



*Lacey's*  
**FIGHT**

— PREY —



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JANE BLYTHE

LACEY'S FIGHT (SPECIAL FORCES:  
OPERATION ALPHA)

PREY SECURITY: ARTEMIS TEAM

BOOK THREE

# JANE BLYTHE



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**Cover designed by Q Designs**

Dear Readers,

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

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

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

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

**READ ON!**

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Behind her bubbly, flirty smile hides a world of hidden pain.

Despite her dark childhood Lacey Smith believes in looking for moments of joy wherever you can find them. But when a seriously hot SEAL saves her life and then turns her down when she asks him out she begins to rethink everything. Going undercover with a man who doesn't like her isn't ideal but that doesn't mean that the danger won't have sparks igniting between them.

Most days Navy SEAL Benjamin Blanchett is so mired in grief and guilt that he doesn't even want to move forward. So when a bubbly, sassy, ball of energy asks him out of course he says no. He thought that was it but now they're going undercover together as husband and wife. Lines are blurred, feelings emerge, but by the time he realizes what he wants it might be too late.

*I'd like to thank everyone who played a part in bringing this story to life. Particularly my mom who is always there to share her thoughts and opinions with me. The wonderful Amy Queau of Q Designs who made the stunning cover. And my lovely editor Lisa Edwards for all her encouragement and for all the hard work she puts into polishing my work.*



# CHAPTER ONE

August 2<sup>nd</sup>  
6:58 P.M.

So, this was how she was going to die.

Chaos.

What should have been a quick in-and-out rescue had turned into complete and utter chaos.

All thanks to an unexpected storm.

With visibility down to a couple of feet, the rumble of thunder competing with the crashing of waves for top volume, and the lashing rain, there was no way she was going to be able to find the boat again.

Staying on the boat would have been the smart choice. Lacey Smith absolutely acknowledged that. Jumping into the ocean in the middle of a storm wasn't one of her smartest choices, but then again, no one had ever accused her of making smart choices.

Loud, flirty, sassy, outgoing, confident, and bubbly, those were words the people in her life—or even people who had just met her—would use to describe her, but never sensible or logical.

Nope.

Guess she was the only one of her sisters—okay, so they weren't sisters by blood, but they'd grown up together and were her family—who hadn't been blessed with the rational gene.

But what else was she supposed to do?

Leave the poor girl to drown alone in the cold, unforgiving ocean?

Yeah, no.

Not going to happen.

Lacey didn't care if this decision wasn't the most reasonable she could come to. There was no way she was going to allow this girl to drown, not when she could do something about it.

Leaving her team on the boat to deal with the group of rich, drunk college boys who had used their parents' money to buy a couple of women they were keeping on a yacht, Lacey had straightened her arms above her head and dived into the choppy water.

Immediately it had swallowed her up.

She and her sisters had had a crazy upbringing, but nothing had quite prepared her for this.

When she was just a baby, her father and two older siblings had died in a house fire. Her mom had been out that night, and her dad had managed to get her out of the house but gone back in for her older brother and sister.

Unfortunately, none of them made it out.

Her mom, unable to deal with the fact that she'd been out visiting the man she was having an affair with at the time of the fire, had committed suicide just two weeks later leaving Lacey an orphan with no one to take her in. Entering the foster care system, her case worker had been dirty and sold her into human trafficking where she'd ended up with a man who called himself The Master.

The Master trained her and her sisters to be killing machines. She had been training since she was a toddler and knew how to fight, shoot, and wield a knife and a sword. She could withstand torture as well as execute it, knew how to kill with her bare hands, and could withstand any and all conditions.

Including the ocean.

Only water had never been her friend.

There was just something about it that creeped her out.

Not a bathtub or a pool, they seemed to contain water, tame it. Even ponds and lakes she could deal with if she had to although she didn't enjoy it.

But the ocean ...

It was freaky. So powerful that no man could control it. It took what it wanted without a care, and right now what it seemed to want was her very soul.

Kicking against the current, Lacey broke the surface, sucking in a breath.

Rain pounded down against her head, and as she looked from side to side, searching for a glimpse of the girl, she could barely see through the torrent.

If she didn't find the girl soon, it could be too late.

No.

She wasn't going to let that happen.

That girl was completely innocent. All three girls held prisoner on the yacht were in their late teens or early twenties. All had been snatched off their college campuses around the country. They'd been trafficked quickly through a dark website that sold mostly women and young girls, but boys and men as well. They'd been gone for between five weeks and two and had been with this group of six young men for nine days now.

In that time, they had lived through an horrific ordeal.

One she could empathize with far too closely.

Lacey didn't have to imagine to know how awful it had been for those girls as they'd been passed around and violated by rich, drunk young men who thought they were entitled to do whatever they wanted without consequence.

Well, they were about to find out all actions had consequences.

And one thing she knew was that nobody should want consequences rained down upon them by the world-renowned Prey Security. As one of only two all-female teams who worked at Prey, Artemis Team worked almost exclusively with human trafficking victims. Something she and her sisters were all passionate about.

Her team might not be as big and physically strong as Prey's other teams, but they were highly trained, skilled, and good at what they did. They also had an edge that the guys didn't, they were constantly underestimated just because they were women.

Lacey loved men, particularly loved to flirt with them, and was always up for a one-time romp in bed, but sometimes she did wish that she was taken a little more seriously. Not that any of the men at Prey ever looked down on her or the other women who worked there, but a lot of the men they encountered on missions thought women were nothing.

Just like those men who had bought these girls for their own amusement.

Battered by the wind and the rain, Lacey found her strength flagging even though she had been in the water for barely a minute.

How would she find the girl, keep them both afloat, and get them back to the boat alive?

At this rate, she wouldn't even be able to find the boat again.

The yacht was only a few feet away from her, but the storm had already consumed it like it wasn't even there at all.

A huge wave crashed over her, throwing her under the surface and tossing her about like she was nothing. Out here she kind of was nothing.

If you wanted to feel small and inconsequential then jump into the ocean.

Kicking with all her might, she broke the surface again and sucked in a couple of breaths of air, knowing that at any second the water could just wash her away.

While she tread water, Lacey lifted a hand and tried to use it to shield her eyes. How was she supposed to spot the missing girl when the ocean and rain kept tossing water in her face?

A crack of lightning split through the night, lighting the sky and everything beneath it for a couple of precious seconds.

Lacey didn't waste a single one of them.

There.

Around ten yards away from her was the girl. Dressed in nothing but a flimsy white satin nightgown, there was no way the teen could survive long in this frigid water.

Even dressed in the wetsuit beneath her clothes, Lacey could feel the cold seeping into her body. They had to get out of the water quickly or it wouldn't only be the storm that was a risk to them, it would be hypothermia as well.

With quick, even strokes, Lacey fought against the waves trying to toss her in the opposite direction. She had to get to the girl.

Had to.

Only it felt like she was making zero progress.

Another bolt of lightning lit up the night, and she caught a glimpse of the teenager. Closer than she had realized. She was making progress after all.

Blocking out everything else, Lacey focused only on swimming.

Kicking her feet.

Cartwheeling her arms.

Exhaustion tugged at her already. It took almost more strength than she possessed to make any headway against the churning sea.

A battle she wasn't sure she was going to win.

Panic threatened to claw at her.

She felt trapped out here.

Despite the ocean's vastness, she felt like the world was folding in on her.

The storm was too wild, and she realized far too late that jumping in as soon as she saw the girl get tossed overboard had been a mistake.

One she couldn't take back.

She was out here now and wasn't even sure if anyone knew that she'd jumped into the water after the teenager.

That meant she was on her own.

Whether that poor girl lived or died was on her shoulders.

The tremendous pressure was enough to keep her panic at bay, and she pushed on, refusing to give up.

Giving up wasn't in her DNA.

So onward she plodded.

The current was trying to drag her out to sea, the waves wanted to push her down into their murky depths, and the torrential rain pounded on her head like a million tiny hammers.

It was hell.

A cold, wet hell.

One that seemed never-ending.

Water in all directions, above and below, left and right, before her and behind her.

Everywhere.

Consuming her.

Eating her alive.

Claiming her.

Killing her.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 2<sup>ND</sup>

7:22 P.M.

BENJAMIN "RABBIT" Blanchett frowned as he watched the woman jump off the yacht.

What was she thinking?

The storm was a bad one, and unless you were the world's best swimmer there was no way you were making it out of the water alive.

Not that he thought he was the world's *best* swimmer, but Ben was a SEAL, and even he would think twice about throwing himself into the rolling waves that were big enough to crush a boat, let alone a single human.

Suicide.

Whatever she'd been thinking was irrelevant. She had pretty much just committed suicide.

"One overboard," he announced to his team.

"Two."

He turned to face whoever had shouted the word and found a pretty raven-haired beauty with green eyes. Since he had been briefed on who they were coming to assist he recognized the woman as Pearl Masters. One of the four members of Prey Security's Artemis team she had recently married a former Delta, former DEA Agent, turned owner of the Imogen Masters' Hope Center. The charity helped women and children who had been trafficked recover in a safe environment as they learned to readjust to life again. While formed only within the last couple of months, the center had already provided care, support, and counseling to dozens of victims.

"Two?" he asked, watching the woman warily. While she was no threat to him—she was already married—he made it a point to always keep his distance from the opposite sex. Victims he could handle, they also weren't a threat to him, but any other woman had the potential to destroy him.

"There were three women we were sent in to rescue, we only have two. All six targets are secured," Pearl informed him.

So, the woman had jumped in after one of the victims Artemis Team had been sent in to rescue.

Perfect.

Suicidal he could work with, but a woman with a hero complex who was overly confident in her abilities would be much harder to cope with when he went in after them.

"She shouldn't have done that," Ben said flatly.

Pearl bristled. "What should she have done then? Just let the poor girl drown? She's only nineteen, and she's just been through hell. What would you have done?"

The question was pointless as well as rhetorical.

He was a SEAL. This woman while highly trained, was much smaller than him, which meant she had less strength and less stamina. She would also succumb to the cold much quicker than he would have.

“You knew we were minutes away, she should have waited,” Ben said.

Even through the power of the storm, the woman’s anger resonated clearly. Pearl turned her back on him and stalked away. He was sure she was muttering insults, but he cared little for what people thought about him.

This was a job.

A mission.

In and out.

Assist Artemis Team in transporting their three victims and six prisoners back to shore. It was pure luck his team had been close by, close enough to be of use once the storm blew in. Luckier now that there were two women in need of rescuing.

Since seconds counted in these conditions, Ben took a moment to watch the waves and the direction the water was flowing so he knew where the two women were likely to have been dragged off. He then dived into the raging ocean.

Storms were his passion for the last few years. He studied them and followed them when he got a chance. Not a storm chaser per se, he was an enthusiast, and he felt the power of the thunderstorm flow through his body as he hit the water.

Between the waves, the wind, and the rain it was hard going, but he worked with the ocean instead of against it, and a minute or two later he spotted them up ahead.

Surprise hit him when he saw that the woman had somehow managed to reach the victim, had an arm around her, and was even towing her in the direction of the yacht.

Respect followed.

He’d made a mistake in underestimating her. Ben didn’t know which of the other three Artemis team members she was, but it was obvious she was a whole lot stronger and more capable than he had given her credit for.

With smooth strokes, he closed the distance between them. When he touched a hand on her shoulder the woman startled, looking up at him in shock for a second before her face broke into a grin he only caught because of a well-timed flash of lightning.

That smile was pure sunshine.

If you bottled it, you could make a fortune.

Because the sudden lightening of his soul shook him, Ben lashed out in frustration.

“You shouldn’t have jumped in after her,” he said, reaching for the teenager and pulling her against his body.

Instead of responding with irritation, a laugh sounded over the storm. If anything, it seemed he had amused her.

His frustration grew.

This woman had no right to be putting her life at risk in such a reckless manner, no right to make him feel lighter with her smile, and no reason to ignore his anger like it didn’t exist.

It existed for a very good reason.

The only reason he was still sane.

Or at least marginally sane.

Turning his back on the woman, Ben began to swim toward the yacht when he realized he should check to make sure the Artemis woman wasn’t going to drown. She might have managed to annoy him in the whole three minutes or so that he’d known her, but he didn’t want her death on his conscience.

He already had enough to deal with on that front.

“You need help?” he growled.

“Nope, I can make it, easy-peasy.”

When he looked over his shoulder, he found she was right there, keeping pace, following along.

Maybe she really could do it on her own.

Unsure if he was more irritated with himself for respecting her more with each passing second or her for making him feel anything, he focused on his task.

Get the girl to the yacht, get Artemis Team to shore, and head home.

Simple steps. That was how he got through each day.

It wasn’t like this was the first time he’d worked with a woman. While there were no women in the SEALs they often worked with the CIA, NSA, DEA, and that meant working with whatever agents were assigned to the case, quite often female ones. He always did his best to treat them as he would a male agent, but he was sure more often than not he failed.

Wasn’t their fault.

Not at all.

Ben wasn’t sexist, he knew women were strong and capable, but women held the power to destroy what was left of him if he let them.

So, he couldn’t let them.



Reaching the yacht, he hoisted the teenager up into the waiting arms of his teammates. The girl hadn't resisted him once, and he hoped that didn't mean she was already dead.

When he turned to grab the Artemis woman and help her into the yacht, he froze.

She wasn't there.

Damn.

Flinging himself back into the waves, he backtracked the way he'd come. She'd been doing so well, and he'd been so intent on getting as far away from the sunshiny woman that he hadn't bothered to keep a check on her.

If she drowned it would be his fault.

Another heavy weight he would have to carry around with him.

Familiar panic began to beat a steady drum inside his chest. This was why he didn't like interacting with women. A few seconds in the woman's company and she'd already managed to affect him enough that her death would hurt.

The further he got without catching a glimpse of her the more frantic his movements grew. If he wasn't careful the storm was going to claim him too.

*Calm.*

*Steady.*

*Control.*

He repeated the mantra in his head until he spotted something bobbing in the water.

No, not bobbing. The tiny figure was attempting to fight against the waves slowly pushing her down.

Her head went beneath the water as he increased his speed.

Ben watched with his heart in his throat, only letting out a breath of relief when he saw it pop back up.

He wanted to call out to her, tell her to hold on, but the roaring of the storm meant she likely wouldn't hear him.

All he could do was pump his arms and legs and try to get to her as quickly as possible.

Down again.

This time when her head went under it didn't come back up.

Fear coiled through him, almost paralyzing him. Images flew through his mind. The silence, the blood, the horrifying sense of loss.

Everything else faded away, he couldn't let this woman die.

Couldn't fail another woman.

When he reached the spot he'd last seen her, Ben dived down, searching the murky, swirling water for any signs of a body. It was dark, and with the storm, he was unlikely to find her, but he couldn't give up.

Something brushed against him, and he snagged it, knowing it was the woman. She'd been out in the cold water too long, under the water too long, he didn't hesitate to yank her up against his body and start swimming.

With each stroke, he prayed.

*Don't be dead.*

*Please. Don't be dead.*

## CHAPTER TWO

August 2<sup>nd</sup>  
7:33 P.M.

A MUSCLED arm held her firmly against a granite-chiseled chest.

If there was one thing Lacey knew it was men's bodies, and this one was exquisite perfection.

Sex was her coping mechanism. A way to pretend she had control over herself, her body, and her life, even though more often than not she felt the opposite.

Her innocence had been stolen when she was only ten years old by The Master, the monster who had abducted her and three other infant girls, raising them to be his own personal little army. For what reason she had no idea. The man had a knack for slipping through their fingers any time they got close so she might never know why she had been taken.

The whys didn't really matter. All that did was that something inside her had been broken.

Too broken to ever be repaired.

"Almost there."

The voice rumbled through the chest she was held against, and she realized—somewhat hazily—that they were still in the ocean.

Probably not a good thing that the raging storm and crashing waves had faded into nothingness in her mind.

Maybe she gave an answer?

To be honest, Lacey wasn't really sure.

Everything seemed so different, so ... pale.

Not vivid like it had been when she'd been towing Carmela toward the yacht. The girl had battled against her at first, dragging Lacey beneath the surface several times before exhaustion took over and the teenager became dead weight.

Dead weight that continued to pull her down toward the sandy bottom of the ocean dozens of feet beneath them.

Fighting against it had felt futile, but it wasn't in her DNA to give up.

So she'd kicked as hard as she could, used her free arm to propel herself through the sea, and prayed she had enough strength to get herself and the girl to the yacht.

Then out of the storm emerged a savior.

All black and strong, bringing with him the confidence of someone who didn't fear much of anything.

Was he the one who had spoken?

The owner of all the muscles?

She didn't know his name, but if he somehow managed to get them both back onto the yacht before they became victims of the storm then she definitely wanted to learn it.

Oh, and learn a whole lot more about those muscles.

Lacey bet he had them all over. She loved a nice chiseled six-pack, but who didn't? And well-defined legs? Also sexy. But what really made her heart flutter and heat pool between her legs was muscled arms.

Mmm.

So sexy.

There was just something about being held by strong, muscled arms that made her feel safe and protected.

"Take her."

The shouted words made her flinch, and like a bubble had been popped, the cold began seeping into her body. The rain pounded on her head hard enough to give her a headache, and if it weren't for the sturdy hands gripping her hips, she knew she would have been washed away by the ocean.

"Too loud," she mumbled, but she doubted he heard her because the wind tore her words away the second they were out of her mouth.

Those hands lifted her, hoisting her out of the water, and then more hands were grabbing at her, lifting her up.

For a moment, it felt like she was left dangling in mid-air, but then she was being laid down on something hard.

The yacht.

Relief stole her ability to do anything else but sit there and shiver violently. This was exactly why she hated the ocean. It could be so ruthless in its desire to destroy and claim anything that entered it.

Much better to stay on dry land.

“She okay?” The voice belonged to her savior. Even though she’d heard it only above the howl of the wind she’d recognize it anywhere. It resonated with her like it had been tattooed on her psyche.

Hands tugged at the hem of her black long-sleeve t-shirt, pulling the sodden material up.

“Usually m-make a guy b-buy me a d-drink b-before I let h-him undress m-me,” she said, her voice slurred like she was drunk, only she *never* got drunk. One drink was her limit and most of the time she didn’t even have that, just a soda or sparkling water as she waited for a guy to catch her eye.

Those hands froze. “Are you making a joke?”

Through the pelting rain, she could see confused dark eyes looking down at her. It was more than obvious that this man had zero idea what to make of her. Shooting him the best grin she could while her teeth were chattering, she said, “Yep.”

The *you’re crazy* was implied, but he didn’t say anything as he carefully pulled off her soaked clothes, including the wetsuit, then covered her in the blanket someone else handed him.

Warmth was still a long way off, but she was alive and that was really all that mattered.

“The girl? Carmela? Is she okay? She stopped fighting me. I was worried that was because she’d swallowed too much water.”

Although the words fell from her lips in a chattering mess, her savior seemed to have no trouble understanding them. “She’s okay. Receiving medical treatment now and will be taken with the others to the hospital when we get back to shore.”

The journey back would take them a couple of hours. They were in international waters. The stupid young men who had bought these three poor girls had thought they’d found a foolproof way to get away with their illegal activities.

They were wrong.

And she would make sure they paid for it with lengthy prison sentences.

“Good,” she murmured, letting her eyes fall closed. “Good.”

So she’d saved the girl. Well partly saved. If it wasn’t for her tall, dark, and dangerous SEAL savior then it was possible she couldn’t have gotten herself and the teenager back to the yacht in time. By herself, she probably could have managed it, but with the added weight of Carmela and the huge storm, she might not have been physically big enough to perform the task.

Never one to pretend she didn’t have weaknesses, Lacey determined that she was going to have to get herself into the ocean every day to work on her skills until she could handle anything the sea had to throw at her. It might be a daunting and formidable opponent, but she wasn’t one to back down from a fight. Especially not when she might have to perform another ocean rescue in a storm, and there wouldn’t always be a sexy SEAL to come to her rescue.

“What are you doing?” Lacey squawked as she was suddenly lifted off the ground, cradled in a pair of strong arms.

“You’re hypothermic, I’m taking you inside,” he replied like it was obvious.

“You could ask,” she told him, amused. Alpha males didn’t faze her. In fact, she loved the fun of conquering them and getting them to lose control in the bedroom. This one would be a particularly fiery encounter, she knew that just by looking at him. He was all raw power and dominance, her body stirred just thinking about it.

Maybe they could even be friends after. Since she was always upfront about only being interested in one night of passion and fun, she often remained friends with the guys she slept with. It certainly made life interesting, and she was all for as much fun as she could squeeze in between missions.

All she got in response was a huff, which made her laugh.

Toughy gruffies, that was what she always called the grumpy, growly alphas who thought emotions were for girls only. Even if all she had to offer them was one night where they got to relax and enjoy themselves, show them the brighter side of life, how nice it was to talk and laugh and let go, she thought it was worth it.

