerco and Ghost were pulling me out of the cabin.

“*Jesus fucking Christ, Kilo.*” Talerco glanced at the left side of my face. “You were supposed to protect your fuckin’ head, not add to the TBI.”

I didn’t say shit.

Talerco glanced at Ghost. “What the fuck happened?”

“Need to know.”

I didn't hear shit else as they half dragged, half walked my ass across my lawn.

Ghost punched in my security code.

I tried to glare at him. Then heaved.

I fucking vomited in the bushes.

They got me inside.

I aimed for my bedroom.

“Kilo,” Talerco clipped. “You're not lyin' down. We're goin' to the hospital.” He looked at Ghost. “You should've already fuckin' taken him in.”

I drew.

Aiming at Ghost, I gave the motherfucker one last warning, only because I was home. “Leave.”

“Copy.” Ghost left.

I swayed, but I aimed at Talerco. “Eat a bullet or I will. No motherfucking hospitals.” Sleep. That's all I needed.

“Go ahead.” Talerco's hands went to his hips. “Your pupils are dilated as fuck, you're swayin' like a drunk fuckin' sailor, and you're not trackin' my movements. I'm betting you can barely hear shit with that left ear still bleedin'. So go ahead, SEAL, take your best shot.”

I squinted to aim.

Talerco disarmed me faster than I could focus. “Take a fuckin' shower if you can stand up. I'll get your med kit. You still got that Zofran I gave you?”

“Yeah.”

“Go shower,” the fucker ordered.

I went.

Half an hour later, I was in my bed that smelled like her, ice was on my head, meds were in my system, and I was about to check out. “Thanks,” I muttered.

Talercio chuckled. “You won’t be thankin’ me when you wake up heavin’ your fuckin’ guts out again in a few hours because you refused to go to the hospital and get serious meds. Crash. I’ll stay.”

“Not fucking staying. I take care of myself. Leave.”

Talercio stood there. “Kilo—”

“Leave.”

Fucker held his hands up. “Fine. But one condition. Check in every eight hours. Me, November, Alpha. Pick one.”

“You tell Alpha about this, I’ll shoot you.”

“Better ’an you have tried.” He put a cell on the nightstand. “Answer when it rings.”

“No.”

Fucker pulled up a chair.

Christ. “Fine. Fucking leave.”

“You’re welcome.” Asshole smiled. “Bonus? Now you and Missus Prince got matchin’ wounds.”

“Fuck you.” My redhead. *Fuck*. I needed to tell her she was safe.

Talercio chuckled and left.

I fucking crashed. Hard.

For five days, I ate meds, vomited my fucking guts out, answered the cell every eight hours, then immediately hung up, slept and blanked out every goddamn time I got up.

By the fifth night, when I’d eaten, showered, and gone six hours without meds or heaving or blanking out, I answered the cell when it rang. “Who’s this?”

“November. Checking in.”

In a level enough headspace to speak, I’d already made the decision. “Car. Need one.”

“Can you drive?”

Not my MTT, which I noticed yesterday was in my garage. “Yeah.” Probably. “Need it by tomorrow.”

I needed to see her. Tell her shit was handled. Then walk the fuck away. But not before I saw her one last time. Smelled her. Tasted her. Felt her. Then I’d walk.

It was the right fucking thing to do.

Blanking out every goddamn day, my head fucking worse than it’d ever been, my hearing shit, I didn’t want her to know me like this. She deserved better.

November started talking again, and I had to focus up. “I’ll bring one of the Range Rovers tonight. Anything else?”

A new goddamn brain. “You know where she is?” My head started to pound again.

“Yes. Texting you the address.” He paused. “Also emailing her background.”

“Copy.” I could barely fucking focus, let alone read, but I remembered to ask, “Sitrep?”

“No one’s asking questions about the compound. I suspect Ghost cleaned that up. The CIA contact that you and Alpha met with is dead. The hotel manager too. Alpha’s using his connections to find out how the weapons were stolen.”

“Alpha suspect anything?” Meaning my involvement.

“Yes. And one last thing. The professor had a gallery. It was a money-laundering front for the cartel. The CIA shut it down, but they’re tracking all loose ends. I buried the lead on the artist’s connection to Carlos and the money she got from him for the paintings. She’s in the clear.”

I fucking exhaled. “Copy. Thanks.”

“Car will be there shortly. I’ll leave it in your garage.” November hung up.

I ate four Advil and fucking crashed.

The bed no longer smelled like her.

EIGHTY-EIGHT

Anneliese

“Still remember my voice?”

Shock ripped through my body like a blast wave, and I froze.

Oh my God. Him. His voice.

Standing at the stove with my back to the kitchen entrance and a spoon in my hand, the questions started to come, and I started to shake. My voice shook. “I didn’t hear you come in.” Was he okay? When did he get back? Where was he? How did he find me? How did he get through my locked door? How did I not hear him come in? Turn around, Anneliese. *No, do not turn around.*

“You still like to cook.”

My heart, my mind, my hand, they were all shaking with the need to see him, but I didn’t turn. I stirred the sauce and fought every fiber of my being to not drop the spoon, run into his arms, and beg him to never leave again. “You ignore locks.”

“I’m a breacher.” His voice came closer. “I ignore a lot of things.”

Soap, fresh laundry, metal, musk—his masculine scent filled every empty corner of my soul, and I inhaled as if it were my last breath. “Like goodbyes.”

“I don’t say those.”

Forcing, *forcing myself*, I didn’t turn. I didn’t look at him. Because I knew the moment I did, I wouldn’t be able to keep it

all in. So I stirred. I stirred a sauce I had no idea I would be in the middle of making when he came back. Red sauce. It wasn't the right color for him. "No, you just leave without saying anything."

"Had something to handle."

Now knowing what that trace of metallic scent was that always lingered around him, I asked what I was sure I didn't want to know. "Something that involved explosives?"

"Yes." Without touching my skin, he swept my hair off one shoulder, and his breath, warm and minty just like that first time, fell over my nape. "Domestic looks good on you."