Even if it did mean she lost another portion of her soul.

As soon as they were inside, out of the wind and rain, Lacey moaned in relief and rested her head against the SEAL’s shoulder.

For one microsecond he paused, almost stumbled. An emotion she

couldn't get a read on flashed across his face.

Before she had a chance to ask what that was all about, they were entering the yacht's living space, and her sisters came rushing over, asking if she was okay and what she had been thinking jumping in on her own without alerting anyone to what she was going to do.

Later, she'd answer all their questions and ask more of her own about the girls and the men, but right now, there was something she needed to know.

The SEAL set her down on the couch and paused almost absentmindedly to make sure the blanket was tucked around her leaving only her face free and her hands so she could take the mug of steaming tea her sister Opal pushed into them.

When he turned to leave, she reached out and snagged his hand. "Wait. What's your name?" How could she track him down later if she didn't even know who he was?

Looking down at their joined hands a frown furrowed his forehead. "Ben. My name is Ben."

Abruptly he pulled free of her grasp and turned to stalk away.

There was something intriguing about Ben, and she hoped that when everyone was safe and the men had been taken into police custody, the two of them could burn up the sheets for one night of fun.

Just one.

Because one was all a broken soul had to offer.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 2<sup>ND</sup>

10:02 P.M.

"BEN."

The voice calling his name made him freeze.

Not so much because it was pure sweet sex, but because no one ever called him Ben. His mom called him Benny just like she had from the time he was born. His dad called him Benjamin in that serious tone his dad always used. His two older sisters called him Bunny just to annoy him because they knew he hated the Benjamin Bunny reference. His teammates called him

Rabbit.

No one called him Ben.

No one.

Except for the one woman he'd given that name to earlier on the yacht.

For some reason, his body reacted instantly to the chirpy sound, and he quickly shut it down.

He didn't react physically to women. Not ever.

At least not in the last three years.

That loss had changed him so profoundly that he was pretty sure everyone who knew him would say he was a completely different person.

Once upon a time before his world became bathed in bloodshed, he'd been just like Lacey Smith. Easygoing, fun-loving, with a great sense of humor, his sisters would say a little spoiled as the baby of the family.

Back then he'd thought he had it all.

And he had.

But then he'd lost it.

One moment in time was all it took for the very fiber of his being to unravel.

The man he used to be was gone, there was no going back. This man had nothing to offer anyone but the use of the skills he'd been taught as he trained to become a SEAL. So, he used those skills and saved innocents in the hope that one day he might be able to balance the scales.

A task he knew was impossible.

"Hey."

A small hand rested on his forearm, and when he looked down at it, he realized just how small it was. Delicate. Fragile. Much too easily broken.

"What are you doing here?" he growled as he turned to face Lacey.

Her smile faltered, her hand dropped, and she took a small step backward.

Obviously, not the reception she'd been expecting.

Ben bet the sassy, flirty little sweetheart was used to men falling at her feet.

But he was immune to her charms.

Curiosity filled her pretty brown eyes, which up close he could see had the occasional speck of green, not quite making them hazel but enough to make them unique. They were framed by almost impossibly long lashes, which if he couldn't see she wasn't wearing a lick of makeup he would have thought were fake. Her lips were pink and pouty, the kind that practically



begged to be kissed. She was a tiny little thing, maybe five foot two, but she had some cute curves, and while not huge, her breasts were the perfect handful. And ...

Why was he even thinking this?

He never worried about what a woman looked like.

No need to when you didn't intend to do anything with them.

"You left without saying goodbye," Lacey said, a thread of hurt in her tone.

That hurt affected him in a way he absolutely didn't like, so Ben hardened his expression.

Instead of making her turn away, her expression softened like she read something in him that he didn't want her to see.

Desperate to get rid of her before he did something stupid, he went to his go-to. Anger. "Why would I say goodbye? The job was finished, no need to hang around."

Her flinch was almost imperceptible, but she didn't back down, and he grudgingly respected that.

"You saved my life and don't even want to know my name?" When she asked the question there was no heat to her words, no anger, just curiosity.

There was no way in hell he was going to tell her that he'd actually asked which sister she was and how she was doing after becoming hypothermic in the ocean.

Better she didn't know that. Ben had a feeling if she did, she'd use it as ammunition.

"No need to know it."

Understanding filled her eyes instead of the pain he'd been expecting. "Sometimes it hurts too much doesn't it? To know the names of victims or potential victims. Eats at you. The ones you can't save, and the ones you do because you know their journey is far from over. Their open wounds will take a long time to scar."

Those words resonated with him with their accuracy.

It *did* hurt too much to assign a person to each of the nameless faces that passed through his life. To hold on to what sanity he had left, he had to keep them nameless. Couldn't think of them as human beings. If he spent too long dwelling on their suffering, he wouldn't be able to function.

Because his emotions were bubbling too close to the surface, he kept his tone harsh. Hard, cold, emotionless, that was how his team, the few friends

he had left, and his family saw him these days.

It hurt to know he was hurting them by shutting down, shutting them out, but this was about survival.

His survival.

“Are you here for a reason?” he snapped. There was no need for her to be here in the parking lot of the military base. He and his team had done a quick debrief after dropping off Artemis team and leaving them to handle getting the three girls to the hospital and the six young men to jail. Now he was supposed to be heading to his cramped one-bedroom apartment, instead, he had been ambushed by the tiny warrior.

Again, when he'd expected her to lash back out or tuck her tail, turn and run, the woman surprised him by laughing. A sweet, free sound, like the song of a bird. It grated on his nerves because it reminded him of a time when his life had been filled with such laughter.

“I'm Lacey.” She held out her hand, cocked her head, and arched a brow, silently asking if he was going to be rude enough to refuse to shake her hand.

Little did she know he could indeed be that petty.

Anything when it came to protecting himself.

Something drew him to her and compelled him to reach out and take her hand. He hated it and in deference to the compulsion gave it one hard shake before dropping it like it burned.

In a way it did.

For three years he had lived free of any attraction to a woman, pain and guilt overriding anything else.

Was it this woman or simply the passage of time that cursed him into feeling again?

If his brisk handshake bothered her, she didn't let on. Like she had every other time she simply smiled at his rude attitude. “In answer to your questions, yes, I have a reason for stopping by. I came to see you.”

“Me? Why?” he asked suspiciously. Ben did *not* like the idea of this beautiful woman tracking him down. That felt way too much like forging a connection with someone when the only connections he allowed were to his team and his family.

“Days like today, they take a toll. Sometimes you need to find a way to decompress,” Lacey said.

Decompress?

Was that a euphemism for what he thought it was?

“I thought maybe since you saved my life today, you’d let me take you out for a really late dinner?”

“Dinner? Just dinner?”

There was no blush, no embarrassment, no hesitation. She knew she wasn’t doing anything wrong in embracing her sexuality. In a way it was refreshing. A woman had every bit as much right to have sex with whomever, whenever she wanted. In another way it made him want to throw up.

Sex.

He didn’t do sex.

Ever.

“If that’s all that happens absolutely, if something more comes of the night, I wouldn’t say no.” Her smile was an intoxicating mix of sexy siren and sweet sunflower. It was hard to resist, and yet, the idea of having sex with anyone—even this gorgeous woman—left him feeling ice cold.

It would be a betrayal.

A betrayal of the only woman he would ever love.

The woman he had failed.

That his body stirred at the idea of being in bed with this confusing conundrum of a woman made him feel like he had failed Jemima all over again.

“I don’t sleep with women I don’t know,” he sneered, regretting his harsh tone the second the words came out of his mouth.

For a moment it was like the lights went out inside Lacey’s soul.

The bright, bubbly, confident, vibrant woman who had thrown herself into the ocean in the middle of a storm to try to rescue a young woman with no thought for her own safety, who had come out here specifically to thank him disappeared.

Just like that.

Gone.

Desolation replaced that light.

A darkness that rivaled the one that lived inside him.

Then like she flicked a switch, her smile was back in place, the lights back on, although he felt a distance between them that hadn’t been there before. Which was stupid since what he’d said was true. They didn’t know each other.

“No worries. Sorry to have bothered you. I hope you know how grateful I am for what you did today. Job or not, you saved my life, and more

importantly, you saved Carmela's life. You made a difference in the universe today." Standing on tiptoes, she touched a kiss to his cheek then turned and walked away.

Leaving him staring after her because, yep, he watched her leave.

There was an ache in his chest as he did.

Lacey Smith was nothing to him, and yet somehow, he felt that tonight he had failed her, he just had no idea how.

## CHAPTER THREE

August 2<sup>nd</sup>  
11:49 P.M.

SHE FELT COLD TONIGHT.

It had nothing to do with her dip in the ocean earlier. By the time they'd reached the shore Lacey had warmed up enough to ditch the blankets and tea and find some dry clothes to put on.

Between the warm summer evening and the throng of people dancing and making out inside the bar, she shouldn't be cold. But this cold wasn't due to nature, it was inside.

Deep inside in a place she pretended didn't exist.

She'd always hoped that if you painted something in enough bright colors you could eradicate the black beneath it.

But you couldn't.

No matter how many layers you put on that black it was still there, ready to show through when anyone scraped away some of the color.

Like Ben had done to her earlier.

It wasn't that he'd turned her down for sex, that was his right, and while it didn't happen very often, he wasn't the first man not to be interested in sleeping with her. It was the way he'd gone about it.

He'd wanted to hurt her.

Wanted to lash out.

Lacey wasn't stupid, it was pretty obvious that the man was dealing with

some sort of heavy trauma. She knew it because she carried that same burden. But just because you were hurting didn't mean it was okay to lash out and hurt others.

You never truly knew what someone else was dealing with.

Even a smile could hide a whole load of pain.

Ben didn't know it, but he'd scratched away several layers of her colorful paint today by making her feel like a cheap hooker.

So, she liked sex, so what?

If she was a man, nobody would try to make her out to be a whore, but because she was a woman and wasn't looking for a commitment that somehow made her less.

It sucked, big time. Because she liked sex, liked that it let her control her own body's release rather than having that control snatched away from her.

Wasn't like she was asking Ben for a commitment and a marriage proposal. One night of fun, dinner, maybe some dancing, and a few hours burning up the sheets. It would have worked off the stress of the mission, made them both feel good, and then they could have gone their separate ways in the morning.

If that wasn't what he wanted he could have just let her take him for dinner to say thank you. Or just said no but said it in a nice way. There was no reason to make her feel like a piece of garbage. She'd felt like that enough for a hundred lifetimes.

Instead of going to sleep tonight satisfied and held in the arms of a strong, capable man, she'd go to sleep alone. Again.

Just because she wasn't looking for what Ivory had found with Roman or Pearl had found with Jesse, it didn't mean she didn't get lonely sometimes.

Oh well.

No sense in dwelling on it.

She'd paint that color back on one smile, one laugh at a time until the black was all covered over again.

"Hey, beautiful."

The words pulled her out of her funk, and Lacey smiled at the man standing beside her table.

After leaving the base completely humiliated, she decided to stop by her favorite club. It was late, the place was packed, the music was playing, and she was starving. Needing some space, she'd kept her gaze on her food so no one approached her, but this guy had come up to her anyway.

“Hey,” she said, attempting to shoot him a flirty smile but pretty sure she failed quite dismally.

“May I?” he asked as he nodded at the chair beside her.

“Sure.” Why not? If she wasn’t good enough for Ben, then this guy was obviously happy to step in.

“Looks like you’ve had a hard day, darlin’.”

Lacey sighed, a deep sound that seemed to emanate from her soul. “Yeah, it was.”

“I know how that goes.” When he reached out and placed a hand over hers, she didn’t bother to shrug it off.

The touch was nice.

It made her feel connected.

Sometimes, she felt just like she had today in the ocean. All alone in a vast empty world being buffeted from every angle, knocked down over and over again. No matter how hard you fought it felt like you were stuck in the same place not moving anywhere.

Was it really such a bad thing that she looked for moments of joy where she could find them? And if that way of finding them was by having sex, so what?

She wasn’t doing anything wrong.

“You had a bad day, too?” she asked.

Weariness filled the man’s green-blue eyes, and she knew exactly how he felt. Bone-deep exhaustion that clung to you like a bad smell you couldn’t get rid of.

Problem was, *you* were the bad smell so there was no escaping yourself.

“You could say that. It’s brightened up a little now though.”

At his smile, she couldn’t help but smile back. The guy seemed nice, and he was what she was usually attracted to. Big, strong, and muscled, she liked to feel protected by a lover. Oftentimes she went for military, SEALs, Delta, or Green Berets. It didn’t matter to her, they were just the kind of man she understood. When it wasn’t a military man, chances were she’d wind up with a cop or a firefighter. It was like she had an internal radar for that protector persona.

“You’re a sweet talker, aren’t you?” she teased. “Cop?”

Surprise flitted across his expression. “How’d you know?”

“Lucky guess.”

“Guess we were both lucky tonight then because mine certainly changed

when I saw you.”

“You keep saying that and we will both be getting lucky tonight,” she said with a laugh.

The man laughed along with her. “I’m Trent.”

“Lacey.”

“What do you do, Lacey?”

While her job wasn’t a secret, and since the guy was in law enforcement he likely knew all about Prey, she didn’t want to think about work right now. “On a good day I try to stay sane,” she admitted, telling a one-night stand more than she probably should.

“Job the cause of the bad day?”

“Yep. Yours wasn’t?”

“Got dumped. My fiancée was cheating on me with three other guys apparently. None of us knew about the others. Turns out she’s decided to try being single.”

“Ouch.” Lacey winced in sympathy.

“Thought I’d come here, find something to do to take my mind off her.”

“*Something* or *someone*?” she asked. Wouldn’t be the first time she’d been used as a distraction. Hell, sex for her *was* the distraction, her coping mechanism of choice, so she could hardly be angry about it.

“Well, I didn’t expect to meet someone as stunning as you.” He gave her an appreciative once over, and she knew she looked good in the simple pale pink halter-neck dress she’d chosen. It highlighted her slim curves without giving too much away. “So do you want to take this somewhere a little more private?”

“I’d love to.”

Trent held out his hand, and she reached out and took it, but the second his fingers closed around hers an image of Ben filled her mind.

It shouldn’t, she hadn’t been interested in anything with him other than a fun, hot night, and perhaps friendship, but his rebuff had hurt more than it should. There was nothing between them, and she didn’t want there to be, and yet somehow, she couldn’t seem to get him out of her head.

“Uh, Trent,” she said, tugging her hand free.

“Change your mind, gorgeous?”

This never happened to her.

When she went looking for a good time she never backed out. Why would she? It was what she wanted.



But tonight ...

Tonight, she didn't think she could go through with it.

"I'm sorry. I'm not a tease I swear. I wanted this. It's why I came here tonight, but I ..."

"The reason for the bad day a guy?"

"Yes, but not in the way you think. I don't cheat. I'm single, and I don't even know this guy. But ..."

"You don't have to explain, beautiful. A real man knows that a woman can change her mind. It's no big deal."

"Raincheck maybe? Next time we're both here if neither one of us is seeing someone I'd love to spend the night with you."

"Deal." Trent grinned and dropped a kiss to her cheek before releasing her hand and disappearing into the crowd.

Tears stung her eyes as she watched him go.

Damn, Ben for doing this to her.

If he didn't want her, fine, but he didn't have to make her feel bad about herself. Now, all she felt was shame for using sex as a way to cope with the horrors of her past.

Dirty, stained, ruined inside.

Lacey knew tomorrow she'd have to pull herself back together, but tonight, she was going to give herself permission to remember that no matter how hard she tried or how much color she added to her world, the black was still there and always would be.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 3<sup>RD</sup>

10:16 A.M.

THIS CERTAINLY WASN'T the first night Ben had gone without sleep. Guilt, grief, anger, loss, and nightmares were all the major contenders for his lack of meaningful rest, but none of them were the reason for last night's restlessness.

The honor for that rested on the head of a stunning brunette.

All night he'd felt ... wrong ... about the way they'd ended things last

night.

He had no reason to. He didn't have to take her up on her offer of dinner and sex. But he'd been rude, purposefully hurtful and he did regret that.

Just because he had to shut down his emotions to survive, didn't mean he went out of his way to be mean to people. Usually, he just kept contact to an absolute minimum. But last night he had punished Lacey because his body had responded to hers.

Not her fault, and yet he'd made her pay for it.

That felt wrong and completely unfair, but he could do nothing about it now.

No way was he going to track her down to apologize. It would have been the right thing to do, but he didn't want to see her again.

Next time he might do something stupid.

Like take her up on her offer.

Although he was sure after his harsh dismissal it had been taken off the table.

“Rabbit.”

At the sound of that ridiculous nickname that he'd hated ever since he'd been given it—although he had beat up the first person that tried to use bunny, at least rabbit was marginally better—he stopped running. Since he'd been wired with energy that he was determined to call anxious energy but which anyone else would likely claim as sexual energy, he'd been running laps on the beach since he and his team finished their morning PT.

Ben had no idea how much time had passed, but he was drenched in sweat, and the muscles in his legs felt like Jell-O, so he guessed he'd been running for a couple of hours at least. Running on the sand was always his go-to when he needed to clear his mind. The slip and slide of the sand was the perfect workout to make you forget about everything else.

For a little while at least.

“What's up?” he asked as his commanding officer and another man crossed the sand toward him. As he drank from his water bottle, Ben realized the other man was familiar. Tall, dark hair, blue eyes, and carried himself with a confidence that he recognized. Whoever the man was he was a former SEAL, Ben would bet anything on that.

“Rabbit, this is—”

“Eagle Oswald,” he cut off his CO when it clicked. The man was an utter legend in military circles. A former SEAL who had been raised off-the-grid

until he was eighteen and enlisted. After his team was betrayed and he was medically discharged after losing part of his leg, he started the world-renowned Prey Security with the billions he and his five siblings had inherited upon their parents' murders.

There wasn't a single person in the special ops world who didn't know Eagle Oswald and his teams. Knowing that Lacey had been chosen to work for Prey's Artemis Team told him she was highly skilled as well as tough and brave. All things he'd learned about her when he found her determinedly towing the young woman through the storm toward the yacht.

Without attempting to hiding it, Eagle gave him an assessing once over. Since he had no idea what the man was looking for, he could do nothing but stand there and wait for the assessment to be over. Eagle had a decade on Ben's twenty-seven years, the man was happily married with a two-year-old daughter, Luna, and his wife Olivia was four months pregnant with their second child.

After what seemed like a solid minute of silence, Eagle nodded. "He'll do perfectly."

"Perfectly for what?" Ben asked, somewhat suspiciously. Why was Eagle here? And with his CO? What exactly was going on?

Lacey wouldn't have said anything about last night, would she?

No.

He couldn't see that.

And even if she had, it wasn't like he had done anything wrong. There was nothing Eagle could be angry with him about except maybe the way he'd talked to one of his employees.

But there was no way a man like Eagle, who ran a multi-billion dollar a year company that provided security for wealthy clients as well as doing black ops missions for the government, would waste time coming to talk to him about his tone of voice.

"A job," Eagle replied.

"What do you mean?" Ben already had a job. It wasn't like he could just walk away from his team. Sure, they were supposed to take some scheduled downtime, something he hadn't been looking forward to. Without his work, he had too much time to think—to feel—but that didn't mean he was looking to go and work for Prey.

"Eagle has a special assignment he needs you for," his CO informed him.

"I don't understand." Truth was, he wasn't sure he wanted to understand.

After last night with Lacey, he wanted to give all of Prey a wide berth for a while. It was inevitable that sooner or later his team would wind up working alongside them, but he was hoping it wouldn't be for a good few months. Or longer.

"I need someone to go undercover with one of my operatives," Eagle said. "It's a short-term assignment. It shouldn't take more than a few days, a week or two at the most. We'll have you back with your team before they go back in the rotation."

Ben couldn't deny he was vaguely interested.

Working with Prey again so soon wasn't ideal, but he was pretty desperate not to spend the next couple of weeks with nothing to do but hang around his tiny apartment with too much time for thinking.

"What does this involve exactly?" It was one thing to want an excuse not to take time off, but it was quite another to go blindly walking into a mission he knew nothing about.

"We've been after a man known to have bought young girls several times. Each time we get close he slips through our fingers," Eagle explained. "We got wind of an auction at a remote estate in England. We believe he might be there. Even if it turns out our intel is wrong, we can take down a huge number of buyers and sellers. So, are you in?"

What kind of question was that?

A chance to help take down several traffickers?

Hell, yeah.

"I'm in," he said.

"Good. When I heard what you did last night, jumping into the ocean in the middle of a storm to go after Lacey and that girl, I knew you were who I'd been looking for. My other teams are all off on missions or otherwise occupied, and I think you're a good match."

"A good match for what?" Or who?