I shivered. "What are you doing here?" *Live your life.*

His thick, dominant tone, the one he used when he'd been inside my body, spread across every inch of my flesh before his lips touched my neck. "Tasting."

I didn't flinch or shiver. A seismic tremor assaulted my entire body. "The sauce?" Don't turn around. *Do not turn around.*

He kissed my nape with the gentlest touch he'd ever given me. "Not that kind of taste."

My body my traitor, I leaned into his touch, but my mind grasped on to my hurt with everything I had. "You told me to live my life." That was the last thing he'd said to me. Six days ago.

"Are you living it?"

No. "Yes." I was alive. The sun touched my face today. I hadn't spoken to another soul since his last call. Living was a relative term.

"Lie."

My body ached for him. My art was different. I hated sunsets, and everything I knew about life had become a fallacy since his hand had landed on mine. *Remember my voice.* "Why are you here?"

His body heat covered my back as his arm snaked down mine. “Spaghetti?”

“Pasta.”

Guiding my hand, he stirred the simmering tomatoes. “Smells good.”

“It’s sauce.”

“It’s you.” His mouth landed just below my ear, and his tongue swirled.

Dropping the spoon, I spun and brought my hands up to push him away because I needed more, deserved more of an explanation before his mouth touched my skin.

But my gaze landed on his face, and shock robbed my movements as fear bottomed out in my stomach. “What happened?” I reached for the side of his face that was bruised from temple to jaw.

Stepping back before I could touch him, the slate gray of his eyes turned into the first whispers of a storm. “A redhead happened.”

He was hurt. Because of me. Horrified, speechless, I stared as the storm became a SEAL.

“She walked into my blast zone.”

My heart tripped.

The SEAL became a breacher. “My world detonated.”

My breath stopped.

His voice turned lethally quiet. “I burned hers to the ground.”

I fell into the storm.

His voice my air, his stare the swells, he pulled me under.

“You’re safe.”

I drowned. “He’s....”

“Dead.”

Dark. Deep. Ocean.

SEAL. Breacher. Storm.

Black. White. Slate. “How—”

He pulled a silver chain with an initial pendant from his pocket and dropped it onto the table. “He’s dead too.”

My gaze went to the blood-caked necklace. *Oh, my God.*

“The professor set you up. He was in bed with Carlos. Drug runner. That was his warehouse in Hunts Point. Also had a gallery. It was a money-laundering front for the cartel.”

I stared at the piece of jewelry I’d never wanted to see again. “You killed him?”

“You don’t have to ever fucking flinch again.”

I looked up at him.

The only man who’d ever fought for me turned toward the door he’d breached.

My heart shattered at a warrior’s feet. “Kilo?”

His tall, muscular frame taking up the entire height of the doorframe as his shoulders spanned the width, he spared me a glance. “Kavan.”

I breathed. Deep.

Then I asked the storm to stay. “Kavan Darach King, would you like dinner?”

EIGHTY-NINE

Kilo

“Kavan Darach King, would you like dinner?”

Fucking dinner.

Staring at a woman who'd gotten more beautiful in the past week, I didn't want food.

I wanted to fuck her, keep her and corrupt every damn inch of her with my dominance, but my headspace was fucked, and she deserved more.

Before I could come up with an excuse that would save her from an addiction that'd grown into a full-scale obsession, my cell vibrated.

For once, I fucking answered.

My gaze locked on a redhead, holding the phone to my right ear, I waited.

Alpha's Team Leader tone filled the line with accusation. “Carlos is dead.”

So were fifty of his men, his second, and a piece-of-shit photographer who had fucking pictures of her.

Nothing to say to Alpha, I didn't comment.

He wasn't finished. “A gallery owner in the Lower East Side is also dead.”

“Point?”

Alpha exhaled. “Who helped you?”

I didn't categorize Ghost's involvement as help. Everything that fucker did was self-serving. Making me blow the entire compound instead of just rigging one of Carlos's cars was my penance for calling Ghost in the first place. I wasn't sorry that all of Carlos's top men were dead. It'd made her safe, and I'd do it a thousand times over. Even if it cost me her. But *fuck*, I was pissed at Ghost. I suspected that motherfucker had tipped off Carlos's second, giving him my and the redhead's location that night at Hunts Point. If he did, I knew why Ghost had done it. Carlos's second was his head of security. With him out of the picture, it made the compound job easier. But putting my redhead at risk was fucking inexcusable, and Ghost better never cross my path again.

I told Alpha the truth. "No one." I'd rigged that entire fucking compound on my own.

I'd also taken the risk and made that video call to her. It'd been a fucking amateur tactical mistake. And the best goddamn call of my life. I got to see her. I got her words. She let shit go. The fear in her eyes had left once she'd told me her past. I didn't regret it. I'd never fucking regret it. Life came hard and fast. I could've been dead at ten years old. I could've been shot by any of the dozen night patrols Carlos had combing his compound. Hell, we could've been shot on that fucking yacht. So yeah, when she'd asked, I didn't give a shit about the fucking time it'd eat from my exfil plan. I wasn't thinking about the light from the screen giving up my presence and location. I was making that call no matter what.

Alpha swore under his breath. "Next time you decide to declare a one-man war on the cartel, don't."

I wasn't gonna make any promises. Didn't matter anyway. Alpha had already hung up.

She'd already plated the food.

"Please, sit." Not looking at me, she stood behind her chair.

I fucking warned her. "Don't feed the beast."

She didn't move. She didn't say shit.

“You don’t want to break bread with me.” Besides the fact that I might vomit it up later and my head was fucked, the last woman I’d cared about was dead.

She looked up and gave me those dark amber eyes. “I want to have dinner with the only man who’s ever stood up for me.” Her throat caught on a swallow, and her voice dipped. “I want to have dinner with you.”

I fucking sat.

She followed.

I picked up my fork.

She picked up hers.

I noticed the painting at the other end of the table. Dark, night, beach, no bright colors. “New landscape?”

“Yes.”

“It’s dark.”

“That’s what it looked like the third night you called. I was sitting on the beach. I took a photo after you hung up because I... I wanted to remember it.” Her voice got quiet. “Then I tried to capture it.”

She’d painted the fuck out of it. “It’s good.”

“Thank you.”

My gaze hit the fucking DNA fest that sat between us. “You want the necklace?”

“No.”

I grabbed the chain and shoved it back in my pocket. Then I gave her facts. “Before you, no one ever cooked for me. Third homemade meal I’ve shared with a woman.”

My redhead didn’t miss a beat. “I hope you enjoy it.”

I took a bite.

Pasta, sauce, cheese.

It was fucking good. Anything was good after days of vomiting.

But she tasted better.

NINETY

Anneliese

He didn't speak.

He ate.

Head down, bite after bite as if it were a race, he didn't stop until his plate was empty. Then he unceremoniously dropped his fork, picked up his glass, and his penetrating gaze landed on me.

I shifted in my seat. "How was it?" I felt like I had no standard to live up to after his admission, and yet, every standard.

"Good." He took a swallow of his water. "But you taste better."

I blushed.

He had a dead man's necklace in his pocket, he'd admitted to murder, and I was blushing. *Blushing.*

I carefully set my fork down. "I think there's something wrong with me." There was definitely something wrong with me.

"You don't get to own guilt for my actions."

"I... don't only feel guilt." I took a sip of my water. "And you're not supposed to confess to crimes." I couldn't say murder, not out loud, not in front of him, and not after what he'd done for me.

"You saw me take out two fucks on that boat, blow Carlos's second to hell, and rig that warehouse. You know who

I am. You know what I do. Little late for taking cover.”

“Is that what you were doing when you told me to go live my life? Taking cover?” My heart was still trying to fit his predinner admission into his storm.

“I was giving you cover.”

“From?” Did I want to know?

“Me.”

My heart broke a little more. “Why?”

“You don’t want me around.”

I wanted nothing more, but something told me that admitting that to him would have the opposite of the desired effect. “If you think that, then why are you here?” Because if what he had said was true, then he didn’t date, and I already knew he didn’t show emotion. I hadn’t known him before his Breacher Syndrome, but I couldn’t imagine him ever being anything other than exactly what he was—stoic, steadfast and dominant.

“Already did what I came here for.”

Nodding past the sudden knife he’d lodged in my chest, I added brutal honesty to my list of his characteristics and reached for his plate. “Of course. Sorry to keep you. Thank you for... everything.” I stood up and cleared the dishes, telling myself I could fall apart after he left.

“Did you give that fuck the necklace?”

My back to him, I stilled. “No.”

“Did he give it to you?”

“No.”

“Why L?”

My stomach churned. “He called me Liese.”

“You don’t strike me as the nickname type.”

“I’m not.” I gripped the edge of the sink. “I wasn’t.” The confession came out. “But he told me to call myself that, to

sign my art like that. I let it happen. I allowed him to manipulate me.”

“He had pictures of you. Some with the necklace.”

Oh God. Rage, nausea, and sheer mortifying shame struck all at once, and my dinner threatened to come up. “How do you know that?”

“You consent to any of them?”

He’d seen them. *He’d seen those pictures.*

My stomach lurched, and I didn’t think.

I ran.

I ran out of the kitchen. I ran down the hall. I aimed for the bathroom, but when I saw the open French doors to the back patio, I kept running.

Across the patio, down the steps, and across the sand.

Then I ran into the ocean.

The first wave hit, and I sank.

I sank under the surface. I sank in shame. I sank in rage. I sank in anger.

Hiding my tears, the cool ocean washed over me, and another wave took my nausea.

Then two large hands took me.

Grabbing me like a child, lifting me from my watery escape, he brought me to his chest and carried me out of the Atlantic Ocean the same way he’d carried me out of the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Except this time, he didn’t look down at me, and I wasn’t shivering from cold.

Striding across the sand in waterlogged pants and wet boots as if it were nothing, as if my drenched sundress wasn’t soaking his shirt, he carried me all the way back to the rental house, up the stairs, across the patio and inside.

But unlike me, he didn’t bypass the bathroom.

Walking us inside, setting me in the tub, he grabbed the hem of my dress and whipped it over my head before dropping it to the floor.

Braless, not wearing any underwear, I crossed my arms over my chest.

He kicked out of his boots, and turned on the water.

I stood silent and naked.

He pulled his shirt over his head, added it to the wet pile that was my dress, then he reached to test the temperature of the water, and I saw it.

Huge patches of Deep Purple Lake faded to Gold Ochre in a landscape of bruises all over his torso. They looked both horrifically, contextually in place next to the scarring on his back and like he'd been painted the color of survival.

It physically hurt to see him so injured, so I watched the veins on his hands and the muscles in his forearms flex, but when I looked closer, I saw that they too were covered in the faded remnants of war.

Guilt swirled with the steam curling into the air as he stepped out of his pants.

Switching the faucet so the hot water came out of the showerhead, he got in behind me and drew the curtain closed.

Strong arms wrapped around me and pulled.

My back hit his chest, his hard length pressed against my ass, and his lips brushed against my ear.

Then a breacher gave me a fatal sunset on a day that was years in the making. "I destroyed all the pictures."

NINETY-ONE

Kilo

For one beat, she went still as fuck.

Then she was turning and throwing herself at me.

Her arms around my neck, her leg around my hip, she fucking climbed me.

I grabbed her ass and lifted. But before I sank my tongue into her mouth and drove into that tight cunt, I had to tell her.

Shoving her back against the wall, I fisted her hair and held her head so she couldn't look away. "It's worse."

She sucked in a breath and blinked. "Pardon?"

Fuck. I didn't want to tell her. I had to. But god-fucking-damn it, I just wanted my redhead right now, and this shit could change that.

I tried to phrase it with words she knew. "You looking to get fucked to forget about those pictures and all the shit that went down, or you looking for something like that dark landscape?"

She frowned. "I am not using you."

"Didn't ask that." She could use my cock all she wanted.