"Your partner," Eagle replied.

If Eagle knew enough about him to be here, then it went without saying that the man knew about his past and how it had affected him. It was no secret that while he worked well with his team, he was hard to get along with. Whatever was asked of him he'd do, but he couldn't promise that whoever he was going to be working with would enjoy spending time with him.

"Who will I be working with and what's the cover story?" As a SEAL, he didn't do much undercover work. Sometimes, he and his team needed to be

able to blend into their surroundings but never full-on undercover work.

“Cover story is that you and your wife are looking to purchase several young girls to start an upscale brothel,” Eagle replied.

Wife.

The word exploded through him with a ferocity that about tore his breath right out of his lungs.

It had been so long since anyone had used that word in conjunction with him.

Too many emotions crashed into him too close together, and he felt like he was back out in that storm being tossed around like he had been in those waves.

The storm.

Lacey.

Something soured in his gut. “Who’s my partner?” he asked, fearing he already knew the answer.

“I think you know her,” Eagle said.

That was what he was afraid of.

The universe wouldn’t do that to him, would it?

Punishment for the way he’d behaved, punishment for his failures, and punishment for pushing everyone away in the aftermath.

“Lacey is going to be playing your wife,” Eagle said the words Ben had been dreading hearing.

No.

Not possible.

In the three long years since his wife had been murdered, his body had never responded to another woman’s.

Until now.

Until her.

Until Lacey Smith with her bubbly personality he could see covered pain she didn’t want anyone to know about.

There was no way in hell he could play her husband and walk away from this mission unscathed.

## CHAPTER FOUR

August 3<sup>rd</sup>  
2:32 P.M.

“I SWEAR this baby gets cuter every time I see her,” Lacey gushed as she bounced one-year-old Indigo Voss on her knee. Making neighing sounds like a horse made the baby giggle in delight, and she swore every time she played with one of the SEALs’ kids she just wanted to run out and have a bunch herself.

“Sure, she’s cute now,” Faith Voss said, “but when it gets to around six o’clock tonight, and she’s covered in dinner, cranky, and not wanting a bath, she’s substantially less adorable.”

Lacey merely laughed. “You love every second of being a mom and don’t even try to tell me otherwise.”

Faith gave her daughter an indulgent smile. “Okay, she’s got me and her daddy wrapped around her little finger.”

“You ever think about having more?” Ivory asked.

If anyone had asked Lacey this time last year if she or any of her sisters would ever consider having kids, she would have given a resounding no. But now Ivory and Roman were engaged, and Pearl and Jesse were married, and maybe she would wind up with a couple of nieces and nephews.

“Charlie and I did, but we decided one is enough for us. Indigo’s pregnancy didn’t go smoothly, and I don’t think either of us wants to risk it again. Besides, we think we got things pretty perfect the first time.” Faith

reached out a hand and smoothed her palm over the silky blonde hair on Indigo's head. The baby caught her mom's hand and stuck a finger in her mouth, making Faith laugh.

"She is pretty perfect," Lacey agreed.

"Gimme my kid," Charlie "King" Voss said as he and the other guys entered the conference room. The man swung his daughter up into his arms and lifted her above his head, making Indy squeal in delight.

Was there any better sound than a baby's laugh?

She was pretty sure there was not.

"You guys have the most beautiful, smart, amazing kiddies," she said, only a touch of wistfulness in her tone. "I don't know how you're all going to survive the teenage years."

"I don't even want to think about it yet," Ryder "Spider" Flynn groaned. He and his wife, Abigail, had a spunky six-year-old son, RJ, who was already determined he was going to be a SEAL when he grew up, and a four-year-old daughter, Talia, who worshipped the ground her big brother walked on.

"At least you have a boy and a girl, I have two girls," Logan "Shark" Kirk grumbled. The man had gotten his name because of his size and dead, empty eyes. Meeting his now wife Claire and falling in love, then becoming a father to the most adorable set of twins, Mia and Maya, had softened him considerably.

"Your girls are going to have every guy in the neighborhood sniffing around," Opal teased Shark, making him look faint.

"I will shoot any boy who tries to touch my girls," Shark vowed, sounding so serious they all laughed. "Don't know what you're laughing at, you have a girl too," Shark told Eric "Night" McNamara. "And so do you," he added, looking at the leader of their team, Owen "Fox" LeGrand.

Night grimaced. "Anastasia isn't dating till she's thirty." As well as his six-year-old daughter, Night and his wife, Lavender, also had a four-year-old son, Christian.

"Ditto for Sally," Fox added. Fox and his wife, Evie, also had a son, five-year-old, Sullivan.

"So, the boys are all allowed to date?" Pearl asked. "Cos that's way sexist."

"Agreed," Lacey said, knowing these guys weren't sexist, just protective of their baby girls. Same way they were protective of her and her sisters. It was just their alpha male way, but it was fun to tease them about it.

Grayson “Chaos” Simpson snickered. “Yeah, you guys are sexist.”

“Hey, just because you and Juliet only have boys, doesn’t mean they’re not going to give you a headache,” Night said.

Two-year-old Blake was a prankster just like his daddy, and she had no doubt that when their second son arrived in a few months he would stick with family tradition and love practical jokes.

“I don’t know how Juliet puts up with you,” Spider said with a roll of his eyes. While some of Chaos’s jokes were funny, some could be downright annoying.

“Aww, I think he’s cute.” Faith gave Grayson’s dark blond locks a ruffle, making her husband growl. “But not as cute as my man,” she added quickly, hiding a laugh behind a cough.

“Better,” King grumbled, but his gray-blue eyes twinkled.

“As much as we all love talking about our kids, we have a mission to discuss,” Fox announced.

“My cue to leave.” Faith took Indigo from King, who wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her in so he could kiss her before touching a kiss to his daughter’s forehead.

Once Faith and Indigo had waved goodbye and disappeared, Fox’s face grew serious, and Lacey straightened in her chair.

Something was going on.

She had no idea what and given that she had gotten no sleep last night, plus no release for all the emotions threatening to overwhelm her, she was already stretched taut.

Bad news was the last thing she needed right now.

“What’s going on?” Opal asked. Of the four of them, Opal was the “mother” of the group even though she was only a year older than Lacey and Pearl, and two years older than Ivory. Pearl was—or had been as she was getting better—the angry one. Ivory was the sweet one, and she was the bubbly, flirty one.

At least on the outside.

Right now, she definitely needed a bit of mothering. Too bad she didn’t have a real mother to fuss over her, although her sisters did a pretty good job.

“Raven and Olivia found intel,” Fox started slowly.

“On?” Pearl prompted, the least patient of the four of them.

“On The Master.”

At Fox’s words, Lacey felt herself and her sisters freeze.



The Master was the bogeyman of all their nightmares. Twice in the last year they'd come so close to finally catching him, but he always managed to slip away. In January, working the case where she'd met and fallen in love with Roman, Ivory had come face to face with him only for him to shoot her and a little girl her sister had been trying to rescue. Then a couple of months later, Pearl, who had been shot in that same previous encounter, had been captured and beaten by The Master, only for him to be gone by the time Jesse and a Delta Team arrived to save her.

He wasn't getting away again.

"Where?" she asked. She wanted him so badly it hurt. "Where is he?"

"According to intel, he's going to be hitting up an auction at an estate in England, looking for girls to replace the ones Pearl rescued," Fox replied.

"I want in," Lacey said immediately.

"Me too," Ivory echoed.

"And me," Pearl added.

"Me too," Opal said, making it unanimous.

"I get it, I do. I remember how I felt when Evie was taken, how badly I wanted to be the one to kill the man who hurt her. Even though I didn't get to be the one to take that kill shot, I'm glad he's dead. I know how much you guys want The Master, but I can't send you all in, you know that. As soon as he sees you all he'll know it's a setup. He'll tell everyone you're undercover and you'll all get yourselves killed. Or worse."

Unfortunately, they were all well acquainted with the *or worse* side of life.

Unfortunately, they also all knew Fox was right.

Only one of them could do this, and even that would be a big risk.

"Which one of us gets to go in after him?" Ivory asked.

Fox's gaze moved over them one by one before settling on her. "Lacey."

"Me?" Her eyes widened, not what she'd been expecting. Ivory was usually the one who went undercover, although Pearl had a few months ago, and she and Opal had done it before as well. "What's my cover?"

"Married couple looking for young girls to buy to start an upscale brothel," Fox replied.

Lacey winced because human trafficking was so much more prevalent than people realized, and that story could so easily be true. Then she asked the obvious. "So, which of you handsome guys is playing my husband?"

"None of us," Fox answered.

“Then who?”

“Benjamin Blanchett.”

Ben?

Her Ben?

The same Ben who had saved her from the storm only to harshly imply she was a whore and he was too good to sleep with her?

Ben, who she hadn't been able to stop thinking about and wasn't sure if she wanted another chance to convince him to give her one explosive night of sex or to never see him again.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 4<sup>TH</sup>

7:24 A.M.

BEN HAD no idea how he was going to do this.

The plane had taken off all of thirty minutes ago, meaning they still had around ten hours in the air before landing in London. Then they were being picked up and driven out to the estate, a four-hour drive.

That meant a total of fourteen hours minimum of traveling time with Lacey. Then there was the time they'd be in the airport, not to mention when they arrived at the remote manor, there would be no opportunity to get space from the gorgeous brunette.

Once there, they would have to be completely in character. One slip meant the end of both of their lives. While he had spent the last three years since his wife's murder praying for a death that was yet to come for him, he wouldn't risk Lacey's life.

She was young and beautiful, had the world at her fingertips, and he would do his job and make sure she was safe.

Her role was to play the flirty, sexy madam on the market for several young girls. He was the remote, protective husband, not expected to say much but stand by Lacey's side and give off touch her and die vibes. The success of this mission rested almost entirely on Lacey's shoulders. He was really just a glorified bodyguard.

How they were going to play out their roles he wasn't one hundred

percent sure yet because he had been too much of a coward to go and speak to her, and she was busy ignoring him, poring over paperwork instead.

Lacey acted like she didn't even know him. Like they hadn't met two days ago when he threw himself into an angry ocean to save her life. Like she hadn't tracked him down with an offer of sex. Like he hadn't hurt her by implying she was some sort of unpaid whore.

There was no anger, no hostility, she showed no signs of the hurt he'd seen that night. There was just ... nothing.

He'd expected ...

What, he wasn't quite sure.

For her to throw herself at him again as soon as they were alone, break him down with her continued pleas for sex so that when he finally gave in, he had an air-tight excuse he could give himself?

It shamed him to say that part of him *had* thought she would ask again. Be persistent. That he might eventually give in. If he did, he could assuage his conscience by telling himself it wasn't cheating on his wife because he'd been pressured into it.

Pathetic.

Still, even as he knew he should go over there and say something to break the ice, he didn't. Didn't even know what he would say or how to make things okay between them. Turned out, if you stopped using your emotions you forget *how* to use them.

"Hungry?" Lacey appeared before him and dropped a couple of cookies and some potato chips on the table in front of his seat. "Sorry, all we have is mostly snacks. Since Artemis Team usually use this plane, it's mainly stocked with our favorite junk food. The guys always complain when they come with us, they like their healthy junk." She gave a shudder as she dropped into one of the plush leather seats on the other side of the table.

Even though Ben knew the guys she was talking about were the former SEAL team who ran Prey's West Coast offices, guys who were all happily married with kids, he felt a small stab of something at the thought of her having close relationships with any man even if that relationship wasn't sexual in nature.

Not that he wanted to have sex with Lacey.

His heart and his body still belonged to his wife. The woman he had failed so horribly.

"Thought you were ignoring me," he grumbled as he snatched up a white

chocolate chip and macadamia nut cookie. Probably not the smoothest thing to do, but he didn't understand how she could avoid him one minute and offer him snacks the next.

Lacey shrugged. "Life's too short to hold onto anger."

If only it were that easy.

Some things you didn't hold onto, they were just stuck to you with superglue so you could never escape them.

Since he didn't know what to say to that, Ben merely grunted.

"So," she drew the word out, "we need to come up with a plan on how we're going to make us being husband and wife in any way believable."

That same ice spread through his veins at the word wife.

There was a time when that word had meant everything to him. Marrying the woman of his dreams had been the happiest day of his life. Jemima had been the opposite of Lacey. Tall and willowy, with blonde hair that brushed her shoulders and huge baby-blue eyes. She'd been quiet and a little on the shy side. A first-grade teacher who also babysat the children of one of their neighbors most nights so the single mom could manage two jobs and college.

Some traits the two women shared; they were both kind, generous, and warm like the sunshine. Both would give you the clothes off your back and never hesitate to throw themselves in wholeheartedly to help someone in need.

But Jemima had been his wife, they'd taken vows, and made plans for their lives. Lacey was just a partner on a mission.

Hearing Lacey—a woman he was physically attracted to—mention being his wife, even if it was just pretend, made his guilt surge until it was just about suffocating. "Did you read my file?"

Looking taken aback, her brow furrowed. "Of course. I wanted to know about how you operate in the field. What your strengths and weaknesses are and how we can best complement one another."

"Nothing else?"

Understanding filled her eyes. "I didn't want to pry into your life, Ben. You told me no, and despite what you might think of me, I take that seriously. I just wanted to know what to expect working with you. Anything else you want to tell me about yourself is completely up to you. Besides, I bet you read a file on me, right?"

Although her words were accompanied by a teasing smile, shame hit him again.

Yeah, he'd read a file on her.

Only unlike Lacey, he hadn't just read a report on her skills in the field.

Nope.

He'd read everything.

Knew she had been abducted as an infant after losing most of her family in a house fire and been put in the system. That she and her sisters had been rescued by Prey about six years ago. That during the years they'd spent with a man known only as The Master, they'd been horribly tortured and trained in all manner of self-defense and ways to kill. That twice in the last year, The Master had slipped through their fingers.

Ben knew this case was personal for Lacey, but Eagle had assured him it would not mess with her ability to do her job and since the man was who he was, Ben had no reason to distrust his evaluation.

Since he'd taken the opportunity to read up on everything there was to know about the woman, he found it hard to believe she hadn't done the same.

"You really only read about my job?" he asked.

"I trust Eagle with my life. If you weren't capable, you wouldn't be here. I just wanted to learn some details to know how we'd mesh." Lacey sighed and set down the cookie she'd been nibbling on. "If you have questions you want to ask me then go ahead. I want you to trust me so ask me anything."

Hell, yeah, he had questions.

None of which he wanted to ask on one of Prey's private jets where they might be monitored.

What had happened to her and how badly she had been scarred by it was none of his business. So long as they could accomplish the goals of this mission that was all he cared about.

"No questions."

"None?" Lacey's tone lifted in surprise. "You have to know we're specifically after The Master, although we'll take whoever else we can in the raid. You have to know what he did to me and my sisters, that this is personal. After saving my life, are you sure you trust me to handle myself in high-pressure situations?"

Ben growled. She'd handled herself better in that ocean than he'd thought she would, and she thought he was holding it against her?

He didn't like that idea.

"I trust you," he grumbled.

Trusting Lacey wasn't the problem. It was trusting himself.

For three years, he had been consumed with the anguish of losing his wife under the most horrific circumstances and blaming himself. Nothing else had mattered. He had barely functioned, and only in the sense of being the special forces operator he'd trained to be.

Now this woman was bringing back to life another side of him.

Ben the man rather than just Ben the SEAL.

He didn't like it. Jemima was dead, it was only fitting that he spend the rest of his life nothing more than the shell of the man he'd once been.

## CHAPTER FIVE

August 4<sup>th</sup>  
10:41 P.M.

ENGLAND WAS A BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY.

Too bad she couldn't enjoy it.

Lacey was too strung out.

This case was everything she and her sisters had wanted from the moment Prey rescued them. Knowing that the man who had hurt them so badly was still out there had made adjusting to a world they knew nothing about that much harder. They had never given up on hoping one day they might get a chance to take him down.

To have that chance slip away twice already put more pressure on her and this mission.

Which meant she should have her entire focus on it and not the silent man sitting beside her.

Ben was a distraction she couldn't afford.

Yet he was a distraction that wasn't going anywhere.

Like she'd told him on the plane, life was too short to hold onto negativity. Wasn't always easy to let go of the things that hurt you, but the only other alternative was to let them consume you.

Ben had definitely messed with her head and made her feel bad about herself. But they had to make peace to work together, and it was more than obvious if left to his own devices Ben would never have done anything,

choosing to let the tension between them continue to build.

Big picture.

Putting up with the fact that Ben didn't like her was a small price to pay to finally get a chance to destroy the man who had come perilously close to destroying her.

Some days closer than others.

The private car that had picked them up from the airport began to slow, and she focused herself, slipping into character. Prey managed several identities they could use with detailed and regularly updated backgrounds, and the ones that had been chosen for her and Ben were perfect. Diana Harper was a flirty, bubbly socialite with a darker side she kept hidden, a role Lacey could play with ease. Her husband, Drake, was a powerful businessman with ruthlessness and willingness to do anything to make money that lent authenticity to their story.

As far as she was concerned, the only thing that might mess this up was Ben's reactions to her. It was clear he didn't like her, but he was going to have to find a way to put that aside and accept that he was supposed to be her devoted, protective husband. Since he wasn't used to undercover work like this, she prayed he could pull it off.

They'd been in character since they got off the plane. They'd been met by two men sent to pick them up and endured both a search of their luggage and their bodies. Thankfully, it wasn't a strip search and just a pat down because from the way Ben had glowered at the two men as they ran their hands—very dispassionately—over her body, he'd been giving off I'll rip you to pieces vibes. Maybe she shouldn't be worried about his acting abilities.

He could pull this off, they both could.

They had to.

Anything less wasn't acceptable.

The Master wasn't getting away again.

Whatever it took, she was going to make sure that he met with the fate he deserved.

Once they'd entered the car, Ben had pulled out a laptop and begun to work. What exactly he was doing to make it look like he was working she had no idea. Lacey had pulled out her cell phone, pretending she was chatting with friends and flicking through her social media apps. Part of their cover was social media, every detail that could be considered had been, Prey didn't do anything by half measures.



Now, she slipped her cell phone into her purse and leaned toward the window. “Darling, are you seeing this? Look how beautiful the manor house is,” she said as the driver pulled up to large wrought iron gates, giving them a view of the mansion at the end of a long tree-lined driveway.

Although it was night, the sky was clear, and with the moonlight and starlight, they could get a reasonable view of the house.

“This is what I was telling you I wanted. Some nice, quiet little spot where we can build the most amazing manor house just like this. It will be the absolute, most *perfect* place for us to start this new venture,” she gushed. Pretending that she agreed with buying and selling people, using them against their will made her feel sick inside, but it was for a good cause. Lacey just had to keep reminding herself of that.

As though he somehow sensed how difficult this was for her despite the bright smile on her lips, Ben closed his laptop and placed a large hand on her thigh. Regardless of how important this mission was, by far the biggest of her career, her body instantly responded. With all his pent-up, tightly controlled emotions, Lacey just knew that if the two of them ever fell into bed together it would be explosive.

“Whatever you want, you get. You know that, sweetheart.” The endearment sounded a little stiff and forced, but she doubted anyone would pick up on it.

“I’m so excited for this venture, darling. I want something that’s mine. I’m getting bored with just playing with my friends all day. I want to *do* something.” Opening the window, she pushed her head out as they started down the driveway and inhaled. “Smell that fresh air. The countryside is just so beautiful. So peaceful. I want a place like this for myself this very second.”

Ben chuckled indulgently. “Soon, sweetheart. You know I already have my people looking for your dream property.”

Lacey pouted. “You know I absolutely loath being patient.”

“Try, sweetheart. I promise this is the first step. Once we secure some merchandise then everything else will fall into place.”

“It better.” Adding a huff for good measure, she then threw her arms around Ben’s neck. “Oh, thank you, darling, for letting me do this.”

His body had stiffened at her touch, but his voice remained in character. “Anything for my queen, you know that.”

“You’re so good to me.” Leaning in so her lips were just above Ben’s ear

she added in a whisper, “Stop freaking out every time I touch you. We’re supposed to be a happily married couple who are madly in love. Drake Harper wouldn’t look like he was about to have his ... thing,” she cast a glance at his lap, “cut off every time the wife he adores and pampers touches him.”

Not wanting to give him the chance to respond, partly because there was no retort he should give to that and partly because she was concerned that if he did give a retort anyway, it would only be something that would make her self-conscious, Lacey turned back to the window.

The two men in the front of the car got out, the passenger coming to open her door, the driver to open Ben’s. Climbing out, she looked up at the large manor house in awe. Not fake awe but real awe. The place was amazing. Red brick, three stories, vines grew along the front of it, and since it was summer, they were full of beautiful flowers in an array of bright pinks, yellows, and purples. If you didn’t know the place was used to house and sell people on the black market, this would be most people’s dream house.