She studied me for a beat. "Have you really never eaten a meal with a woman before me?"

"Eaten, yes." I'd taken her to dinner. A fucking French place. "Dinner cooked for me, no."

Her throat moved with a swallow. “Have you ever taken a woman to your house?”

“No.” *Fuck* no.

“But you’re asking if I want a dark landscape with you?”

“What do you want, woman? Me or my cock?”

“Why can’t it be both?”

I didn’t answer. I fucking stared.

She picked up on half of the program. “So my response is going to change the outcome of this moment?”

“No, it’s going to change what happens after I fuck you.” If I didn’t goddamn blank out.

“Meaning you’ll either leave or you’ll stay.”

“Not staying here.” I had a house. One where the fucking doorways weren’t short as hell and the showerhead wasn’t at chin height. “Answer the question.”

Her grip on me loosened. “Why? It doesn’t seem like it matters what I say.”

It didn’t. “I’m fucking you either way.”

“And aftercare?”

There it was. “Damn, that looks good on you.”

“What does?” she demanded, giving me flipside.

“Jealousy. And we’ll talk after I fill that sweet cunt.” I leaned down to sink my tongue into that hot mouth of hers.

She leaned back. “I’m not jealous, and I want to talk now. I don’t know what you meant by dark landscape other than obvious inferences, but you don’t do that. You never have. You’ve always spoken bluntly and honestly to me. I want that now because you were about to walk out of my kitchen if I hadn’t asked you to stay, and that frightened me. So, I’m asking. What do you want?”

Fuck, my redhead was beautiful. “Everything I shouldn’t.”

“Meaning?”

“You. In my bed. On my cock. Every fucking night.”

She frowned. “And why shouldn’t you want that?” No flipside, no attitude, she asked her question like the woman who’d crawled to me because I’d told her to.

I downloaded. “The TBI is worse.”

The exact fucking expression I was trying to avoid coated her entire face. “Worse?”

“I’m not a bright sunset. I’m a dark fucking landscape. You deserve better.”

“*Kavan.*” She gently cupped the left side of my face. “What really happened?”

She’d already sunk into my headspace was what really fucking happened. But same as she deserved better, she deserved the truth.

I gave her all of it.

“I took out Carlos’s entire compound. Perimeter was large. Volume of explosives larger. Had to cut it close. Blast wave was fucking supersonic. Threw me a few meters. I took another concussive blow. Hard one. Spent the last week vomiting. Headspace is still fucked. Not fucked like it already was. Worse. More blackouts. I don’t know if it’ll reverse or if this’ll be my new normal. You tell me to walk after I fuck you, you say it with conviction, I’ll listen.”

“And if I don’t tell you to walk?” she asked, no hesitation.

“I’ll dominate the fuck out of you until I bring that sweet, submissive flipside to the surface. Then I’ll take you down to base. Make you scream my name. Fuck you until your cunt’s full of my cum, and you’re calling me an animal again. I’ll also nurture the hell out of every submissive breath you give me until you forget you were made for anything other than being mine.”

Her voice dropped. The corner of her mouth twitched. “I’m my own person.”

I fucking stared. “You testing me?”

Shy, reserved, sweet, she smiled. “Yes.”

I metaphorically stood the fuck up. “In my bed, you’re my sub.”

“And outside your bed?”

“You’ll be my submissive artist who paints the fuck out of any goddamn thing you want.”

She kissed me.

My little sub fucking kissed me, and that was all it took for me to lose control.

My cock was driving into her cunt, my tongue was dominating her mouth and I had no reins.

I held her legs, and I fucked her.

I thrust, I ground, I bottomed out.

Then her cunt was constricting, and it happened.

I fucking blanked.

Except this time, my body didn’t follow my headspace.

My hips pounding into her. My cock driving into that tight cunt. Like she was my cure, I kept fucking her.

That pull.

Her. Me. Sex.

I felt it.

Her. Me. Us.

I breathed it.

“Kavan!”

She fucking detonated.

My shit came back, I drove in deep, ground my hips, and I fucking came.

Pulse after pulse, filling that tight cunt, holding her shaking body, my head spun.

Then all of a sudden, I was fucking shaking, and my vision was tunneling.

Training kicked in, and I was moving.

Slamming the water off, holding her on my cock, stepping out of the shower, I carried her down the hall and made it to the bedroom.

Still cupping her ass, praying I didn't fucking pass out, I hit the bed hard, took her weight, then fucking warned her. "I'm going under."

My cock still buried deep as she straddled me, two small hands hit my face. "Tell me what to do."

I fucking fought to focus up. "Nothing." My eyes closed.

"What's happening?"

That *motherfucking* tunnel. "Still concussed. Blood flow. Cock. Not Head. Give me a sec." *Fuck.*

Wet hair was pushed off my face.

Soft lips touched mine.

Hot breath hit my right ear. "Did you remember my voice?"

Tight cunt slid on my cock.

Hard nipples rubbed against my chest.

Fuuuuuck.

My cock came to life. I grabbed her hips. Her palms hit my chest. My eyes opened.

My redhead rode me. Slow and smooth.

I watched her tits. I watched her mouth. She arched her back. She ground her hips. But she didn't come.

She couldn't.

I stepped the fuck up.

Topping her from the bottom, I lifted her hips. Then I angled my piercing against her G-spot and rocked her as my mouth closed over one of her nipples.

Letting out an uninhibited moan, she fucking came.

Her cunt milking my cock threw me over the edge, and I filled her a second time.

Breathless, wet hair, soaked cunt, slicked skin, she fell to my chest.

I fucking inhaled and held it.

Then I wrapped my arms around her, turned us to our sides, and closed my eyes. “You brought me back.”

“From?” She sifted her fingers through my hair.

It felt good. I didn’t stop her. “LOC.”

“LOC?”

“Loss of consciousness.”

I felt her shift up. “That’s what you meant when you said you were going under? Literally, you were going under?”

“Yeah.”

“Kavan,” she whispered.

Too fucking tired, I didn’t open my eyes. “What?”

“How often has that been happening?”

“All week. Why I didn’t come sooner.”

The hands returned to my face. “Please look at me.”

I opened my eyes. *Fuck*, she was beautiful. “My redhead.”

“Your...?” Her face softened. “Stop trying to distract me.”

“Never, beautiful.”

“That.” She shook her head. “I know what you’re doing.”

“Avoiding this conversation?” I closed my eyes again. “Guilty.” I needed sleep.

She didn’t say shit, and her hands didn’t leave my face.

Breathing in, I opened my eyes and focused up. “All right. Let’s have it.” I made a mental note. Horizontal fucking, good.

Shower fucking, questionable. This motherfucking current concussion couldn't heal fast enough.

“Did you see a doctor?”

“Talerco came.”

She frowned. “What did he say?”

“The usual.”

She glanced at the left side of my face, and her frown deepened. “I'd like you to see a doctor.”

“Turning the tables on me?”

She blinked. “Pardon?”

I brushed her hair from her temple. “Pretty sure I said something similar to you. I'll be better in a few weeks. If not, I'll get seen.” I'd do it for her. “Good?”

Relief coated her expression. “Yes, thank you.”

“Welcome.” Now, I wanted to have a different conversation. “Nomad life. You need that?” Because I'd fucking read the shit November had sent. London, Rome, France, Antigua, Italy, Greece, Spain, the Caribbean—she'd been all over the fucking place in the past five years. Never staying more than a few months in any of them.

“In what way?” she asked carefully, like she was stepping around something.

“For your painting.” For her head, her sanity. Fuck, I didn't know. I didn't know enough about her yet, except that she escaped in her art like I escaped under water or in blast waves. There was headspace, then there was fucking headspace. This woman had both. So the fuck did I. We also had that pull. Now I knew why. Her life, mine—not so fucking different.

“For my painting,” she repeated, stalling.

“Answer the question.”

She drew in a breath, then let it out slow. “I don't know. But it's always been what I've done. Growing up, we

constantly moved. Or rather, we never had a home. My mother was always traveling. Usually between New York, Paris, Milan and London. Sometimes we would have a furnished apartment for a while. Mostly we stayed in boutique hotels.”

“Sounds fucked up for a kid.” Not that I was one to talk.

“It was all I knew.”

“Ready for something different?” Starting tomorrow, because I really fucking needed sleep.

“Is the something different with you?”

“Yeah. You, me, my house.”

She blinked. Then bullshit spilled out. “I’m an artist. Art is messy, and your house is clean. And what if we—”

“Halt,” I ordered.

She bit her bottom lip.

Glancing my thumb across her lips, I pulled it loose. “Life is fucking messy. But we fit. I think we just proved that.” Twice. “That pull. It’s not going anywhere.” Not for me. “Tomorrow, I’m taking you home. Tonight, I’m gonna hold you, and we’re both gonna sleep.” It’d been a long fucking week. I just wanted her in my arms.

“*Kavan*,” she whispered.

I stared at my redhead. Then I gave her real. “I have the controls.”

For two seconds, she didn’t say shit. Then she curled into me. “Okay.”

I fucking exhaled and wrapped my arm around her. “Sleep, beautiful.”

“Content,” she whispered. “Like this. With you.”

EPILOGUE

Kilo

Grabbing two bottles of water from the fridge, I came up on her six as she sat on a stool in front of her easel in the dining room. All the other furniture shoved aside, she'd turned the space into her studio.

I set a water down next to her before opening mine. "It's a good thing I dick you down every day." Otherwise, I'd have a fucking complex.

"Pardon?" Distracted, she looked up from her current painting. This one of fucking Talerco.

Raising an eyebrow, I looked at her giant canvas that was the size of a goddamn table. "Seriously? Fucking Talerco?"

She looked back at her work. Then she cocked her head, her hair fell in a sheet ripe for fisting, and she exposed her neck. Slowly driving me to insanity, she tapped the end of her paintbrush against lush lips that'd been wrapped around my cock this morning. "I don't know. I think he's pretty."

I almost fucking choked on my water. "Pretty. Talerco." That was it. Her ass was fucking mine tonight.

"*Oui*. In a very secular sort of way. Also like the sun, but without light. He smiles, except he doesn't."

I didn't comment on her art speak. I didn't understand half of it, but I loved the fuck out of how smart she was. This woman kept me on my fucking toes. "You met Talerco once, and you haven't seen him with his women." Talerco fucking smiled.

That made her look up at me. “Women?”

“His words, not mine.” I tipped my chin at her latest creation, then glanced around the space. “Talerco, Blade, Roark, Alpha, Zulu—how many more fucking guys you gonna paint?” I didn’t count the dozen giant canvases she’d already painted of me. All of my head. Except one of my shirtless back, scars showing. I was looking over my shoulder. That one I fucking hated. Didn’t tell her, though. She’d said it was the only painting of me that she’d *gotten right*, so I let that shit go.

“How many more of your friends am I going to meet?” she asked coyly.

“Fucking none.” Now. And I didn’t have friends. I had colleagues, I had her. Just how I liked it.

She smiled. Then the little vixen used my own words against me. “Looks good on you.”

“Not jealous.” Completely, insanely headspace-fucked, jealous. Of goddamn paintings.

“Of course not.” She turned back to her giant painting of a SARC-turned-surfer. “And I heard you. But I don’t believe you fucked down anything yet today. If I remember correctly, I ___”

I fucking grabbed her and picked her up.

“Kavan!” she squealed.

“Remedying my cock not being in your cunt right fucking now. Drop the brush and wood thing,” I ordered.

“Palette,” she softly reminded me because that was another fallout of that last blast wave.

I couldn’t fucking remember certain words. I also still blanked out more than I had before, but not as bad as during those first few weeks.

“Drop your palette, woman.”

She leaned over in my arms and set it down. Carefully. Then placed her brush on top and leaned back up. Putting her

arm around my neck, I got that faint smile again. “Thank you for having my things shipped from my Milan storage unit.”