“Darling, do you think they would sell this place? I mean, it’s absolutely perfect. I love the brick, I love the vines, I love the grounds, it’s just so beautiful. I’ve never lived in England before, but I’m sure I’d love it.”

“I don’t think the house is for sale, ma’am,” the driver said politely.

Lacey pouted. “But it’s so pretty. We can at least ask, can’t we, darling?”

“If you want it, I’ll make it happen,” Ben replied.

“Sir, the house isn’t—”

“If my wife wants it, I’m sure I can present an offer that would be acceptable.” The glare Ben gave the two men was enough to make them cringe, and she was sure they had seen and heard a lot in their line of work.

“Oh, thank you, darling.” Lacey turned and threw herself into Ben’s arms trusting that he would catch her.

He did. His strong arms curled around her waist supporting her weight as she wrapped her legs around his hips and arms entwined around his neck. When she planted a kiss directly on his mouth, she felt his body go cold like she had doused him in ice water.

Was she really that repulsive to him?

Was touching her really so awful?

Despite her determination not to let anything this man said or did mess with her head, Lacey felt her own body respond by growing cold.

Then like somebody had flipped a switch she hadn’t even known existed,

heat suddenly sparked inside Ben. One of his hands moved to claim her backside, kneading it despite their audience, and he took control of the kiss, turning it from a mere show to something that felt far too real.

This man was the most confusing one she had ever met, and she hated that she wanted so much more with him than one kiss.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 4<sup>TH</sup>

11:02 P.M.

*STOP.*

His mind screamed the word at him, yet Ben felt powerless to end the kiss with Lacey.

It felt so different from his kisses with Jemima. Those had been soft and sweet, full of emotion. This was raw and sensual, full of power.

The kind of power that could consume you if you let it.

He'd loved his wife, he really had, and would have done anything for her. When he'd pledged his life to her in front of their family and friends, he had wanted to give her the world. A nice home, stability, security, and a family of their own.

But there had always been something lacking.

Passion.

Their young, innocent love had grown into something that could have lasted a lifetime if fate hadn't intervened so cruelly, but there had been no spark.

At the time Ben hadn't cared, the relationship had been comfortable, and he'd known that Jemima was the kind of woman he would never have to worry about cheating on him when he was away for long months at a time with his team. At the back of his mind, he'd always worried though. About the effect that his job would have on her. On them.

Could Jemima truly handle being a SEAL wife?

He'd been twenty-four when she was murdered, he'd been with the SEALs only six months. There had been a couple of deployments in that time, and Jemima seemed to cope, but he'd seen the toll it was taking on her,

having to keep up a front so he didn't worry during their video calls.

What would have happened to them after several years if a few months had already started to take their toll on his wife?

Guilt that he was having doubts about the wife he had loved while kissing another woman stole any fire the kiss had ignited inside him.

Ben very well might have ruined their cover before they even really started this mission by throwing Lacey as far away from him as he could, but before he could react someone cleared their throat.

"Oh, sorry. Forgot we had an audience." Lacey gave a delightfully adorable giggle as she released her hold on him, and he set her on her feet.

Knowing she must have felt him stiffen again just before they ended their kiss, he half expected her to move away from him. Instead, she moved into him, taking one of his hands and lacing their fingers together as she tucked herself into his side and rested her cheek against his chest.

"Sometimes we get a little carried away." Another little giggle, and he knew she had everyone in the vicinity eating out of the palm of her hand. She was good at this. As if he needed another reason to respect this woman.

"Totally understandable. Your husband is breathtaking," the woman said. Amelia Kutcher was herself a breathtaking woman. Delicate features, long, silky dark blond hair, large crystal blue eyes, she was slim and dressed in a simple white skirt suit. Pearls adorned the slender column of her neck, and diamonds sparkled in her ears and on her fingers.

"He is, but I don't share." Lacey winked and then giggled again before walking toward the other woman, holding her hand out. "Thank you so much for having us, we're so excited to be here. Well, I am. He just tags along on anything that makes me happy." More sweet giggling and Amelia was smiling when she shook Lacey's hand.

"It is a pleasure to have such a lovely couple attending our auction," Amelia said.

"We're hoping the merchandise is to our liking," Lacey said. Like magic her voice took on a darker quality. She was a thing to behold, playing her role to perfection. She was an enigmatic mixture of sweet and dark, someone who could believably have come to purchase people, and yet someone no one would ever suspect of having an evil side.

"As I am sure you are aware, anything you are unable to find in our catalog you'll be able to special order. Of course, that is substantially more expensive," Amelia added.

“Oh, money isn’t a concern.” Lacey waved her hand dismissively.

Even though he knew his role was just to play Diana Harper’s quiet, cold, protective husband, he felt like he wasn’t pulling his own weight. He didn’t have to do much but observe and keep Lacey safe, and it didn’t feel like enough when she was going all out with her part.

“My husband loves to make me happy, and I’ve made my mind up,” Lacey said firmly.

“Well, the auction is the day after tomorrow. The catalogs will be available tomorrow, and we have people you can talk to if you need to put in a special request. So you are aware, there are cameras in all common areas for everybody’s protection, but the bedrooms are all private areas, so you two are free to enjoy yourselves,” Amelia told them.

“Oh, we’ll be enjoying ourselves.” Lacey moved back to his side and ran a hand across his abs.

“I don’t doubt it. If I had a man like him, I doubt I’d ever leave the bedroom.” Amelia gave a wistful sigh. The woman looked so demure and put together that you would never suspect she was involved in such an evil business.

“It is hard.” Lacey giggled again then touched a kiss to his jaw.

“Anything else we need to know?” he asked, voice hard. He could not spend another second with prying eyes watching him, expecting him to be an attentive, devoted husband to a woman who stirred up feelings he had no interest in. It would be much easier if his damn body would stop betraying him and reacting to this sassy woman.

“I think that’s it. An information folder is in your room that should answer any questions you have. If there’s something you need to know that isn’t in the folder, feel free to give me a call. There’s a phone in your room, dial 001 to be connected directly to me. I am here to be available for anything you need for the duration of your stay,” Amelia told them.

“We appreciate it, and we’ll definitely call if we need anything,” Lacey said.

“We want your stay here to be enjoyable so don’t hesitate to let us know if there’s anything we can do to make it better. Meal times are listed in the brochure. If you have a special request let the kitchen staff know. And you can make full use of all the facilities here. Pool, spa, gym, it’s all here for your enjoyment. Would you like to be shown to your room?”

“We can find our own way,” he growled, needing to get to the privacy of

the room as quickly as possible.

“My husband is a bit of a grump. I apologize for his surly manner, but yes, we can find our own way,” Lacey said, smoothing things over.

“Of course. You are in room 204. Up the stairs and to your right, at the beginning of the first hallway,” Amelia informed them.

Taking Lacey’s hand only because he had to for appearance’s sake, in his other Ben grabbed their bags and took off inside.

“Thank you for having us,” Lacey called over her shoulder as she allowed him to tow her along behind him.

Once they reached their room, he threw open the door, tugged her inside, then closed and locked it behind them.

Finally.

Peace.

“That went well I think,” Lacey said as she breezed across the room toward the giant four-poster bed.

The sight of her so close to a bed when his body was throbbing with three years’ worth of pent-up sexual frustration was too much for him to handle right now.

“Do not put your hands on me again,” he hissed.

Lacey spun around, eyes wide with surprise. “What do you mean? We’re playing a husband and wife. You knew this would be part of it.”

“You don’t have to kiss me.”

“Ben, you know I do. Diana would kiss her husband. Drake would *want* his wife to kiss him. If you can’t handle this, you better tell me now, and I’ll get a message to Eagle telling him you need an exfil. I guess we could claim Drake got sick and had to leave. It will look suspicious, but not enough that they should call off the auction.”

That she was standing there so calmly when his body and emotions were flying so totally out of control was the final tear in his control.

Stalking toward her, he didn’t stop until he was right in her personal space. With their height difference, Lacey had to tilt her head right back to be able to meet his gaze. “You don’t *ever* kiss someone without their permission. I’m not one of your cheap one-night stands.”

Shame flew through her gaze before she schooled it. “I had your permission, Ben. When you agreed to play this role, you agreed to everything that went along with it. Don’t ever imply that I would sexually assault someone again.”

Her voice was all the more powerful because she didn't raise it, didn't scream or yell, didn't cry, just stepped away from him and walked into their attached bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Leaving him standing there staring after her, hating himself all over again for causing her pain.

Seemed that was all he was good for.

Real wife or fake one the result was the same.

Pain.

Destruction.

Guilt.

## CHAPTER SIX

August 5<sup>th</sup>  
8:19 A.M.

TO SAY things were tense might just be the understatement of the millennium.

Lacey hadn't exchanged a single word with Ben since last night when he'd all but implied she was some sexual pervert who raped men.

Having grown up being raped regularly since she was ten years old, being compared to someone like The Master who had taken great pleasure in stealing things that didn't belong to him was about the worst thing someone could say to her.

Knowing that Ben was aware of her past—even if he didn't know every detail he had to know enough to know how badly that insinuation would hurt her—and yet had chosen to say something that would so effectively inflict pain, definitely made her opinion of him dim. Lacey wasn't stupid, she could see he was battling some pretty major demons, but that didn't mean it was okay for him to hurt her.

Nothing gave anyone the right to inflict pain on another.

Nothing at all.

It was a little cowardly, but she'd hidden in the bathroom for a while last night, crying out her pain into the shower, before finally slinking out and back into the bedroom. Without a word exchanged, Ben had gone into the bathroom, and she'd quickly changed and climbed under the covers.

They'd discussed sleeping in the same bed or not and decided Ben would



take the couch. There were no cameras in the room so no reason to believe anyone would know and he had been adamant that he wouldn't share a bed with her. At the time she'd believed it was just because he saw her as some sort of easy lay who slept with anyone. Now she wondered if it ran deeper than that.

Not that she cared.

She was done worrying about him, done thinking about him. She just wanted to do this mission, play her part, find The Master, arrest anyone who was here buying or selling people, and rescue as many trafficking victims as they could. To do that, she didn't have to like Ben or care about him at all. She just had to pretend he was her husband.

Something that was harder to do this morning than it had been last night.

As they stepped out of the room and into the hall, Lacey pasted on a bright smile.

It wasn't new to her, pretending that all was fine when it was anything but. Not that she'd ever admit it out loud, but it was how she spent most of her life since being rescued by Prey.

When you were smiling people assumed you were okay.

A smile was the ultimate disguise because it was all people saw.

Maybe she shouldn't lie to others—and herself—but that was the thing when you lived in survival mode. You just did whatever worked.

"I hope they have raspberry pancakes for breakfast," she said loudly, keeping her voice cheerful, her mask in place.

"Amelia said whatever you wanted you could ask for," Ben said. Although there was no hostility in his tone, his voice was flat, his expression blank. It was a good thing that his cover was a man who didn't express much emotion otherwise they were all but broadcasting that they didn't fit in here.

"Ooh, I wonder if she has raspberry juice." That was actually her favorite. She had a bit of a raspberry obsession. They were her favorite fruit, and anything with raspberries in them was an instant favorite.

"If not, you can ask them to get you some," Ben said.

Although she didn't want to, she slipped her hand into his as they walked through the hallway and down the grand staircase. This morning, after dragging herself out of bed after very little sleep, she'd read through the folder of information provided for them. She'd learned the schedule for the day and memorized a map of the manor house and its grounds, so she knew exactly where the breakfast room was and that it was open from six until

nine.

It wasn't a coincidence they were heading down toward the end of the time. She'd wanted to hide out in their room for as long as possible because as soon as they left it she had to have her game face on.

"What would you like to do after breakfast, darling?" she asked as they crossed the entrance foyer to the breakfast room down a hallway to the right.

"Whatever you wish."

"How about we walk the grounds?" That would give them the perfect opportunity to get the lay of the land. They would then relay as much information as they could back to Prey with the tiny device they'd brought with them. It was supposed to be a cell phone-free zone, Amelia Kutcher's attempt to make sure her manor house wasn't raided. The small device didn't look like a phone, and she'd managed to smuggle it in by hiding it inside the charger for Ben's laptop. Although the laptop had been confiscated upon arrival no one had questioned the fact that they hadn't handed over the laptop bag that contained the charger.

"Sounds delightful."

Actually, he sounded like he thought it was anything but, but she didn't say so. Instead, she shoved aside the pain he'd caused her last night, and reminded herself that he was likely acting out of some sense of self-preservation, the only reason she could think of for his meltdown over her kissing him.

*Big picture.*

The voice whispering in her head was right.

This wasn't about her or Ben. It was about saving lives, bringing down as many human traffickers as they could, and hopefully catching The Master.

As they entered the breakfast room, her gaze immediately scanned the tables looking for any sign of him. Although she hadn't seen him in six years, both Ivory and Pearl had said that the man hadn't changed and still looked the same.

There was no way she would ever forget a single detail about him.

More nights than not he haunted her dreams.

The Master was like a small demon sitting on her shoulder, constantly whispering in her ear that she would never be free of him. That constant presence made it so hard to move on, but she did the best she could, and found happiness where she could.

You either learned to move on from the past or it consumed you.

She didn't want to be consumed by the hell The Master had put her through.

"Do you see him?" Ben whispered in her ear as he placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her toward an empty table.

The large room was a little like a restaurant. Less formal than the dining room where they would take their evening meal, there were a dozen tables throughout the room, half occupied, and a couple of wait staff dressed in crisp black and white uniforms walking about refilling coffee cups, carrying trays of food, or taking orders.

His voice was gentler than she would have expected, and heat seeped through her chilled body from the hand that touched her back. Even though he hadn't said the words, all of a sudden, she could feel his regret about last night.

Knowing that helped her to shove away the pain. His words might leave behind some scars, but at least they were wounds that would heal, not fatal ones.

"No, I don't," she murmured as he led her to a table and pulled out a chair for her.

"Are we sure he's going to be here?" After pushing in her chair, he rounded the table and took the seat opposite.

"As sure as we can be. Intel Raven and Olivia's tech team were able to dig up suggests he will be, but there are no guarantees. Even if he's not, we can do some good here, we can save lives, and in the end as badly as I want The Master, more than that I want all these innocent victims not to suffer."

Softness in his dark eyes made him seem less hard angles, and gave him a few smooth edges. Ben was a handsome man with smooth dark skin, high cheekbones, and a square jaw, but he had a hardness that she was sure was designed to keep people at a distance. Same way Pearl had used anger to keep people away from her, Ben used cold disinterest.

It was effective.

And it was certainly going to have her keeping her distance from here on out. She would push away her hurt, do what she had to, but she no longer saw Ben as someone who could have some fun burning up the sheets with her.

There was heat, and then there was being burned, and she had a feeling that Ben might have the power to burn her badly enough to leave more scars if she gave him half a chance.

So self-preservation meant she wouldn't allow him to have any more

chances to hurt her. There would be no more kisses unless the integrity of their mission depended on it. When they were in their room, she would just stay away from him, and when she had to because they were out in the public parts of the house, she'd keep touching to a minimum.

This was why she always kept things surface-level. Sex was fun, friendship was fun, and the chances of getting hurt were much slimmer.

Letting anyone in gave them the power to hurt you and she'd already been hurt so much in the past.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 5<sup>TH</sup>

10:47 A.M.

AS IF HE wasn't already regretting the way he'd lashed out at Lacey last night.

The way the light had gone out of her eyes and never turned back on had a horrible knot of guilt sitting heavily in his gut.

Ben knew he should be used to guilt by now. Living with it for three long years, a constant companion who never allowed him a moment's respite, it was a wonder he even knew the difference from having more guilt heaped on top of what was already there.

But he did know it was there.

It had taunted and mocked him as he listened to Lacey cry in the shower. It was there when he'd taken his own shower and pictured her standing in the same spot trying to cry quietly so he wouldn't hear her. It had been right there when he'd stretched out on the couch under the window and tried to get some sleep.

And it had been there this morning when he and Lacey got up, and he realized he was being frozen out.

It was what he wanted. The idea of being attracted to another woman was more than he could cope with. And yet, this wasn't anything he could cope with either.

Ben just didn't know how to fix it.

Or himself.

Didn't even know if he wanted to fix himself.

He kept close to Lacey as they strolled around the manor house and extensive grounds. While they'd been inside, she'd held his hand and chattered away with a cheerful voice that made it sound like she didn't have a care in the world. Lacey was one hell of an actress, and he had to wonder what else she hid behind the chirpy veneer she wore.

If anyone came toward them she would lean into him, stroke her fingertips across his abs, even touch soft kisses to his jaw, but that was it. No more.

Given his meltdown over the kiss, it was no wonder she wasn't going to do it again unless they had to in order to maintain cover.

There was no reason in the world he should be disappointed about that when he had all but demanded it.

Now that she'd taken it away, Ben found that he sought her light.

Needed it even.

Since they had no idea how many cameras covered the extensive gardens or where they might be placed, Lacey made sure to stay close to him, holding onto his arm and pointing out things with the zeal and excitement he'd come to expect from her.

Only now that excitement was fake.

Before he'd ruined things last night, even though she'd been playing a role there had been a genuineness to it that was lacking now. Now she was merely going through the motions with a detachment that unsettled him.

Accusing her of basically sexually assaulting him when she was right, he had voluntarily come here to play her husband, had been going way too far. His mother would be ashamed of him. His dad too, and his sisters. Hell, his entire team would be disappointed in him if they knew how he'd treated Lacey.

She was a good woman, a good person. Maybe she cared too deeply, it could make her a little reckless, but she deserved a whole lot better than he'd given her.

"Maybe we should head back soon," he suggested. They'd already toured the entire house, admired the artwork, strolled through the library, and gushed over the gorgeous pool area. Then they'd walked the gardens, looked at the flowers, and wandered through the woodland. Visited the horses, stopped by the aviary, and now they had made it almost to the boundary.

"Just a little further," Lacey insisted. "I want to know everything so that I

can give a detailed report.”

Damn, she was a stubborn thing.

If he had to, he wouldn't hesitate to throw her over his shoulder and march her back to their room. That was within keeping of his Drake Harper character, and he knew Lacey would make it seem like he was taking her back to their room for sex. She wouldn't do anything to jeopardize this mission.

But neither would he.

His primary role was backup and support to Lacey. His job was to keep her alive while she did what she knew how to do and fooled everyone into believing she was Diana Harper, a socialite and upscale brothel runner.

“We should head back for lunch,” he said.

Lacey glanced at the gold watch adorning her slender wrist. “It's not even eleven, lunch doesn't begin till twelve and goes till two.”

She was right, but he was worried the longer they hung around out here the greater the chances that someone would come looking for them and wonder why they had wandered so far from the house. Tempting fate was never a good idea in his mind. Better to play things safe.

However, it didn't seem Lacey shared that viewpoint.

Releasing her hold on his arm, she walked over to the eight-foot-high brick fence, a puzzled frown on her face. She ran a hand along it as she walked down toward a corner section. The corners were more like towers in a castle wall, and as she reached it and ran her hand along it a section popped open.

A bad feeling settled in his gut.

Thankfully, it pushed out a little of the guilt, but since it replaced it with fear, Ben wasn't sure he'd really come out any better than he'd been.

“Lacey, we should go back.”

“This is why we came. I'm going in, I want to know what's down there.”

Without waiting to see if he was going to agree to go with her or not, she stepped inside the small opening and disappeared.

Ben cursed.

This was dangerous. They should go back to the house, try to get eyes on The Master, and confirm if he was indeed in attendance. That was the job. To give intel to Prey, they didn't need to search every inch of the grounds.

But since his job was to keep Lacey safe, he had no choice but to follow.

The space inside the tower was small, maybe only five feet wide, and

descended down a steep metal staircase. There was dim light coming from somewhere down below, and since he wasn't sure if it was Lacey or someone else already there, he couldn't call out to her.

How he wished he had a weapon on him.

Since they knew they were going to be searched on arrival, there was no way they could have snuck in weapons. Of course, he could kill with his bare hands, but that wasn't so effective when the other guy was armed with an automatic rifle.

Creeping down the steps, keeping as close to the wall as possible, when he reached the bottom, he found Lacey standing in the middle of a large open space.

Her expression was pure horror, but it took him a moment to figure out what had caused it.

When he did he felt every bit as horrified.

The space down here was large, the room probably twenty feet long by twenty feet wide. There were a couple of doors on the walls to their left and right, probably leading to more tunnels that likely lead to other rooms just like this one. In one corner of the large space was a crude medical center with an examination table, and a cabinet with instruments and bottles of medications. There was also a small kitchenette with a sink, fridge, stove, and countertop with some cupboards underneath he assumed contained food or utensils and cooking equipment.

One wall—the one opposite where the brick fence would be if they were above ground—was a series of glass doors. On the other side of each door was a small cell. Inside each cell was a person.