The shit had shown up earlier today. I hadn’t done it. “November did it.”

“Yes, but you asked him to, and I appreciate it.”

Carrying her to our bedroom, I glanced at a couple of the paintings she’d uncrated in the living room to check that they weren’t damaged. The colors were bright, like the ones that’d been destroyed in that warehouse. The portraits she’d been painting since she’d moved in with me that night after the pasta dinner were also bright colors. But they sure as fuck weren’t scenery. “How come you don’t paint sunsets or landscapes anymore?”

She drew in a deep breath and wrapped her other arm around my neck, sinking her fingers into my hair. “Because I don’t need them anymore.”

Setting her on our bed, I hovered. “Context?”

Her gaze drifted. Then she looked back at me and gave another piece of herself. “I used to always search for the perfect sunset. To me, they symbolized the death of a day. An inevitable fatality that has to happen so a new day can break, which is what I was really after. I kept waiting to wake up one day and feel the brightness of the sun, not just see it. I kept hoping those colorful sunrises would be the start of a new version of myself.”

Instant fucking anger hit. “You don’t need a new goddamn version of yourself.” She was perfect. “You’re fucking perfect.”

She smiled in full. Still reserved, still shy, but no fear. “I know that now, thanks to a beautiful breacher with slate eyes and a filthy mouth.”

“You forgot pierced cock.” One that was about to sink inside her.

Spreading her legs, naked under the T-shirt she’d swiped from me this morning, she dropped her voice. “I didn’t forget.”

“Good.”

Pushing up to shed my jeans, I fucking froze.

A new painting, one I’d never seen, was hung on the wall adjacent to the bed.

“*Jesus fucking Christ.*” I stared.

Her.

Young.

Naked.

Arms crossed. Hands over her tits. She stared back with the most goddamn submissive expression I’d ever seen.

I looked at her.

I looked back at the painting so lifelike it could’ve been a fucking photo. “This the painting in the bottle?”

“Yes. I stretched it today with the supplies that came from Milan.”

I was a fucking perv. “I’m a goddam perv.” She was *young*, young. “You’re fucking beautiful.” Then it hit me. “You’re thirteen here?”

“Yes,” she replied quietly.

When she’d realized what she was. “It’s fucking stunning.” She was stunning. I’d never seen a picture of her except the one in that suit fuck’s file. But *Jesus*. “Woman.”

“Kavan.”

I was a goddamn man. She was a fucking *kid* in this painting. I couldn’t see it hanging there every day and fuck her. “When did you paint this?”

“After that... incident at my father’s that I told you about.”

I turned and looked at her. “You painted a painting that looks like a goddamn photo when you were only thirteen years old?”

She didn’t smile. She didn’t blink. “Yes.”

Jesus. This woman. “I was trying to get my cock pierced at fourteen, and you were a damn prodigy.”

She put it together in half a second. “You were already... at fourteen?”

“Fucking? Yeah.” Thirteen, actually, but I didn’t say that shit to her. She had her own thirteen-year-old story. Wasn’t adding my shit to her headspace.

I glanced at the painting again. *Fuck*. It was so goddamn stunning, but it was also fucking with me. The timeline was fucking with me. I was eleven years older than her. While she was painting the goddamn Mona Lisa of submission, I was deployed, making the biggest fucking mistake of my life. After-action review, Alpha, Zulu, Blade, Delta—every Team member on that op that made it out—they all said the same shit. I’d followed protocol, called the detonation, everyone’d been clear. I’d done my job. Those two Teams guys had rushed the blast zone. Nothing I could’ve done. But fuck, *fuck*. I was living that fucking reality when she was painting this goddamn picture. I didn’t know how to wrap my headspace around that shit. Except she was still carrying this painting around, same as I was still carrying the guilt of that day.

“And you got pierced at fourteen?” my redhead asked, horrified.

I stared at the art of a woman so damn talented, it’d given her both an outlet and the means to paint the one damn thing she’d hated most about herself. In detail. Just like the Navy had spun me right back up after that mission, with explosives. I’d done my job. Breacher. She’d kept painting. Artist. Me and her—fucking parallels. *Jesus*.

I looked back at my redhead. The same woman who’d told a cartel second and a breacher to shoot her. The same woman who’d crawled to me because I’d told her to. “No, piercer laughed me out of the place. Told me to come back when I was legal. I walked back in at sixteen with a fake ID.”

The dark amber gaze of a woman who got more fucking beautiful every damn day, took me in. “Is that when you.... When it started?”

I knew this would come up eventually. Not shit I wanted to download. But I did. For her. “If you mean addiction, yeah. Told you I was in the system. In and out before age ten. After the car accident, it was a string of foster homes till I aged out. When you grow up like that, you look for shit that gives your headspace an escape. Also look for any high that feels good when everything around you is shit. But my options were limited. I was poor, and drugs were out. I wasn’t gonna be a junkie like my old man or the woman who brought me into this world. Fighting lost its appeal when I stopped getting my ass kicked. That left fucking. It was free, and it felt good. Felt better after getting pierced.”

“It felt better for you?” she asked, curiously. “Didn’t it hurt?”

Hurt like a motherfucker getting pierced, but I knew what she was really after. I wasn’t touching that first question. “You don’t want me to answer that.”

“I think I do.”

She didn’t. She was jealous as fuck. Just how I wanted her. But any damn time we were in public, if I got checked out by a woman, she lost her shit. Silently. Then she’d turn reserved as hell until I threw down with her. Not gonna lie. It was a perfect fucking chain reaction. Fed the breacher in me. Gave me a fucking high. But apparently, I had my own damn flipside, because at the same time I loved that dynamic, I also hated her getting in that headspace. I didn’t want my woman insecure. But the sex afterward? *Fuck*. Goddamn double-edged sword.

I laid it out, exactly how it would go down. “If I feed that shit into your headspace, you’ll get jealous. Then I’ll fuck you hard, you’ll get sore, and I’ll be on lockdown for two days. Reins in, relegated to soft fucking.” I wasn’t fucking soft. Full stop.

“You’re going to fuck me anyway and—wait.” She frowned. “You know how to be soft?” A taste of that attitude she had came out, complete with a side of sexy vixen. “Kavan Darach King, you’ve been holding out on me.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You want me soft, woman?” Calling her on her bullshit, hitting the bed, I lay on my back and threaded my hands behind my head. “Go ahead. Have at it.”

“No! *Non!*” Climbing me, straddling my hips, she was already pulling at my wrists. “Stop it. That is not what I meant, and you know it.”

“Not soft.” I winked.

Her cheeks flushed, and she stilled. “No, you’re not soft.” I got her shy, reserved smile. “You’re you.”

I caught her face. “You’re fucking beautiful.”

“You’re art,” she replied, soft and quiet.

“Breacher, woman,” I warned, dragging my thumb over those lush lips that’d sucked me this morning before I’d taken her cunt with my mouth. “You’re the artist.”

She kissed my thumb. “You’re my best subject.”

No, I wasn’t. “Not even close.” I looked back at her self-portrait. “Christ, woman.” I knew she had talent. I liked her art. But this put every damn thing about her in perspective. “Now I know why you dissect shit.” She’d already mastered making shit look real.

“Pardon?” She crawled off me and curled into my side.

“Your other paintings. They’re like pieces of a puzzle all put together. Liked them, but not gonna lie, didn’t get them until now. You already figured out how to blow shit up. Now you do controlled detonations of color.” Her, me. Parallels.

She didn’t say a damn word.

I looked down at her.

Eyes welling, she looked up at me with sub side. Then she whispered, “I love you, Kavan Darach King.”

My pulse flatlined, my headspace blanked, and I fucking stared.

Her voice grew, and she said it again. “I love you.”

I blinked.

Then I was rolling on top of her, taking both sides of her face in my hands and shoving the head of my cock home. “Never had those words said to me.”

Her lips parted with a gasp, she spread her legs wider, and my cock sank deeper into her wet cunt. “Kavan,” she whispered.

“Love you back, woman.” I kissed her.

I fucking kissed her like she was mine, because she was. All goddamn mine. My redheaded, artistic little sub who liked every damn inch of my roughness.

Pulling back only to drive right back in to the most addicting goddamn high I’d ever crested, I hit her G-spot and rocked. Fucking slowly. Because I was always gonna give as good as I got from this woman. “How’s that for soft?”

Angling her hips, she groaned in half frustration, half pleasure. “You’re incorrigible.”

“You love it.” She loved me. *Fuck*, this woman loved me. And that shit spread. Threading into my headspace with a new fucking level imprinting, but so did something else. Something I’d been harboring. Waiting for.

Her face softened. This time, it wasn’t flipside or sub side. It was my side.

My redhead.

My woman.

She fingered the hair that fell over my eyes. “I love you.”

“Enough to have my kid?” Because ever since that moment on a couch in a fucking safe house, I’d been thinking about it. Fixating on it.

Me, her, us.

Me, her, kid.

I’d fucked her bareback every day since I’d gotten her home. She still wasn’t carrying my kid, but I had a theory.

Her face fell. “You know what the doctors said.”

Yeah. Same kind of docs that said I'd be in a fucking vegetative state with one more blast wave. "Docs can be full of shit." I drove in deep and downloaded. "Nothing physically wrong with you. Shit's all there." I knew. I'd been fucking her for months. She was goddamn perfect. But I'd also been at those doc appointments with her. Held her hand through those fucking tests that proved nothing. Even watched one asshole put a speculum and two fingers in her. Almost lost my shit then and there. Was still thinking about detonating that motherfucker's ride.

"Kav—"

"Hear me out." Brushing her hair from her face, I gripped a handful. "You just had something missing." I tipped my chin at her temple. "Right headspace." I fucking knew headspace. Knew the power of it. "You brought me around from that last hard hit I took. All you gotta do now is let go. The past, the shit emotions. None of that matters now." I stared down at my redhead. "Let it all go, woman. I have the controls."

"Kavan," she whispered

"I have the controls," I repeated.

She sucked in a breath.

Then she gave me her trust. "Okay."

I sank my tongue into her mouth, and I slow fucked my woman.

Scanning with the night vision binos, surveying the compound, I looked for moving heat signatures.

None.

Doing one more pass, I took it slow.

No survivors.

I tossed the binos onto the passenger seat of the dusty-as-fuck open-top Jeep and got behind the wheel.

One of my burners vibrated.

Glancing at the screen as I pumped the gas and turned over the old engine, I swiped to answer but didn't speak.

"The Butcher's handled."

I threw the Jeep into first gear. "I know. Why are you calling?"

He ignored the question. "The breacher used enough C-4 to draw attention."

Everything drew attention from somebody. "Again, I know." Accelerating over the uneven terrain, I held the cell to my ear with my shoulder and shifted into second gear. "Answer the question or hang up."

He didn't do either. "How are you going to handle it?"

"As far as you're concerned, there's nothing to handle." He was done.

"There'll be questions."

There always were, and we'd had this conversation before. I wasn't having it again. "You have two seconds to get to the point." No windshield on the Jeep, I needed to end this call and pull up my shemagh or I'd be eating dust for a week.

"It's time."

I shifted into third gear. "For?"

"Come in."

Slamming in the clutch, I braked to a stop. Then I hit the Speaker button, dropped the cell to my lap, and grabbed my sniper rifle. Uncapping the scope, I sighted and looked the fuck around me. "You wanted out. You're out." He was also still breathing because I hadn't pulled the trigger, but that didn't mean he wouldn't snipe me, given half a chance. "Your choices don't affect me."

"Do you know what a choice is anymore?"

Fuck him. "Don't call again."

"I won't, but now's your chance. Come in." For the first time, he hung up on me.

I scanned one more time with my rifle.

Then I took the SIM card out of the burner, broke it, and tossed it. Throwing the clutch, I pulled up my shemagh and shifted into first.

THANK YOU!