It was one thing to know this was a human trafficking organization and that, as such, there would of course be victims here, it was another to see it with your own eyes.

Some girls were curled up in the corners of their cages, some were lying on the mattresses inside their cells, and a couple were looking at them with abject terror. Worst of all was the cage with a row of cribs inside it.

Babies.

Some of these victims were literal infants.

Panic marred Lacey's beautiful features. "We have to get them out," she said, her voice borderline shrill as she ran toward the closest cell.

Ben moved quickly, blocking her path and gripping her shoulders tighter than he would have liked because it was the only way to get her not to try to

dart around him. “We can’t.”

“We have to.”

“We can’t, Lacey. You know that.”

“We have to,” she repeated. Desperation bled off her and cracked a couple of the walls protecting his heart and his sanity.

“We can’t,” he repeated softly. “You know that no one who buys one of these girls is getting away. These girls will be rescued, they will be returned home to their families and their lives. They will be okay. But we can’t let them go. Not yet. After the auction this place is being raided, everyone will be arrested and the girls rescued.”

“They need to go now.” Lacey’s eyes appeared more green than brown as they shimmered with unshed tears and practically begged him to help her.

Reaching out, he brushed his knuckles across her cheek and then tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “No, sunflower. We can’t. Not yet. If we let them go now, then we tip our hand. They’ll figure out who it was, or they’ll catch us in the act, and then the auction will be called off. Who’s to say there aren’t more rooms like this with more girls in them down here?”

Lacey’s eyes widened like that thought hadn’t occurred to her yet.

“I think I’m going to be sick.” Lacey pressed a hand to her stomach and one to cover her mouth.

“It’s going to be okay. We’re going to save them,” he soothed.

“I ... I know what ... what they’re going through,” Lacey whispered. She looked so desolate, so broken, unlike the sassy woman he’d met in the ocean that his heart broke a little.

“I know,” he murmured. Curling a hand around the back of her neck he pulled her into him, and she buried her face against his chest. “I know.”

Ben held her cradled protectively against him as she shook and cried silent tears. How did this woman manage to affect him like this?

Lacey brought out his protective side as well as his long-dormant sexual one. Between the two, he knew she had the power to crush him, destroy all that remained after Jemima’s murder.

“What’s going on?”

At the angry voice both he and Lacey jerked back to find a half dozen weapons aimed at them and an angry Amelia standing amidst the guards.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

August 5<sup>th</sup>  
11:20 A.M.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING DOWN HERE?” Amelia demanded. “And how did you even know about this place?”

Lacey shoved aside the rage at how these girls were being treated, and her guilt that she couldn't end their suffering this very second. She had come here for a reason and finding this hidden chamber didn't change that. If she wanted these girls to be free, she had to follow through with the plan.

No deviations.

Thinking quickly, she devised a plan and prayed Ben would go along with it.

Pulling herself out of his grip she ignored the weapons aimed at her and ran toward Amelia, throwing her arms around the shocked woman.

“This place is perfect. Just perfect,” she gushed.

“I ... what?” Amelia asked.

“We were walking the grounds,” she said, gesturing to Ben, who grabbed her hand and yanked her back to his side, tucking her protectively against him. “I love this place. I told Drake that I wanted to buy it. Your driver told us it wasn't for sale, but Drake and I can be awfully persuasive when we have to be. I wanted to walk around, see the whole place, and figure out if it really was what we wanted for our new venture. We found an opening in one of the towers. I guess someone didn't close it properly, and of course, I was curious.

Drake always reminds me that curiosity killed the cat, but you know how it is.” She did that airhead giggle that always put people at ease.

“So why were you crying?” Amelia asked. Although the woman still looked suspicious and the weapons were all still aimed at her and Ben, Lacey felt that some of the tension had drained out of the room.

“You don’t cry happy tears?” she asked innocently. “I’ll admit I was shocked at first. I guess I never really thought about the business side of what you do. But then when I realized that his place couldn’t be more perfect, I just burst into tears. I mean, the manor house is just the most gorgeous location to set up our upscale, exclusive establishment, and then these underground rooms and tunnels, are there tunnels?”

“There are,” Amelia replied.

“See, perfect! If we were ever to be raided by the cops, then we could just hide all the girls down here, and they would be none the wiser. You’ll sell it to us, won’t you? Drake will pay whatever you want, money is no issue. With what we pay you you’ll be able to purchase another house to set up your auctions.” She gave the woman her sweetest, beseeching expression and even pressed her palms together in a gesture of supplication to add to the appeal.

“I, well, I hadn’t really thought of selling,” Amelia said, a little confused about this entire encounter.

“Oh, but you must, please,” Lacey begged. “England is just so beautiful, and I just want to move here so badly.”

“Well, I mean, I suppose we could discuss numbers after the auction,” Amelia said hesitantly. Although it was clear she wasn’t one hundred percent convinced she did indicate that the guards should lower their weapons.

“Oh, thank you,” she gushed, pulling herself out of Ben’s protective hold to throw her arms around the other woman once again.

“I can’t guarantee that I’ll agree,” Amelia cautioned.

“Drake and I will convince you I’m sure of it,” Lacey said, giving her giggle again. “Won’t we, darling?”

“If that’s what you want, sweetheart, I’ll make it happen.” Ben shot Amelia a threatening glower as though daring her not to give his wife whatever her heart desired.

“After the auction, we’ll talk,” Amelia agreed. “For now, would you like a tour of the rest of the underground tunnels?”

“Oh, we’d love to,” Lacey replied.

Ben reached for her hand and again moved her so she was at his side. She

didn't miss that he positioned her so he was between her and the armed men with his body angled slightly to offer her what protection he could. He might not like her, but he had been sweet when she'd had a mini meltdown upon seeing her own worst nightmare come to life before her very eyes, and she knew he would protect her with his life if it came to it.

Not that she'd let him.

They were here as a team. He wasn't here as her protection detail. Just because they were utilizing both their skill sets didn't make them any less a team. Lacey knew how to take care of herself. She didn't need some man—especially one who seemed to despise her—to do it for her.

“How many slaves can you house here?” she asked as they followed Amelia through the tunnels. The guards had them boxed in, half leading the way, half bringing up the rear, but Lacey had no doubt that they would convince the woman they were no threat to her operation.

“We have four rooms like the one you found at each corner of the property. In between the miles of tunnel that connects them are various other rooms. Some are training rooms, some punishment rooms, and some medical ones in case we need to perform any procedures. There are also some guards' rooms down here if you feel safer knowing that your merchandise is well protected at all times,” Amelia said.

The way the woman talked about these girls like they were really nothing but a commodity was extra awful given she was a woman and two-thirds of all trafficking victims were female. Perhaps that was sexist, but it was one thing for a man to groom a girl as a sex slave and then sell her, but it was another for another woman to do it.

“I like that idea very much. I think this would be the perfect location to keep our girls when they're not in use. Providing of course you sell,” she added with a grin.

If Amelia Kutcher had no qualms about running a human trafficking business because it made her a lot of money, then she suspected there wasn't nothing the woman wouldn't do to make more. If Drake and Diana Harper were real people, then she was sure they would have sealed the deal.

They stopped inside a small room with a large window taking up most of one wall. The door behind them was closed and locked, and for a moment Lacey worried that their cover had been blown after all, and Amelia was going to order them interrogated and murdered.

But instead, she pulled out a video camera. “I'm sure you understand that

since you have found the behind-the-scenes workings of what we do here I can't let you go without some sort of insurance."

"Insurance?" Ben barked in a tone sharp enough to cut glass.

"So you don't think about double-crossing me," Amelia expanded.

"What kind of insurance exactly?" Lacey asked. There was no way she would touch one of the girls here, and she knew Ben wouldn't either. They'd end this right here if it came down to it. They might lose The Master, might lose a few of the other men who would come to make purchases, but they would at least save these girls.

"One of our girls has been acting up. She requires some discipline before the auction tomorrow night," Amelia explained. "You watch the punishment session, we film you watching, so you are not able to claim at a later date that you were unaware of what was going on here. Do we have a deal?"

Her insides trembled with revulsion, but Lacey kept her expression serene, if a little bored. "I really have no interest in the training of slaves. If we did, we would have done that part ourselves and saved some money. But if you insist then we have no problem with that, do we, darling?"

Ben stood behind her, a solid wall at her back. She felt the same tension swirling inside her radiating off him, but his voice was steady when he spoke. "Hurry up and get it done. I don't like my wife to be exposed to the rougher side of life."

Amelia nodded to one of the men, who pulled out a radio and told another man to bring the girl in. She held up a video camera, careful to keep herself out of the frame.

On the other side of the window, a girl was marched into the room. She was naked, pale, too thin, with fading bruises littered across her otherwise smooth porcelain skin. Her ankles were shackled meaning she stumbled and walked awkwardly, and her wrists were also handcuffed together.

In the middle of the room was a wooden bench. The girl was taken to it and bent over it, her shackled ankles chained on one side while her wrists were bound on the other leaving her on all fours. The bench was angled slightly so that her bare backside was elevated. The man who had brought her in retrieved a whip that was hanging on the wall and carried it over to the girl.

With the first blow, Lacey wasn't sure who flinched more, her or the poor girl being abused.

By the third blow, she was struggling to contain her anger.

By the sixth, she could hardly hold back her tears.

By the tenth, she was reliving in her mind every single time she had been tied up, naked, and vulnerable while The Master tore at her fragile skin with a whip.

Pain, humiliation, terror, the trifecta of what her life had been back then.

What life was for these girls.

That she was standing by and doing nothing to stop this girl from being tortured would be a black mark that would score her soul for eternity.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 5<sup>TH</sup>

9:29 P.M.

BEN WAS WORRIED.

Not about himself or their safety. Well, not physical safety anyway. But he was worried about how Lacey was handling things emotionally.

What had happened in the underground tunnels had been rough on her.

No, beyond rough, it had been hell for her.

Given what he knew about her past, he could far too easily imagine Lacey as the one being held captive. Her naked body bound and beaten, terrified but not broken.

This woman couldn't be broken. That he was convinced of.

She was so much stronger than he could ever hope to be.

Lacey Smith was the very definition of a survivor.

Which was why it hurt him to see the blank look in her eyes. To anyone else you wouldn't be able to tell anything was wrong. When she spoke, her voice was still bright, her smile appeared genuine, and she chattered away to anyone who came near them. After the disaster that was the trip down to the underground tunnels, they'd come back to the manor house and had lunch. Then they'd taken a swim in the pool, sat in the spa for a while, and talked with a couple of the other people here for the auction.

After a brief reprieve when they headed back to their room to change their clothes for the more formal evening meal, she'd had to have her game face on constantly. Dinner was more of the same; eat, talk, gather information, pretend you were every bit as excited for the ensuing auction.

When the meal was done, they'd been ushered into another room where they'd been entertained by a small string quartet.

It was still comparatively early, but Lacey needed out of here. She needed time to decompress, process what she'd seen, and what she'd had to stand by and let happen without so many prying eyes on her.

"Come on." Standing, he grabbed Lacey's hand and pulled her up with him.

"Where are we going?" she asked, her voice so bright it was almost brittle.

"To our room."

A couple of the men at nearby tables hooted and hollered, making Lacey roll her eyes and grin as she swatted at his arm. "Told you he can't keep his hands off me for long."

Ben merely gave a grunt. No one expected him to say much since he'd shut down conversation with anyone stupid enough to attempt to strike one up with him. Right now, he didn't care about the façade or the game they were playing. He just wanted to get Lacey somewhere she could just be.

As he pulled her out of the room, he knew people would assume he was just a man, turned on by the reason for being here, who was desperate to get his wife alone for sex. That these men thought that way was sickening, but he couldn't do anything to change it. Evil existed in the world, he knew that, it had stolen his wife from him, and it had marked this woman he was now carefully guiding through the large house in a way that was irreparable.

Lacey had scars, he did too. Together they were a disaster waiting to happen, but he knew both of them were one hundred percent committed to this case. Those girls might have to wait another couple of days, but they would be rescued and returned home. They would be free to try to find light in the world again like Lacey tried to do.

Only difference was that Lacey *was* light.

The light in her own life as well as everyone else's.

But what happened when she used up her resources and her light went out?

What would happen to her then?

He didn't want to, but he cared.

About her, about her happiness, about her peace, and about her future.

They might only be part of each other's lives for a short time, but her strength, determination, and bravery had impacted him in ways he hadn't

expected when he saw her jump off the yacht into the ocean in the middle of that thunderstorm. There was something about Lacey that was almost impossible not to respond to.

It was that light.

Light to those trapped in the dark was a lure that couldn't be ignored.

Ben didn't even think she realized the impact she had on the people around her because she was so busy just being her bright, sunny self.

As he opened the door to their room and ushered her inside, locking it behind them, Lacey let out a soft sigh and walked toward the bed, dropping down onto it and curling onto her side.

Unsure what to do, Ben stood helplessly in the middle of the room. Did she want space? Did she want comfort?

Jemima had been a very even-tempered woman, she rarely lost her temper and rarely cried. On the odd occasion when something did upset her, all she needed was a little pampering, and she was back to her old self. Hugs, maybe some chocolate, a massage, and Jemima was usually ready to move forward.

"I hate that they're down there alone," Lacey said softly.

Making up his mind, Ben crossed the room, climbed onto the other side of the bed, and sat with his back against the headboard and his legs stretched out in front of him. "You know it was the only thing we could do."

"We just stood by and let him hurt her." The utter desolation in her voice was the saddest thing he'd ever heard.

"No, we didn't. We did what we had to in order to make sure that girl lived. What do you think they would have done to her if we tried to stop them? They had guns, we only had our hands. We weren't going to win. We'd have been tortured for information and then killed. Those girls would either have been killed if Amelia decided it wasn't safe to continue or they would have been sold as per the plan. There was only one choice we could have made given the circumstances, and we made it."

"I know," she said softly. "I just hate it."

"I know."

Lacey rolled over so she was facing him now, although she remained curled on her side, her arms wrapped protectively around her middle. "I'm sorry I kissed you. I thought you knew it was part of the plan. I hope you know I would never ..." Her voice wobbled, and he despised himself for putting that fear in her head.

“I know,” he said gruffly.

“I was ...”

“I know,” he growled again.

“So, I would never do that to anyone ...”

“I know.” This last was roared, and he grabbed her biceps and dragged her up so she was kneeling on the bed beside him. “I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve what I said to you.”

Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears, and she leaned forward. Ben knew what she was going to do, knew that he should push her away. It was one thing to care about her feelings, to feel regret for the heartless things he’d said, even to care about her as a person including her needs.

It was another to take things further.

To a place there was no coming back from.

Still, when Lacey moved closer, her lips just millimeters from his own he didn’t pull away. Didn’t push her away.

In fact, he was the one to close the distance.

Whisper his lips across hers.

The soft moan that she made had heat building in his body. For three long years, he had punished himself by denying himself any release, any pleasure. How could he allow himself pleasure when Jemima was dead because of him?

“Ben, we should ...”

“We should what?” he demanded as he grasped one of her breasts, kneading it between his fingers.

Another moan tumbled from her lips as she thrust her chest forward. “We shouldn’t. You don’t like me.”

Not true.

Not true at all.

“Don’t dislike you, sunflower.”

“Sure seems like you do.”

The problem wasn’t not liking Lacey, it was liking her too much.

Because he didn’t want to discuss Jemima and what he’d done, he spun her around and hauled her onto his lap, kissing her neck as he shoved up the short skirt of her purple silk dress so he could dip his hand between her legs.

“Are you sure?” Lacey asked, even as she spread her legs to allow him better access.

“That I want to watch you unravel, find out if it makes you brighter than



the sun?” The tiny scrap of material covering her was soaked in her arousal, and he shoved it aside and slipped a finger inside her. “So tight, so hot,” he groaned.

Another finger joined the first and Lacey began to rock her hips. One hand clasped his forearm as he began to play with one of her breasts again, and the other reached behind her to where he was straining against the black pants of his suit.

“You’re so big,” she said, stroking him through the pants.

Adding a third finger inside her, stretching her, his thumb found its way to her bundle of nerves, and he circled it. Her moan of pleasure had an almost frantic need thrumming through his body.

He needed this.

Needed to feel good even just for a moment.

Lacey’s hand found its way inside his pants and gripped him tightly, her fingertips making small circular motions as she stroked up and down his throbbing length.

As his thumb worked her bud, his fingers stroked, hitting the spot inside her that would drive her wild.

It did.

As she undulated on his fingers pressure built inside him until it was almost unbearable. Ben increased the pressure on her little bud, stroking deep with his fingers, making sure to graze the rippled flesh inside her with each thrust.

“I’m ... I’m ... I’m going to come,” she cried, and then a moment later he felt her internal muscles quiver and clamp around him.

As her release ripped through her, the hand stroking him tightened almost convulsively and he shattered.

Three years was a long time to withhold pleasure from himself, and the orgasm that tore through him was unlike anything he had ever experienced before. It seemed to go on and on, and he realized it was because Lacey had never released her grip on him, stroking him throughout, drawing out his pleasure as though she sensed he was in desperate need of it.

She was looking over her shoulder at him, and he realized he’d been correct.

The hand playing with her breast moved to brush his thumb across her cheek. “Brighter than the sun.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

August 6<sup>th</sup>  
1:37 P.M.

IT WAS hard to concentrate today.

Lacey felt distracted. It wasn't on purpose, she knew better than to let personal issues cloud her thinking on a mission. Personal issues were to be dealt with on your own time, not Prey's.

While she was sure nobody would blame her for feeling out of sorts given why she was here and what she'd been forced to do yesterday she was angry with herself. Watching that girl being beaten had brought back every memory from her childhood she'd tried so hard to shove back down. But Ben was right, the only way to save her was to play along for now.

Which would be one thing if playing along didn't mean leaving the girl to suffer.

And Ben was another issue weighing on her mind.

They'd made out yesterday. Touched each other. Brought each other pleasure. She had come all over his hand, and he'd come in hers.

Lifting the hand that had been covered with his cum last night, Lacey cradled it in her other hand as she stared at it. Despite what they'd shared, things had continued on like it had never happened. They'd both taken separate showers. She'd slept in the bed him on the couch. They'd had breakfast, gone to the gym, relaxed in the spa, and then had lunch.

Everything was the same, and yet at the same time, nothing was the same.

A large hand moved to cover her thigh, and when she looked up to find Ben watching her with concern in his dark eyes, she realized she had been staring at her hand for longer than she thought.

Clearing her throat, Lacey set both hands in her lap and shot Ben an apologetic smile. "Sorry, got distracted."

"Understandable." His hand was still on her thigh, and he squeezed gently.

After last night, Lacey no longer believed the man hated her. She just wasn't sure what he *did* think of her. The way he'd made her feel that night when she'd asked if he wanted to have dinner with her was still in the back of her mind along with his insinuation their first night here. But now there were new moments too. The way he'd stood solidly at her back while they'd watched the girl's beating, offering silent support. The way he'd taken her back to their room last night because he knew she was close to snapping.

Those small moments of kindness were wiping away the bad ones.

In a way, she almost felt like she was being brainwashed. That was how you broke someone down, wasn't it? You hurt them but interspersed it with offering nice things. It messed with their head and emotions, confusing them to the point where they no longer knew how to feel.

Right where she was about now.

"Darling, did you see anything you like?" she asked, shoving away the tangled mess of thoughts tumbling through her head. There would be time to sort them all out later. Right now, she had a job to do.

A job she wasn't going to fail at.

After another worried glance, he schooled his features. "This is your project, dear. Whatever you want you'll get."

"You spoil me, darling," she said, throwing in a little giggle. They might be the only ones in the library, but that didn't mean they weren't being watched. There were cameras everywhere, and Lacey had to believe they were constantly monitored.

The hand on her thigh tightened again, and she looked up to find Ben's gaze intense. "You deserve someone to spoil you."

For one second, raw, naked emotion flared in his eyes and there was so much pain there that it literally stole her breath for a moment. But then it was gone, and stoic, expressionless Ben was back. She wished she knew what demons he was battling, but it wasn't her place to find out. If he wanted her to know he could tell her.

“You spoil me,” she said softly. Of its own accord her hand lifted to cup his cheek, tenderness flowing through her. Something seemed to arc between them. She wasn’t sure what it was, she had never experienced it before.

“Nothing more than you should have.”

The moment seemed to linger, they stared into one another’s eyes. Slowly it looked like Ben’s gaze was softening, opening, but then all of a sudden, they shuttered again, and he returned his attention to the catalog.

Lacey did too.

As unpleasant as it was, they had to play their roles, which meant accepting the catalog handed to them at lunch. Instead of taking it back to their room as some of the other guests had done, they’d settled in a quiet spot in the library and begun to flick through it as though they were enjoying pouring over it and making selections.