Thank you so much for reading KILO! If you are interested in leaving a review on any retail site, I would be so appreciative.

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Turn the page for a preview of [GHOST](#), the next thrilling book in the Alpha Elite Series!

GHOST

Navy SEAL.

Tier One Operator.

Pawn.

It started as an order from the Vice Admiral. A Black Ops mission for a woman from a government acronym I'd never heard of. The brunette slid me a smile and said the parameters were simple. One high-value target, a HALO jump, my sniper skills, and a coordinated exfil. Double tap the HVT, then I'd be back with my Team in time to spin up.

Except seconds into the jump, everything went FUBAR.

My parachute didn't open, my backup was tampered with, I was taking enemy fire before I hit the ground, and there was no exfil.

I should've been dead. But I was a SEAL. Thirteen bodies later, I made my own way home. The brunette was waiting. With a suggestive wink, she said I'd passed the test and now belonged to her. Enraged, I made a silent vow. This woman wasn't going to own me.

Code name: Ghost.

Mission: Retaliate.

GHOST is a standalone book in the exciting Alpha Elite Series by *USA Today* bestselling author, Sybil Bartel. Come meet Ghost and the dominant, alpha heroes who work for AES!

BLADE

Battle born.

SEAL.

Loner.

Ringling out of BUD/S was never an option. Third generation Navy SEAL, the Teams were in my blood. I earned my Trident, and a year later, my brother earned his.

As Tier One operators, the battlefield was our playground.

Then I got a cryptic call. Enemy combatants, coordinated attack, no survivors, catastrophic loss—my brother was dead. Two days later, I was carrying his coffin off a transport. Except my brother hadn't been deployed at the time of the attack, his new wife was missing, and no one was talking.

Intent on answers, I left the Teams and joined Alpha Elite Security. With the private military contractor as my cover, I went looking for payback and found it—all five feet of her.

Code name: Blade.

Mission: Vengeance.

BLADE is a standalone book in the exciting Alpha Elite Series by *USA Today* bestselling author, Sybil Bartel. Come meet Blade and the dominant, alpha heroes who work for AES!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Your birthday came while I was writing this book. You would have turned nineteen.

I still have the presents I never got to give you on your sixteenth birthday. I didn't know you were going to pass just a few days before. I wish I'd given them to you early. Now, I can't bring myself to open them.

Domino is still kicking it (as the hero of this book would say). He still goes upstairs to your room every night. He sits, he waits, he lies down. Then he reluctantly comes back downstairs. I don't think Domino will ever understand where you went, but bless his sweet furry self, he does not miss a single day in his endeavors to look and wait for you.

Domino and I have that in common, looking up those stairs, the not understanding. Every day that I write, every day—period, I look up those stairs.

Speaking of writing, I finished another book. I don't know what number book this is, but as I write this note to you, I know it's been thirty-seven months since you gained your heavenly wings. Thirty-seven months since an undiagnosed congenital heart defect took you in your sleep. I still can't understand that. I never will.

This book was a hard one to write. Really hard. More so than the others. I don't know why. Maybe because the hero has an organ that can't be fixed. Wait, is the brain an organ? I'm not sure, but I know you would know the answer. Definitely something I would've asked you while I was writing. Anyway, I wrote this book over what I now call "the season"—the anniversary of your passing, your birthday, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years. (They all come back-to-back and topple in a punishing row of grief that I will never be prepared for). It rained on your birthday this year, and on Christmas. Two of your favorite days. I don't think you would've minded, though. You loved the rain. You loved all weather. I remember you telling me the names of all the clouds when you were barely in elementary school. I didn't even know they had names. I asked how you knew, and you said, so simply, that you'd read it. Then you proceeded to teach me about all the different types: cumulonimbus (your favorite), stratus, cirrus, cumulus, stratocumulus, and those mammatus ones we saw on occasion when it was about to storm. I know there are more, but those are the ones I remember right now.

I'd give anything to just watch the sky with you again.

A sunset, a sunrise, a storm, clouds, rain, a harvest moon, a meteor shower, fireworks, a nighttime rocket launch, the stars. Even the sky at midnight from the parking lot of Walmart. Remember the day you realized that some stores are open twenty-four hours? You were only eight, but you wanted me to wake you up at midnight on that day (it was a school night) and take you to Walmart just so you could see what it was like. You said you thought there'd probably be a lot of really tired people there. We laughed. Then, that night at bedtime when I tucked you in, you asked again to go, but I didn't take you.

I really, really wish I had. Even if we'd never gotten out of the car.

I really wish I'd done a lot of things with and for you that I didn't.

I miss you, Oliver Shane.

I miss your reserved smile and your love of learning.

I miss your voice.

I miss swimming underwater with you to see how long we could hold our breaths. I miss watching the clouds with you. I miss watching you grow up, live life, and notice all the small things that make every day a day to remember because the sun always rose for you.

I miss your understated joy and your unreserved laughter.

I miss you, Sweet Boy.

So much, I don't have the words.

So all I can think to give you is actions.

Today, I'll watch the clouds move, I'll wait for the sun to dip, and I'll look for the moon to rise. I hope you're watching too. I hope your view is better. I know tomorrow there will be a new sunrise, but tomorrows were unequivocally better with you in them.

I love you, Oliver Shane, forever and always.

Thank you for being the greatest gift I was ever blessed with.

XOXO

Love, Mom

You can listen to *Oliverian Fantasy* [here](#).

Navy Special Warfare Operator 1st Class Christopher J. Chambers and Navy Special Warfare Operator 2nd Class Nathan Gage Ingram, we thank you for your service and ultimate sacrifice. Fair winds and following seas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sybil Bartel is a *USA Today* bestselling author of unapologetic alpha heroes. Whether you're reading her deliciously dominant Alpha Elite mercenaries or her protector hero Alpha Bodyguards, her page-turning romantic suspense and heart-stopping military romance all have unwavering alpha heroes.

Sybil resides in South Florida, and she is forever Oliver's mom.

To find out more about Sybil Bartel or her books, please visit her at:

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