According to their cover story, Diana was looking for young girls, tweens, and very early teens that they would use to start an exclusive and specialized brothel for their wealthy friends. They’d bypassed any of the older girls and those too young, focusing on the ten to fourteen age range. So far, they had seven girls marked that they would bid on tomorrow night.

Prey was funding this op so they had a limitless supply of cash. Hopefully, they would be able to purchase all seven so those girls would be safe until the raid. Those bought by the other guests would still be rescued in the raid, but their new owners would be permitted to use them right away if they so chose.

The girl who had been beaten in front of them yesterday was in the catalog, and although they couldn’t bid on her since she was sixteen, Lacey’s heart had ached at seeing the girl’s picture.

All the images in the catalog were heartbreaking.

It was practically pornographic. All the girls and women, including the infants, had been photographed in a number of positions.

Sickening.

Bile had churned in her stomach and burned her throat, and it had taken all her well-learned constraint to keep it down and a smile on her face.

Broke a piece of her soul though.

Was that what had happened to her?

Had she been put in some auction catalog that sick freaks had perused?

There were no records of how she had been sold, how The Master had come to purchase four infant girls. It hadn’t ever really been something she’d

thought about before. The Master had bought them, taken them to his compound in Alaska, and trained them. The technicalities of how it all occurred had seemed irrelevant.

Now that she was sitting here, flicking through a catalog and feigning delight, she did wonder.

It didn't make any difference. Didn't change anything, and the only way to get those answers was if The ...

Her thoughts trailed off, falling into a deep black hole.

There he was.

Him.

The monster who haunted her relentlessly.

Like no time at all had passed, she was eighteen again, back in Alaska, fighting to get through each day. Enduring horrific torture on a daily basis, covered in bruises and gashes at various stages of healing, malnourished and dehydrated.

A walking zombie.

Because of him.

Of course, Ben noticed the change in her instantly. An arm came to wrap around her shoulders, and he turned her so she was facing him, tucked against his chest.

"Was that him?" he whispered against her ear.

All she could do was nod.

How could she do this?

Lacey knew she wasn't as strong as her sisters. Ivory hadn't flinched when she'd come face to face with The Master, she'd fought to save those little girls. And Pearl had been beaten by the man just a few months ago, and she hadn't succumbed to his mind games.

Here she was catching a glimpse of him walking past the library door, and she was all but falling to pieces.

She couldn't do this.

She couldn't.

No way.

If just seeing him made her freak like this, what would she do when they arrested him?

"Listen to me." Ben's voice was quiet but unyielding. "He is just a man. A pathetic, evil monster, but still just a man. He cannot hurt you anymore. He thinks he taught you to be strong, but he didn't, he taught you to find your

own inner strength. That strength is still there. Still inside you. A woman who doesn't hesitate to jump into the ocean in the middle of a thunderstorm doesn't let anything scare her off."

"I'm terrified of the ocean."

She felt a small chuckle rumble through his chest. "See. Exactly what I meant. Being brave isn't not being afraid. It's doing what you have to do even though you are afraid. You, Lacey Smith, are one of the bravest people I have ever met."

How badly she wished that was true.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 6<sup>TH</sup>  
1:59 P.M.

BEN WAS WORRIED.

Again.

About Lacey.

Finding those girls yesterday, accepting she couldn't save them on the spot, then being forced to prove their loyalty by watching the girl get beaten had pushed her right to the edge of what she could handle.

Seeing the man who had abused her for eighteen long years might just give her the final shove to send her tumbling right over that cliff.

He'd grown up in a good family. They might not have had a lot of money, and there had been things he had wanted that he'd had to go without, but his home had been filled with love. Love between his parents, love between him and his siblings, love between him and his sisters and their parents. He had never doubted once that he was loved and cherished.

His life had been full of all the other things kids his age did. School, homework, riding his bike to friends' houses. He played football, baseball, and video games when he was home. Had a TV in his room and most of the toys he wanted, nice clothes to wear, and more than enough food to fill his belly.

There had been nothing he was lacking even if he hadn't had everything.

Lacey's life had been the opposite.

There had been no loving parents. She'd been raised by a sadistic psychopath in a remote part of Alaska. There had been no school although The Master had taught her and her sisters to read, write, and speak several languages as well as most of the basics they would have learned in school. But along with that he had also ruthlessly taught them to kill and to endure torture.

Her life had been one long trauma, and although she had molded herself into a strong, competent woman who knew how to defend herself and would use those same skills to defend an innocent, he wished she could catch a break.

Ben had meant what he said though. She was the definition of strength and bravery. While he had all but given up and allowed his trauma to consume him, she had forged a new life.

A better life.

One where she triumphed.

As he watched her pull herself together before his eyes, he made a decision.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he stood, grasping Lacey's hand and pulling her up with him.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Our room."

Instead of asking why, she allowed him to lead her out of the library and through the grand foyer. They were intercepted before they reached the stairs.

"Can I take it everything is acceptable?" Amelia Kutcher asked, nodding at the catalog Lacey still held.

"Oh, more than acceptable," Lacey gushed. Ben had no idea how she did it, but there was no trace of the desolation and terror that had been rolling off her in waves. If he didn't know better, he would absolutely believe that she was here to purchase several young girls she was then going to prostitute out.

"I had a report that you looked, how shall we say ... troubled," Amelia said, confirming their suspicions that the cameras were being monitored around the clock.

Lacey dipped her gaze as though embarrassed. "It's just so overwhelming. I didn't even know I needed this in my life until our ... encounter ... with a young girl six months ago. I didn't realize the allure of youth. To know that I'm this close—" she held up her thumb and forefinger a couple of millimeters apart "—to fulfilling my dream. I just ... there aren't

words to describe it. I might have gotten a little emotional.” She gave a self-deprecating shrug, and the tension melted off Amelia.

Reaching out, she placed a comforting hand on Lacey’s forearm. “I understand that. This is a big step, and it’s exciting to see a dream come to fruition. I take it you were able to find several potential purchases?”

“Several,” Lacey echoed. “In fact, we were just going upstairs to celebrate. Isn’t that right, darling?”

Ben grunted, and both Lacey and Amelia chuckled.

“A man of few words I see, but I’m sure he knows how to use that mouth.” Amelia shot him a flirty smile, and he grunted again, uncomfortable with this line of conversation.

To him, sex wasn’t something fun, something to enjoy, it was a reminder of his loss. Of what he had let happen.

Mistakes like the one he’d made with Lacey last night couldn’t happen again. He didn’t deserve pleasure. Didn’t want it. Which was why he had to make Lacey understand why there was no point in her being interested in him for sex. When it came to her, he felt weak like he would give in if given half a chance. If he was going to resist her, he was going to need her help.

What better way to do that than to let her know what he’d done.

“You’d be surprised just how talented he is,” Lacey gushed, leaning into him.

“Well, I’ll let you two head on up to your room. I just wanted to make sure everything was okay. Happy and satisfied customers is what I strive for,” Amelia said.

“I think you will have two very happy customers tonight,” Lacey said.

Amelia headed toward her office, and Ben resumed guiding Lacey up the stairs and to their room. Once he had the door closed and locked behind them Lacey sagged against his side.

“I hate doing that, pretending this is all okay when it’s not. It makes me feel so dirty. Filthy.” A shudder rippled through her, and he tightened his hold on her out of instinct.

Since he wasn’t sure what she wanted him to say—what she *needed* from him—he said nothing, and a moment later, Lacey straightened and took a step away. Slipping off her heels, she went to the bed and sat on it, propping herself against the headboard the way he had last night. For a full minute she looked at him, studying him, seeking an answer to something.

Eventually, she asked, “Why are we up here, Ben?”



How did he explain?

These weren't words he'd ever really spoken.

The people in his life knew what had happened, knew he couldn't talk about it, and never asked him to. But Lacey deserved to know. They were partners, and he knew about her past. She was completely naked before him and that left her vulnerable. He wanted to try to give her that same vulnerability, but it wasn't easy.

In fact, it was one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

If he didn't feel like he owed it to her, there was no way he'd do it.

"There are some things about me you should know."

Lacey shook her head. "I only need to know what you want me to know. It's pretty obvious that whatever you think you have to tell me isn't something you want to share."

Actually, she was wrong.

As hard as this was, he wouldn't do it if he didn't feel he should, and as much as he didn't want to, he also kind of ... did.

Maybe he needed the reassurance that he had no right to even think of pleasure or anything good in his life after what he'd done, and showing Lacey who he really was would achieve that. She was the first woman he'd felt anything for other than his wife, and he needed to keep her emotionally distant while he couldn't keep her physically distant.

"I killed my wife, Lacey."

She frowned. "I don't believe that. You're putting some sort of spin on things. I'm so very sorry for your loss though."

"Believe it or not it doesn't change the truth."

"Come and sit." She patted the bed beside her. "Tell me what happened to your wife."

Invisible magnets seemed to pull him across the room, and he stretched out beside her. "She was murdered."

"Oh, Ben. How awful." Tears shimmered in her eyes making the hints of green stand out. The hand she rested on his arm was tentative, but she didn't move it even when he stiffened under her touch.

"Three years ago. We had just started talking about having kids. I wasn't sure we were ready, but Jemima loved kids, and I couldn't tell her no. She was ovulating so we'd been having a lot of sex. I got called away one night right after we were done. Literally. She knew the drill, so I got dressed, kissed her goodbye, and left. Once I got to base, I found out that the mission

had been aborted, intel had changed, and we weren't going after all, so I turned around and headed back home. I was only gone an hour and a half."

Images flashed through his mind like a movie.

Blood.

Everywhere.

The floor, the walls, the ceiling.

Body parts were scattered throughout the bedroom.

"That was all it took. While I was gone some kid high on LSD caught a glimpse of her taking out the trash, thought she was an alien come to invade the earth. He broke in and butchered her. Cut her apart limb by limb while she was still alive." Nausea choked him as he imagined the sheer terror and horrific pain Jemima had experienced in her final moments. "He decapitated her. By the time I got home he was gone. Left behind his DNA though, and cops picked him up a week later. He's serving a life sentence but what good does that do me? It doesn't bring Jemima back, and it doesn't change the fact that I'm to blame for her death. I was her husband. It was my job to protect her, to keep her safe and happy. It was my job to take out the trash and I didn't. I failed her. It's my fault Jemima was murdered."

## CHAPTER NINE

August 6<sup>th</sup>  
2:13 P.M.

HER HEART WAS BREAKING for Ben and his loss.

How horrific to lose your wife in such a violent and unexpected way. Lacey didn't even like thinking about it and had no idea how Ben had managed to go on after such a traumatic experience.

And to blame himself ...

That was the most heartbreaking thing of all.

Even though she knew he might not like it, Lacey didn't hesitate to shift so she could wrap her arms around Ben's neck. His body was stiff beneath hers, but fine tremors rippled through him. He didn't return her embrace.

"Oh, Ben. No. It is *not* your fault. What do I say to convince you?" she implored. She wanted to take away his pain and heal it for him, but she had no idea how to go about even starting.

"Nothing. I take full responsibility for my actions that night." His voice was cold, hard, and unyielding. If there had been any pieces of her heart left joined together it would have broken them.

"What exactly did you do that was wrong?" she asked gently, leaning back to see his face but gently kneading her hands on his shoulders. Lacey didn't have to ask to know that he was placing the blame squarely on his own shoulders because it was his way of handling his grief and trying to make sense of a senseless act.

“I left her alone, unprotected, and vulnerable.” The monotone scared her as did the empty look in his dark eyes.

“To go to work,” she reminded him. “You got called out on a mission. How many other times had you been called out before that?”

Ben shrugged one shoulder.

“How many?” she pressed. There had to be a way to make him see sense. “Tell me.”

“In the six months since I joined the SEALs, maybe half a dozen.”

“And nothing happened any of those times.”

“Doesn’t change what happened that time.”

“Of course it doesn’t, but, Ben, that doesn’t make it your fault. Leaving for work was part of your lives, nothing out of the ordinary. And forgetting to take the trash out, I’m sure it wasn’t the first time that had happened either, was it?”

“Jemima was always getting annoyed with me about it. I promised her I wouldn’t forget again, but I did. If I’d done it like I was supposed to then she wouldn’t have been out there, and that man wouldn’t have seen her.”

There was no way she could argue with that.

While technically true, it still ascribed an uneven portion of blame upon himself. There was no way he could possibly have foreseen what would have happened from forgetting to take out the trash.

“You must love Jemima so very much,” she said softly. What would it be like to be loved by a man the way Ben had loved his wife? To be loved so completely that logic had no place in the relationship. It was as sweet as it was heartbreaking.

“I planned to spend the rest of my life with her.”

A life that had been ripped away from them. How tragic that the very last time he’d seen his wife they’d been making love to try to create a baby. No wonder Ben had turned her down when she’d approached him that night. Lacey wondered if he’d even been with a woman since the night his wife was murdered.

“And that dream was ripped away from you.” Tears leaked out of her eyes trailing down her cheeks. She wished there was something she could do to help Ben, but she had no idea what.

Lacey had never had a dream, not one like that anyway. Her dreams had been simple, a safe place to live, free of pain where she could be her own person. So long as she had that she had what she needed. But love, marriage,

happiness, kids, none of those things had ever entered her mind. Ben had wanted them though, and he'd lost it all.

"Everyone keeps telling me I have to keep living my life. That moving on doesn't mean letting Jemima go, it just means acknowledging that I'm still alive, but I don't feel alive."

His admission resonated with her on a deep level.

It was the same way she felt.

Her past had damaged her in ways she probably didn't even understand, and in an attempt to heal, to hide her pain, she tried her best to look for moments of joy where she could. When you looked for them, they were easy to find, but it was so exhausting always having to look for them.

"You haven't been with anyone since your wife?" she asked, already knowing the answer. It explained why he'd lashed out both the night after he'd saved her life and that first night here at the manor house.

For a long moment, he was silent. Lacey didn't rush him, giving him time to process what he wanted to say, just honored that he'd confided in her at all. She honestly hadn't felt the need to ask Eagle about Ben, confident that if Ben wasn't good at what he did and the right person for the job Eagle wouldn't have involved him.

"I can't," he finally said.

"Can't like you've tried but were unable to ... perform? Or can't like you just don't want to?" This was none of her business, and she shouldn't be peppering him with questions, but he'd told her for a reason, and she had to believe it was because he was ready to verbalize his feelings.

"Don't want to. The thought of being with a woman makes me feel sick. And ..."

"And?"

"And I don't ... deserve pleasure."

She suspected that was the real crux of the issue. It wasn't that he couldn't stomach the idea of being with another woman—although she knew that being with anyone other than his wife would be one of his obstacles because he obviously loved her very much—it was that he thought he didn't deserve to move on. That he should be punished for the rest of his life because he believed he was responsible for his wife's murder.

"You let me give you pleasure last night," Lacey reminded him. At the time she hadn't really grasped just how big that was for Ben. It had occurred to her that maybe it was his way of apologizing for his harsh words without

actually saying he was sorry. Now she realized it was so much bigger than that.

“That was—”

“Progress,” she finished for him before he could end the sentence the way she knew he’d been going to by calling what they had shared a mistake.

“It wasn’t ... it can’t ... I didn’t ...”

Since she could tell he was floundering, confused, and unhappy, maybe even resentful of what he was feeling, she kept her voice soft and gentle when she spoke. “You’re attracted to me, right?”

The glower he shot her was answer enough.

“It’s okay to not like that. It’s okay to be angry with me, or yourself, or even just the universe in general. But it’s still progress. What happened to you and your wife is ... honestly, there aren’t even words strong enough to describe it, but it’s still okay to live. I had to learn that lesson after Prey rescued us. It took me a while, but I learned to do what made me happy. Maybe I can help you learn that same lesson.”

His brows dipped in a mixture of confusion and suspicion. “How?”

“You weren’t wrong, what you said about me. I do like sex, it does bring me joy, and I don’t think I’m doing anything wrong.” Lacey wasn’t going to add in her secret thoughts about how it gave her the control she needed over her body and her pleasure. “When I sleep with someone it’s only ever one time, no-strings attached. I’m not looking for strings, and you’re not looking for strings, maybe you can use me to help yourself. That way when you do meet someone who you like and want to have a relationship with, you won’t have to worry about crossing that barrier.”

The suspicion had faded, but it had been replaced with something worse.

Something that looked too much like pity.

“That’s the kind of sex you like? Meaningless?”

Keeping her head up and her expression clear of the shame and dirtiness he dragged back up, she gave a decisive nod. “It’s the only kind to have when you’re not looking for a relationship. But the men I sleep with are good men, lots of them SEALs or Delta. They want the same thing I do, to feel good. Feeling good is never a bad thing, trust me.”

The pity disappeared, and this time understanding took its place.

Lacey found she liked that even less.

It was like he had somehow just dived deep down into her mind and dug through her secret thoughts and feelings.

Releasing her hold on his shoulders, Lacey climbed off the bed. “I’m going to go take a bath. I need to relax a little before the auction tonight. Think about what I said, if you need me, I’m here for you, and I won’t ask for anything in return.”

As she turned and gathered her clothes and headed for the bathroom, Lacey was pretty sure she could have sex with Ben without it meaning something.

Okay, kinda sure.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 6<sup>TH</sup>  
8:25 P.M.

LACEY’S OFFER rolled around in his head.

It shouldn’t.

It should have bounced out with the same velocity it bounced in when she first said the words.

What was he thinking?

Ben did not want to have random sex with a woman, any woman, but especially the first one he had found himself attracted to since Jemima. That was just asking himself to develop feelings, and he didn’t want feelings for anyone other than his wife. Lacey might be able to separate sex and emotion, but he wasn’t sure he could.

Might make him weak but it was what it was.

Keeping his distance had been easy when he thought Lacey was a slightly irresponsible brave woman who had risked her life to save a victim. It was even easy enough when she’d tracked him down and asked him if he wanted to sleep with her because back then he didn’t know her, and his mind and body just revolted at the thought of sex with anyone.

But now he *was* getting to know her.

Each glimpse she gave him of the real Lacey Smith, of the vulnerabilities she so valiantly hid from the world including the people she knew loved her, of the brightness he knew she worked hard to shine out into the world, of her secret fears, it made him like her more.

Actually like her.

It had only been three years since Jemima died, and despite Lacey's reassurances—the same ones he'd heard from his family, his team, and his friends—he *did* believe he was to blame for his wife's death. Facts were, if he had taken out the trash like he was supposed to then she wouldn't have been out there, the killer wouldn't have seen her, and she would still be alive.

How was he supposed to move on with his life like nothing had happened with that weighing on his conscience?

"I know your cover is all silent and broody, but you have to at least feign some interest in the auction," Lacey whispered against his ear.

Her breath was warm against his skin, and he remembered the breathy moans she'd made as he'd touched her in their room the day before. Those little pants were pure sex. If you bottled them, he was sure you could make a fortune selling them as an aphrodisiac.

"Ben," she said, sounding both amused and exasperated. "Try to focus."

Right.

Focus.

And not on the slight weight of Lacey's body as she leaned against him or the way her red dress accentuated her cleavage and hugged her flat stomach and slender waist before fanning out around her in soft puffs of scarlet silk. And he definitely shouldn't be focused on slipping his hand under the skirt of her dress, pushing aside the red silk panties he knew she was wearing because he'd zipped up her dress and caught a glimpse of them, and plunging his fingers inside her.

Given where they were, he doubted anyone would care if he fingered her in the open ballroom turned auction room. In fact, probably the opposite. Most of the guests would likely be turned on by the display.

"Ben," she said again, her voice sober this time, any hints of amusement gone. "I'm sorry for what I said earlier, in our room, okay? I should never have offered to help you with your ... issue. It was insensitive, and I hate that I made you angry with me again."

Was that what she thought?

That he was angry with her?

That couldn't be further from the truth.

He was freaked because there was a part of him—a much larger part than there should be considering he took vows to love a woman for the rest of his life—that wanted to take her up on her offer. The more sensible part of his



brain knew that not only did he not deserve the respite from his grief and guilt she was offering him, but that taking her up on said offer might be starting him down a road he wasn't ready to travel.

It also bothered him that she never even considered *she* could be a woman he might eventually move on with.

Just how badly had The Master messed with her head?

Growling, he used the arm he had slung across her shoulders to pull her closer so she was all but in his lap. "I am not angry with you."

"But I thought—"

"Then you thought wrong, didn't you?"

"Okay." She said it like she didn't believe it, but at least her tone had lost the self-loathing he had detected a moment ago.

A rush of tenderness for this woman who hid her pain behind a mask of breezy bubbiness caught him by surprise.

It was one thing to find Lacey wildly attractive. It was quite another to feel anything else for her.

Ben fought the urge to brush the feeling aside, and instead, he grasped her chin between his thumb and forefinger and angled her face up so he could brush a kiss to her lips.

Her surprise was evident, but it was the warmth that spread through her eyes and curled her lips into a genuine smile that made him glad he hadn't run from his emotion. Emotions weren't something he wanted anymore, he'd had his fill with the crushing guilt and grief that never gave him a moment's peace, but Lacey had needed something from him, and he'd found himself unable to deny her.

"Auction's starting," he whispered against her soft, plump lips.

"Then I guess we better turn our attention to Amelia," she whispered back. There was longing in her soulful brown eyes, and he wondered, deep down inside where she didn't let anyone in, what did Lacey want? What did she need?

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are so thrilled to have you here tonight for our very exclusive auction," Amelia spoke into the microphone on the podium. The woman was dressed in a short, tight-fitting black dress. Her hair hung in curls down her back, her heels added several inches to her height, and with her makeup accentuating her features she was stunning.

Why did a woman who looked like that, who was intelligent and business savvy need to run illegal human trafficking auctions?

Ben swore he would never understand how some people's minds worked.

“As you know, in addition to the merchandise we will soon be bringing up on stage, you are welcome to put in a special request, and we will provide what you're after. Of course, since you're all here, you believe in top quality, which sometimes takes time. Our goal here is to offer service unequalled anywhere else in the world. If there are problems with your purchases you can, of course, return them for a full refund. Your happiness and satisfaction are our main priority.”

Looking around the room at the well-dressed men and women sitting at tables, being served drinks and canopies, he saw smiles and nods of approval. Some of the wealthiest and most depraved people in the world sat in this room. He'd recognized celebrities, politicians, and well-respected businessmen, but they weren't who his gaze zeroed in on.

Nope, his gaze zeroed in on what he believed to be the biggest threat in the room.

The Master.

While not the most influential of men—Ben had no idea who the man really was—he was a threat to Lacey, her safety and her sanity, and in his mind that made him the biggest threat.

They'd specifically chosen this spot because it was tucked away in a back corner. They didn't want The Master spotting Lacey and identifying her. Then not only might the man flee again, but he would also tip everyone else off.

The night was understandably and predictably hell. Watching the terrified yet trained through pain to be compliant girls, parade across the stage like cattle was sickening. Watching the guests' reactions to it was worse. The bidding was done with gusto, and Ben had no idea how Lacey so convincingly placed her own bids.

If he didn't know better, he would believe she was just another sick, twisted, wicked person with far too much money to throw around. She was the winning bidder of all five girls they had circled in their catalog. The Master bought four girls, two of the babies, a toddler, and a preschooler.

But what made the evening so much worse was the way Lacey kept a death grip on his hand. Her nails dug so painfully into his skin that he knew it would leave behind marks, and her grip was tight enough to hurt. Every time he smoothed a hand down her back, or cupped the back of her head and drew her in for a kiss, or palmed her cheek and gently caressed her skin, she shot

him a sweet smile and a little of the tension bled out of her body. No matter what though, her hold on his hand never wavered, never loosened.

She was using him as her lifeline, and he wasn't sure how he felt about that.

## CHAPTER TEN

August 7<sup>th</sup>  
12:32 A.M.

“I THOUGHT I knew what Hell on Earth was like, but I was wrong. I would give anything right now to be the one suffering so those poor girls didn’t have to.” Lacey sighed as she leaned back against the bedroom door she had just closed and locked as though that might also shut out the horror running rampant inside her head.

Ben didn’t say anything, but he gave her a funny look as he unbuttoned his tux jacket and slipped it off.

He’d been acting weird all night.

Ever since she’d made that stupid offer to help him get over his issue with sex by offering him no-strings attached sex. One of the stupidest things she had ever done, but the problem was there were no takebacks in life. It was out there now, and she had to deal with it. They both did.

He said he wasn’t angry with her about it, but she wasn’t so sure.

Why else would he be back to treating her as though she had the plague?

Okay, so he had kissed her and let her hold his hand all night. Squash his hand was probably more like it. Hers was aching from the way she’d clutched at Ben’s, sure that if she let go the horror of what they were watching would snap her in two. If hers was hurting his had to be too, only he hadn’t complained.

A stress headache was beginning to pound at her temples. Confusion over

Ben and what her feelings were and were not for him, along with what his feelings were or were not for her, was starting to take a toll on her. That on top of everything else had her on overload.

*Not much longer.*

The thought didn't console her much because even though there was only another twenty-four hours or so until the raid that would bring The Master, Amelia, everyone who worked for her, and everyone who had come to the auction taken into custody, and the girls rescued, it wouldn't end there. There would be meetings and debriefings, and she would make sure she was kept informed on the girls' recoveries.

It felt so never-ending that she almost couldn't handle it.

Across the room, Ben began to unbutton his crisp white shirt. How it was still crisp after a couple of hours of wearing it through dinner and the auction and the after-party celebrations she had no idea. Lacey felt like she'd been tossed in a washing machine, half-drowned, tossed about, then into the drier where she'd been almost suffocated by the heat.

When he finished with the buttons and tossed the shirt onto the sofa, then reached for the buckle of his pants, her mouth dropped open.

"What are you doing?" she squeaked. They didn't undress in front of one another. While she wasn't ashamed of her body, she worked out every day and knew that she was in good shape and looked good, she didn't flaunt it. It had scars, marks from her years with The Master, and while she never let them hold her back, Ben had made it clear on several occasions that he wasn't interested in her in a sexual way even if there was attraction there. That made her uncomfortable baring her body to him and even more uncomfortable for him to bare his to her.

There was only so much temptation she could take and watching him undress, knowing she couldn't have him, might prove to be more than she could handle right now.

"Yes."

"Huh? What do you mean yes?" she asked.

"Your offer."

Lacey gulped. "What about it?"

"Yes."

Did he really mean what she thought he meant? It wasn't that she was some sex-starved lunatic who had to sleep with every man she met, and it *had* been her offer to help him with his problem, but now that he had said yes, she

wasn't sure what to do.

Belt undone, Ben let his black suit pants drop, pooling at his feet and leaving him in just a pair of white boxers.

Wow, he looked good.

She almost had to fan herself.

"Turn around," Ben ordered as he stalked toward her.

To her complete surprise, she complied. Lacey never took orders in the bedroom. Even though she mostly slept with alpha men used to being in charge, they were equals, and she always made sure she was treated as such. In fact, if a man was too pushy, too domineering, she usually never took things any further, leaving them at the club, or bar, or wherever they'd met.

But not with Ben.

When he issued an order, pleasure hummed through her body, her blood heated, and she found she couldn't do anything but what he'd told her to.

His hands covered her shoulders, and she shivered in delightful anticipation. The images of how good those hands had made her feel still vivid in her mind.

Those hands slid slowly down her arms, pausing every couple of seconds to caress her skin before reaching her wrists and gently encircling them.

"Hands stay here, sunflower," he instructed as he pressed her palms against the locked door.

Before she could even think to tell him she'd do whatever she wanted, his hands were back on her shoulders only this time they trailed down her spine until they reached the zipper. With excruciating slowness, he unzipped her until the dress fell in a crimson puddle at her feet.

Since the dress was strapless, she was wearing only a pair of satin panties the same color as her dress and a killer pair of heels.

With her back to him, she felt rather than saw his appreciation, and she was so grateful he didn't mention the scars.

Now was not the time she wanted to think of them.

Heat poured off him as he stepped closer. His chest brushed against her back, his hard length grazing her backside.

When both of his hands came around to claim her breasts, Lacey gasped and thrust her chest forward, seeking more. He kneaded and teased her nipples until they pebbled into hard little peaks.

Then while one hand continued to play his other drifted lower.

His fingertips were rough and calloused, telling of the work that he did,

but the small ridges only added additional stimulation as he lazily traced across her rib cage, moving from side to side and edging lower.

Her body was going crazy with anticipation, heat pooled between her legs, her body already growing wet for him.

“Are these wet?” he asked as a single finger slid inside the waistband of her panties.

“Soaked.”

“For me.” There was a note of pride in his voice as though he liked knowing he drove her wild even if he wasn’t sure he liked that she returned the favor.

“All for you,” she agreed.

“Perfect.” His whole hand entered her panties, stretching the material enough that it tore.

Not that she cared.

His forefinger circled her wet entrance before the tip disappeared inside her.

It wasn’t enough.

Not even close.

But then the finger sunk into her heat until it was buried deep. Another finger joined it, and then a third, stretching her. The heel of his hand pressed against her needy little bud, and a moan tumbled from her lips.

Keeping his pace slow, Ben rubbed against her bundle of nerves while his fingers teased that magic spot inside her. His other hand continued to fondle first one breast and then the other, and sensations began to build inside her.

They built and built, but he kept the pressure light enough that she couldn’t quite reach that edge.

“More,” she begged, gripping his wrist and trying to increase his movements.

“Uh, uh, uh.” He pulled his hands away completely, and she mewed a protest. “I told you these stay here.” Taking both her wrists in one of his hands, he pinned them against the door. “You’ll get more when I’m ready to give it to you. My sunflower isn’t going to come until I tell her to. Then she’s going to explode for me like a good girl.”

Wetness all but dripped from her as she moaned.

Who knew she liked being called a good girl?

“Bend over,” he ordered, lowering her hands so she could bend at the waist. “These have to go.”

With one smooth move, he ripped the already torn panties from her body. “That was ridiculously hot,” she murmured.

“Oh, sunflower, you haven’t seen anything yet.”

She felt him move behind her, then the tip of his length nudged her entrance. When she rolled her hips back, trying to take him inside her, the palm of his hand came down against her bare backside. Not hard enough to hurt, just to sting.

“I’m in charge here, sunflower,” Ben said, tone gently reprimanding. His hand smoothed over the spot he’d just spanked, soothing away the sting.

One thrust was all it took, and he was inside her, filling her in a way she hadn’t felt before.

His pace was brisk, and she felt him swelling inside her, she would have sworn he was growing harder. She was close to coming but not quite there, and for a moment she was sure he wouldn’t let her come at all. After all, she had told him that this was about helping with his problem.

But then his hand found her bud, this time working it was a fervor that matched the rapidly building pressure inside her. His other hand maintained its grip on her wrists, holding her in place as he thrust in and out of her.

“Come, sunflower. Now.”

The simple command was enough to have that pressure bursting free and she came so hard she thought she might actually explode.

“Good girl.”

His words uttered as he found his own release seemed to prolong her pleasure. Or maybe it was him coming inside her.

By the time they both floated down from their highs, they were breathing hard and completely spent.

Releasing his hold on her wrists, Ben stroked her hair and then her back as he pulled out of her. She could have sworn he whispered the words thank you, but maybe that was just her imagination.

“I’ll go dispose of this and get you something to clean up with,” Ben said, pulling off the condom she hadn’t even realized he’d put on as he headed for the bathroom.

“Mmm, then I can’t wait to get into bed, I’m wiped out.”

“I’m going to go take a walk. I’ll try to be quiet when I come back in.”

Her heart dropped. “You’re going for a walk?”

“Have some energy I need to work out. Thought I might go hit the gym.”

Lacey could suggest another way to work out his energy, but she already



knew this was supposed to be a one-and-done. When she reached out to take the wet towel Ben handed her, she had to firm her muscles so he didn't see her trembling.

"I'm sure I won't wake," she said softly, attempting a smile.

"I'll be on the couch anyway, so you're probably right."

So he wasn't even going to sleep in the bed with her. That shouldn't hurt, and it certainly shouldn't make her feel sad and even ... used.

This was all her stupid idea to begin with.

It was supposed to be one time, a way to help Ben overcome his issues. Too bad she'd gone and done the stupidest thing she could do.

Catch feelings.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 7<sup>TH</sup>

1:16 A.M.

TALK about making a mistake of epic proportions.

Sex with Lacey was supposed to be a way to help himself let go of his issues with sex.

Okay, that was a lie.

Not why he'd slept with her at all.

The reason he'd had sex with Lacey was because he'd hoped it would get *her* out of his system not his guilt over his wife's death.

Instead of achieving that goal, all it left him with was a burning need for more.

More.

More.

Until Ben wasn't sure he could ever satisfy his craving.

The night was cool, and the sound of his feet pounding across the ground was the only sound. It really was peaceful out here in the countryside. Maybe when his time was up, and he retired from the SEALs, he'd move out to the country.

Who knows, maybe that was what he really needed.

Solitude.

He could become a hermit, and never have to worry about other people. He'd be free to wallow in his pain without anyone attempting to prod him out of it, without gorgeous women who messed with his head.

Although he'd told Lacey he had extra energy he needed to burn off and might hit up the gym, what he'd really needed was space.

For the first time in three years, he wondered if it was time to start moving on.

How much he'd hated that term in those first weeks and months after Jemima's murder. People had been sympathetic, of course, and understood that he was mired in a pit of grief and guilt that there was no hope of climbing out of. They had been supportive through the trial and when Jemima's killer was sentenced to life in prison.

But over time those whispers of moving on grew louder.

Time doesn't heal your wounds, but it does dull them, he'd been told. Jemima would want you to be happy. She wouldn't want you to waste the rest of your life beating yourself up over her death.

That one he'd hated the most.

How would anyone know what Jemima would have wanted?

And it wasn't like she had died of an illness or even in an accident. Then it might be conceivable that she would want him to be able to find happiness with someone else, but she'd been horribly murdered. Because of him. If anyone had reason to want him to suffer for the rest of his life it was Jemima.

Then after that first anniversary, his family and friends began to try to prod him onto the road of healing. He hadn't even been ready to take that first step onto the road let alone walk down it.

Quite simply Ben didn't want to heal.

Didn't want to move on.

He wanted to coat himself with enough guilt that even looking at anything that resembled happiness was completely out of the question.

After two years had passed, he could tell his loved ones were starting to get frustrated with him and his attitude. They understood him not wanting to date, but that he wouldn't attend family dinners, holidays, or even go out for dinner or come over for a BBQ, which was what they didn't get.

But how could they understand grief and guilt like what he was dealing with?

To be honest, Ben wouldn't wish this feeling on his worst enemy.

By the time the second year passed and they were in the third, the talks

his family and team began to give him basically told him that he needed to accept he wasn't responsible for Jemima's murder or he would never be able to be happy again.

Didn't they get that he didn't *want* happiness?

That he despised it.

That punishing himself was the only way to stay even marginally sane.

Avoiding women and anything hinting at what could turn into sex or worse a relationship had become his go-to. It was better to stay away from women than to risk falling for one.

Was that what was happening to him now?

Was he falling for Lacey?

After Jemima, he had never felt anything for any woman he had come into contact with. Not even the tiniest sparks of attraction.

Until her.

Until he watched her throw herself into the ocean to save an innocent. Found her battling but making progress to get herself and her charge to the yacht. Watched her face her fears alone with no support system but so much courage it filled him with shame.

In life you didn't compare trauma. What he'd gone through was horrific. What Lacey had gone through was too. They'd both handled that trauma in wildly different ways and while he wasn't kidding himself that Lacey had found the answer to surviving and getting past trauma unscathed, he couldn't help but wonder if perhaps her method of healing was better than his.

Avoidance didn't equal healing. It was a coping mechanism and one that might work for a short while, but it was no road to finding peace.

Peace?

Was that even what he wanted?

How could he consider allowing himself to find it when Jemima's last moments had been anything but?

Ben groaned and raked his fingers through his hair, dragging in a deep breath. He could run every second of the rest of his life, but he couldn't outrun his problems.

Feeling something for Lacey didn't have to change anything.

Chances were, it was just the high-stakes situation they had been thrown into anyway. How did he know these feelings were even real? They were likely just the result of attraction and the fact that they were responsible for one another's lives while undercover. Throw in the fact that beneath her

bubbly veneer Lacey hid a vulnerability she'd allowed him to see a couple of times, and it was no wonder he was confused.

Besides, even if he did have some sort of feelings for Lacey—and he was in no way admitting that he did—it didn't mean that she had any for him.

One time.

That was what she'd told him.

Her offer had been to help him try to get over his issue with associating the last time he'd seen his wife they'd had sex and being unable to even consider being with another woman. There had been nothing in that offer that made mention of anything beyond one night.

And they'd had that one night already.

There was no more. He wasn't going to get to touch her again, sink into her tight, wet heat again, listen to her breathy moans, watch as she surrendered her control to him, or feel her internal muscles clamp around him as pleasure claimed her body.

It was over.

Done.

So really it was a moot point. Regardless of what he felt for her, Lacey had made it more than clear that she didn't want a relationship. While he was sure that was largely because of her past, he couldn't make her want to change any more than she could make him change. And who said she had to change anyway? If she was happy being single, keeping her sexual encounters to one-night stands there was nothing wrong with that.

Just like there was nothing wrong with him if he decided he couldn't move past his wife's murder.

The past really did shape the future, sometimes in insurmountable ways.

Still, he shouldn't have left the way he did, leaving Lacey standing naked in their room. Alone, hurt, and confused.

He'd walked away immediately after sex because he'd felt too much. Things he hadn't been expecting. But in doing so he'd been selfish.

Just like he had with Jemima.

If he hadn't kept putting off taking out the trash until he forgot and went running off on a mission, then Jemima would be alive.

Selfish.

If he hadn't learned to put someone else's needs above his own, he didn't deserve a second chance at happiness.

Not that he wanted one.

*Ugh.*

Right now, Ben was sick of being stuck inside his own head. This insane debating about what he wanted and what he didn't when he knew damn well what he deserved was exhausting as well as irritating.

What he had to do was focus on facts.

Fact, he was the one to set in motion the chain of events that led to Jemima's death.

Fact, he didn't see himself ever falling in love again.

Fact, he didn't want to allow himself to feel pleasure again, even after what he'd just experienced with Lacey upstairs.

Fact, he'd messed up when he left the way he had. He owed Lacey an apology. Because despite the facts he'd just reminded himself of, he did actually like her and was still attracted to her. Maybe because they both had such darkness in their pasts they connected on a different level than he could with most people.

She brought something to his life that he didn't want to lose. She thought he had saved her life that day in the storm, but perhaps it was really her who had saved him in a way he hadn't wanted to admit he needed saving.

Ben just hoped she'd hear him out and give him a chance to tell her he was sorry.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

August 7<sup>th</sup>  
2:00 A.M.

GUESS HE WASN'T COMING BACK.

Lacey hated that it stung so badly.

After all, she had been the one bragging about having sex without strings, that she would willingly offer Ben her body to help him with his issue, and that she would have no trouble separating sex from emotion.

How wrong could she be?

Instead of worrying about Ben handling having sex for the first time since his wife, she should have been worrying about her ability to walk away afterward.

Ben hadn't seemed to have any trouble walking away, figuratively and literally.

After handing her a wet cloth to clean herself up he'd simply thrown on sweatpants and a T-shirt and disappeared.

That was over an hour ago.

Sure, she could go to the gym and ask him when he was coming back, but that felt a little too desperate for her tastes.

Like she cared.

She should have known Ben would be different.

Not only had he saved her life, but he'd turned her down when she'd offered him sex. Of course, it wasn't the first time it had happened, but she

could count the number of times it had on less than the fingers of one hand. He was a man, men liked sex, that was her experience both with The Master as well as the missions she worked for Prey. It was her experience with the men she crossed paths with as well.

They were all good men, and they took nothing from her that she wasn't completely willing to give, but all they wanted from her was sex.

Friendship in some cases, yes, but the kind of friendship that was more, let's hang together at a bar if you have nothing else planned. Not the kind of friend you told secrets to, not even the kind of friend who you'd call in an emergency.

Was that all she was good for?

Sex.

Feeling worse about herself than she had the night Ben had made her feel cheap and like a whore, Lacey threw back the covers and climbed out of bed. Wasn't like she was going to get any sleep anyway.

As she tossed on jeans and a T-shirt over her sleep shorts and tank top she tried to analyze her feelings and figure out why Ben's rejection bothered her so much.

It wasn't like she had been expecting a marriage proposal or anything.

Didn't want one either.

Maybe it was just that she thought he was different. Thought that maybe even though he didn't like her all that much, he at least respected her. The sex they'd had was different than her usual given Ben's problems, and even though it hadn't started out that way she thought they had shared ... something.

The headache that had dissipated when Ben told her to turn around and proceeded to undress her was back now, and at full strength.

Fresh air.

A little fresh air would make her feel better.

Lacey knew she would be watched, but there was no reason for anyone to suspect that anything was wrong. Likely they might think she and Ben had had a lover's quarrel and she was going in search of him to clear the air.

Which is what she *should* do, she thought as she wandered through the halls and out into the spacious grounds.

So, Ben only wanted one thing. She was being a drama queen because she had been the one to offer that thing, and at first, he hadn't even wanted it. She was the one who had changed the rules, not Ben. Really, he hadn't done

anything wrong, even if he had been a little unnecessarily rude to her since they'd been here.

The fresh night air curled around her, clearing away a little of her pain and disappointment. The soft breeze lightly ruffled the leaves of the trees as she walked amongst them, and the sky was a smooth, velvety black, dotted with thousands of glittering stars.

So much beauty.

Nature was and always had been her happy place. As much as she loved being surrounded by people there was a peace that only the trees, the sky, and your own company could give you.

She had no idea why this was hitting her so hard, or why she cared so much, or why it even mattered. After this mission, they wouldn't see each other again anyway, and The Master was here so he'd get caught in the raid. Then her nightmare would finally have some closure, and maybe she could move forward.

Although she had no idea what moving forward actually looked ...

Pain jolted through her body like she had suddenly been set on fire.

Her joints locked.

Limbs no longer supported her.

Lacey dropped to the ground with a muted thud as the dirt and grass muffled the sound.

Panic followed the pain as it lanced down her veins. She was out in the grounds. There were fewer cameras out there.

No one was coming to help her, and that was assuming that their cover hadn't been blown and this wasn't Amelia and her men.

Just because Prey maintained dozens of detailed covers ready to be used in any conceivable situation, it didn't mean they were infallible. Raven Hathaway and Olivia Oswald were amongst the best of the best when it came to hacking and anything technology-related, but that didn't mean there wasn't someone better out there.

A shadowy figure moved above her, and then another jolt of unimaginable fiery pain shot through her and the world faded away.

Something was wrong.

That was her first thought when she blinked open heavy eyes to find herself in a small, dark room. A dim light came from somewhere behind her, providing just enough brightness to make out concrete walls and a concrete floor beneath her.



Beneath her?

Tilting her head back she glanced up to find her wrists tied together with rope and then suspended from a hook in the ceiling.

This room looked like ...

Could it be?

Had their cover really been blown?

Was that why Ben had never returned to their room? Had he been taken too? Was he down here somewhere in the tunnels and rooms hidden beneath the estate?

Fear for him overrode everything else including her ability to do what she had been trained to do since she was a toddler.

She knew she liked Ben more than she should considering neither of them was looking for anything permanent. But just because it was inconvenient didn't mean she hadn't caught feelings.

Long before they slept together too.

Small tremors wracked her body, and she couldn't even feel the pain through her arms and shoulders she knew should be there from being strung up like this.

This was one of The Master's favorite ways to punish her. He'd bind her wrists with ropes because he knew how much she hated the way the fibers tore at her skin. Once he had her secured, her feet dangling above the floor so there was no respite from the agony shooting down her wrists to her shoulders he'd pull out a whip.

Slicing through the skin on her back until drops of her blood dotted the floor.

Then he'd come around in front of her naked body.

Naked because he knew how badly she hated being so vulnerable before him. A vulnerability he never missed an opportunity to exploit.

His hand would move between her legs, and he'd touch her, stimulate her, until her body had no choice but to give in and give her an orgasm she didn't want.

It didn't matter that everything inside her revolted at his touch, her body had been designed a certain way, and he knew just how to touch her to make her come.

Each time she did he goaded her, telling her that she secretly liked what he did to her, but it was lies.

Lies.

She hated it.

Hated that she responded.

Hated that she had no control over her own body.

And yeah, it didn't take a shrink to figure out that was why she had fallen into using sex as a coping mechanism once she'd been rescued. She wouldn't have her body used as a weapon against her ever again, and that meant being the one who decided when, how, and who got to give her an orgasm.

Mastering that pleasure instead of having it used against her as torture was the only thing that had kept her holding onto her sanity. And each time an orgasm brought her pleasure instead of humiliation and degradation, it made it a little easier to find something to smile about.

How did whoever had tasered her and brought her down here know how much she hated being restrained this way? Was it just coincidence or was it possible that ...?

“Hello, Lacey.”

The voice from her nightmares had her straining to look over her shoulder, sending her helpless body swinging from the ropes.

Seeing him earlier, walking through the halls in the manor house, and sitting in the ballroom during the auction was nothing compared to being alone in a room with him. Alone and at a major disadvantage.

“I've missed you.”

The crack of the whip in the air had her body tensing even before it made contact with her back. At least she was still wearing her clothing and the T-shirt and tank top, thin though the material was, both offered some protection from the lash of the whip.

Another hiss of air before the whip hit her again, then again, and again.

Wetness on her back told her whatever protection her clothing had offered had been destroyed, the material no match for the thin strips of leather.

A fingertip touched one of her wounds, and she bit her tongue to keep from crying out as it gathered blood from the open sore. Then The Master moved so he was standing in front of her.

Those soulless blue eyes sparked with wicked intent and even before he spoke, she knew what he was going to do next.

The same thing he always did.

Torture her in the way he knew he could inflict the most suffering.

“But I missed your body more.”

\* \* \*

AUGUST 7<sup>TH</sup>  
3:17 A.M.

TIME TO FACE THE MUSIC.

Ben's steps slowed as he approached his and Lacey's room. After running he hit the gym for a while, taking out all his frustrations on the punching bag. It felt good to let go of everything else and just pummel the defenseless bag until some of the clouds in his brain disappeared.

He still had no idea what he wanted or what his future looked like—whether it remained as it was or whether Lacey had any part in it—but one thing he did know was that it was time to apologize to Lacey for the way he'd been treating her since they met. Grieving or not, there was no excuse for the way he'd lashed out at her, punished her for making him feel anything but guilt.

Jemima would have been ashamed to see him act that way, his parents and sisters would be too, and his team and their families. He was ashamed of himself.

So apologizing was not only the right thing to do but what he *wanted* to do.

Easing open the door to their room, he was a little surprised Lacey hadn't locked him out. He stopped short when he saw it was empty.

The covers on the bed were messed up like Lacey had spent some time there, but she wasn't there now. The couch was also empty, and the bathroom door was open, there was no light on inside, so he assumed Lacey wasn't in there either.

Still he went to check, scanning the luxurious ensuite and finding it predictably empty.

Where was she?

Had she decided to go out for a walk?

Ben knew she hadn't been in the gym because he'd just left, maybe she'd decided to go for a run. He knew she was like him and when she was stressed she wanted to work out that extra energy. The grounds were large, she'd have plenty of peace and quiet out there.

Surely she wouldn't go looking for the tunnels again.

He was ninety percent sure she wouldn't do something so reckless. The auction was over now. The wheels were already set in motion for the raid, there was nothing to be gained. The one thing she wanted more than anything else, even more than having The Master apprehended, was for those girls to be saved.

She wouldn't do anything to mess that up.

Now one hundred percent sure that Lacey wouldn't have gone looking for the girls, he wondered if maybe she had gone looking for him. She was at heart a sweet woman who didn't like confrontation and people being angry with her. Chances were that she'd been worried he was gone so long and decided to find him, talk things out. Knowing her she was probably worried about him and how he had handled having sex for the first time since Jemima was murdered.

All he had to do was wait, and when she couldn't find him anywhere she'd come back here. If he went looking for her there was every chance they would cross paths. The estate was large, and he had no way of knowing which direction she'd be going.

Wait, all he had to do was wait.

Taking a quick shower, Ben expected Lacey to be back by the time he was done, but when he'd toweled off and thrown on a pair of jeans and a shirt, the room was still empty.

A bad feeling began to grow in his gut.

What if Lacey wasn't out trying to find him?

What if she wasn't just running off steam or getting some fresh air?

Only ten minutes had passed since he'd returned to the room, there was no need to panic. For all he knew she'd only just left when he'd arrived, so she could still be a little while. Even if she was gone for a couple of hours, it didn't mean anything was wrong.

So why did his gut continue to scream at him?

After tidying up the room, he dropped down onto the couch, bouncing his leg as though he was a nervous kid waiting to see the principal rather than a twenty-seven-year-old Navy SEAL who was used to putting himself in dangerous situations.

Minutes ticked by.

One after another.

With each passing second the feeling in his gut grew.

Something was wrong. Don't ask him how he knew he just did. Felt it somehow. Being a SEAL often meant trusting his gut, and right now, he had no choice but to. Getting a message to Prey that something had gone wrong wouldn't be easy, and even if he could, they might decide to stick with the plan. If they did that it was almost twenty-four hours before help came.

For now, it was just him and Lacey.

Unable to hang around any longer, Ben jumped to his feet and quickly shoved on a pair of sneakers before heading out into the hall. He'd search this place from top to bottom if that was what it took, but he *was* going to find Lacey.

Nothing was happening to her on his watch.

Losing another woman he cared about would be the straw that broke the camel's back. No ifs, ands, or buts, it was as simple as that.

Starting outside he combed the grounds, desperate for a glimpse of her, a sign that she was nearby, that she was okay.

He needed her to be okay.

*Lacey, where are you?*

As though his silent question thrown out into the universe was answered, he saw something glint in the moonlight.

There was no sign of anybody nearby as he jogged over and bent down beside it. Before he even picked it up, Ben knew what it was.

The simple silver chain had four heart charms on it. One was made of ivory, one was pearl, one was opal, and the other was white filigree that looked like lace.

Lacey's.

The bracelet belonged to her. He'd seen it on her wrist when they met up on the plane to fly to England, and she'd had it on ever since. The only time he'd seen her take it off was when she took a shower. Opals didn't do well in water so he presumed she took it off to keep it safe.

No way would she leave it lying in the dirt on the grounds of the estate.

Something had happened to her.

A horrible thought crept into his mind. The Master was here. Had the man seen her and decided that rather than turning her in he could take her himself?

If the girls hadn't been rescued by Prey, then he doubted The Master would ever have let them go. In his mind they were his possessions, or perhaps his creations, he wouldn't appreciate having them stolen from him. As far as Ben was aware nobody knew the reason the man had taken them

and trained them so vigorously but there must have been one.

Scooping up the bracelet, he ran full speed inside, heading straight for Amelia Kutcher's room. He needed answers, and the only one who could get them for him was the woman in charge. Her men wouldn't tell him anything or show him any of the security footage without their boss' permission.

Two guards were standing outside Amelia's bedroom, and both straightened as he careened down the hall.

It took him less than thirty seconds to knock them both unconscious and leave their bodies lying in a heap.

Apparently, Amelia was a heavy sleeper because she hadn't stirred. Stalking across the room, he wrapped a hand around the woman's neck and hauled her out of the bed. Startled blue eyes snapped open, and fear filled them when she saw him standing there, anger pouring off him in giant waves.

"Where the hell is my wife?" he roared. Just a couple of days ago the idea of having a wife, even a pretend one, was too much for him to cope with, now the sound of the word in conjunction with Lacey didn't bother him in the least.

Amelia's hands had lifted to claw at his, and he realized he was cutting off her air supply and preventing her from answering.

Loosening his grip just enough that she could talk, Amelia dragged in a couple of breaths before her gaze darted to the door behind him.

"Don't count on help coming," he sneered.

Those fearful eyes turned back to him. "Don't know what you mean," she wheezed.

"Diana is gone. I went out for a run and a workout at the gym, and when I got back to our room she wasn't there. I found this." He pulled the bracelet from his pocket and held it up. "On the ground outside. She never takes this off, it's sentimental. Where is she?"

"I ... I don't ... know," Amelia stammered, true terror in her eyes. She might think she was all-powerful, playing God with innocent people's lives, but when she didn't have her armed goon squad around to back her up she wasn't so tough.

"Then you better help me find her and you better pray that when we do not a hair on her head is harmed because if anything happens to her, I am holding you personally responsible."

Her and himself.

If Lacey was hurt, or worse, dead, he would never forgive himself for

failing her.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

August 7<sup>th</sup>  
3:41 A.M.

EXHAUSTION.

A heavy blanket of it weighed her down.

Lacey barely felt the burning pain in her back, or at least what she knew from experience should be burning pain. She was to the point where she could barely even summon enough energy to feel humiliated and angry at her own body for betraying her and making her feel things she didn't want to feel.

It was just too much.

Eventually, a brain had to reach overload, and it seemed hers had reached its limit.

Usually, she had no trouble keeping an approximate read on time even when there were no cues, her mind could kind of tick over seconds just like a watch.

But not today.

Today it felt like she had been trapped in this room with The Master for hours, days even, although she knew logically it couldn't be that long.

How much longer she'd be stuck here she had no idea.

At some point, Ben would return to their room and find she was no longer there. He might not care, might just go straight to sleep assuming she had gone off to alleviate her own extra energy, but sooner or later he would



realize something was wrong.

She had no doubt he would do whatever it took to find her even if he didn't really care about her, would likely even realize it was a possibility The Master was the one who was responsible for her disappearance. But when would that be?

And how much longer could she last down here?

It felt like all the progress she'd made these last six years had been undone in a matter of hours. The strong, confident woman who had conquered her fear of intimacy and her body's reaction to The Master's ministrations by taking control of her body and its pleasure was fading fast.

Soon she might disappear altogether.

*No.*

*Don't give up.*

Her inner voice screamed at her, insisting that she fight. Giving up meant letting The Master win. It meant that the last six years were basically a waste if she was just going to melt into a puddle of nothingness.

Saving lives, that gave her own life meaning. A purpose. A reason to get up and face the sunrise each morning. A reason not to give up each night when the sun slowly set.

Giving up now meant she wasn't the woman she thought she was.

Lacey Smith fought. It was what she did and who she was. She'd been fighting since the moment her father carried her tiny body out of their burning home, and her little lungs almost succumbed to smoke inhalation.

She'd fought through years of abuse at The Master's hand. She'd fought through the ordeal of learning about the world outside her Alaskan prison, and harnessing the skills she'd learned for good and not the evil The Master intended.

*You got this.*

No way was she going to give up now.

Lifting her head, she met The Master's gaze head on. Surprise flitted quickly through his dark blue eyes. Did he really think it would be that easy to break her?

"I. Don't. Break," she bit out each word. They were true. She might bend a little under the strain, but no way was she going to snap.

"No?" The Master taunted, stepping closer and resting his hand against her lower belly just above the apex of her thighs. "So, I'm wrong when I remember a little girl sobbing and begging me not to touch her. Weeping

because her body knew what it wanted even when her mind didn't?"

"I *never* wanted you, and you know it," she growled. Lacey had never told anyone how she would orgasm as The Master raped her. Not her sisters, not the psychiatrist Eagle had made her and her sisters see after they were rescued, and certainly not any of the men she had slept with.

It was her biggest secret.

Her greatest shame.

But ultimately it was The Master who ought to be ashamed. Abducting, torturing, and raping little girls. Lacey knew she hadn't done anything wrong even if she didn't *know* she hadn't done anything wrong. Biology was what it was, and she shouldn't be ashamed of responding to physical stimulation the way nature intended.

"If you didn't want it, you wouldn't have come," he said simply.

At the time, Lacey, with all the limited knowledge a pre-teen had, believed that. Even now on some level she still did. But it was her brain's job to inject logic and remove emotion. Each time she willingly slept with a man, gave him her body, and allowed herself control of her own pleasure it erased a little of her doubt.

"I believed that when I was younger, but now I know better."

"You think you're just like Ivory, like Pearl, you think you're better than me now," he sneered. "Do they know? Do they know that you would writhe in pleasure beneath me, practically begging me to give you release?"

"I never begged," Lacey said softly. As much as she hated it there had been times where she had been tempted to. The Master loved to identify a weakness and then flaunt it, and when he'd realized her body was insanely receptive, he'd loved to taunt her, turning her on, bringing her right to the edge but not letting her tumble over it. It was a special kind of hell to be trapped between, not wanting to orgasm and your body's natural reaction to being so close to release that you were desperate to find it.

"You wanted to though, didn't you?" His hand dipped lower until his fingers brushed between her legs. Although he hadn't stripped her naked, he had pulled her jeans and sleep shorts down enough to bare her to him. "You wanted this. Wanted me to make you feel good. And I always did. You always came for me. *Always.*" While his fingers swept across her center he leaned in, touched his nose to her neck, and inhaled, then whispered against her ear. "That made you my favorite."

If that was supposed to be a compliment it failed drastically.

His tongue darted out to caress the shell of her ear, and she shuddered, fighting nausea.

She didn't want to be his favorite.

Didn't want to be his anything.

In fact, she wished with every fiber of her being that she had never met him.

But life wasn't full of wishes it was full of facts, and facts were that she wasn't going to let this man break her.

Ignoring the pain in her back, Lacey collected her calm, let herself hang limp for a moment as though she had given in, then gathered every drop of strength she possessed.

Just as he'd taught her to do, she used the ropes binding her as leverage and pulled through her body, utilizing every muscle, and slammed her knee up into The Master's groin.

Hard.

Lacey was rewarded with the most amazing sound. His howl of agony.

Jerking away from her, his hands flew to his crotch, and he staggered around the room, squawking like an unhappy bird.

Served him right.

Wasn't so fun when someone messed with a part of your body that was supposed to be treated with respect and reverence.

With another howl, he hobbled toward her and backhanded her hard enough that her head snapped to the side and she tasted blood where he'd split her lip.

"You'll pay for that, Lacey. You think you know how bad it can be, well you don't. I'll take you with me, keep you hovering on the edge of orgasm, and not let you come for days, weeks even. Not until you beg me to let you come."

If he thought she would ever beg no matter what he did to her then he had little faith in his own training methods. He was the one who had trained her how to withstand torture. Didn't matter what kind it was, the principal was the same, and she could handle sexual torture as well as she could the physical kind.

After delivering another slap to her face, he turned and stormed—well hobbled really since it was obvious from his red face and controlled pants that he was still in pain—from the room leaving her alone.

Lacey sagged against her restraints, drained now she was alone again.

The pain in her wrists and shoulders had returned, along with the burning in her back, and the stickiness between her legs reminded her of what he'd done to her.

A tear leaked free, trailing a silver line down her face.

Then another.

And a third.

Before a fourth could follow she dragged in a deep breath.

*Hold it together.*

The reminder had her boxing up her emotions until later. If she wanted to survive this and not let The Master take her again, then she had to be smart, logical, and in control.

She had no idea how long she hung there, hurting and scared, trying to figure out a way to get herself free when there were voices, footsteps, and then all of a sudden bright light and a horrified gasp.

When she heard her name fall from the lips of the one person she desperately wanted to see but also desperately didn't want to see her like this, her control snapped.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 7<sup>TH</sup>

3:59 A.M.

IF SHE SOBBED it was going to break him.

Ben felt frozen solid at the sight before him.

Lacey hung from her bound wrists, her feet several inches off the floor, her jeans and bright pink sleep shorts were shoved partway down her legs.

Rage clouded his vision.

A deep, dark red fury that covered everything.

Pain.

He needed to inflict pain on the person who had done this to her.

Needed to do anything that would allow him to breathe, to unlock his muscles, to think.

Hurt.

Lacey had been hurt.

Obviously sexually assaulted.

Because of him.

Because he'd gone off and left her alone and unprotected.

Because he hadn't found her quickly enough.

Because he was too much of a coward to admit—even to himself—that he had feelings for this woman.

She must hate him.

Blame him.

Leave.

He should leave.

Before he made things worse.

"B-Drake." That Lacey said his name in a hiccupping sob and almost blew their cover by using his real name made everything else flee his mind but an all-consuming need to soothe her pain.

He was across the room and by her side in less than a second. First thing he did was pull her pants back up, covering her so the guards with him could no longer see her nakedness.

She'd been violated enough tonight without being on show for men who would do to her the same thing her abductor had done without a second thought.

As he scooped an arm under her legs to cradle her so her weight no longer hung off her arms, their eyes met. Her pain, fear, and humiliation were evident, but there was something else. Something he didn't have a chance to name because the room was filling with more people.

"Cut her down," he growled, keeping his gaze on Lacey. When he moved his other arm to support her back, she cried out, and he growled again. "How badly are you hurt?"

"Just my back," she whispered. Although her eyes shimmered with unshed tears none of them spilled out. Ben could tell she was hovering on the edge, precariously close to falling apart, but her strength and determination were still holding firm.

For now.

Wish he could say the same about his own.

The urge to smash something, destroy it, preferably the man who had hurt Lacey, was so strong he struggled to resist.

Probably the only thing holding him back was Lacey's slight weight resting in his arms.

She needed him.

When Jemima had needed him, he wasn't there for her. How could he leave Lacey to go and seek vengeance when she needed him here, with her?

"Anywhere else?" he asked.

"No." Lacey's voice was soft, not at all like the sassy woman he knew her to be.

One of Amelia Kutcher's guards grabbed Lacey's arms as he prepared to cut the ropes binding her, and Ben found himself growling again.

This man wasn't the one who had kidnapped Lacey and hurt her, but no one touched what was his.

Lacey wasn't his but ... for now she was.

"Drake," Lacey's voice while still soft, held a soothing quality. "He's just cutting me down."

Didn't matter. Anyone putting their hands on her for any reason only turned his blood pressure up a couple of notches.

Watching him somewhat cautiously, the man barely grasped her forearms this time as he quickly cut through the ropes, letting Lacey's arms drop as he took a step back putting distance between them.

Her pained gasp as her abused arms were released and blood flow returned had him throwing a glare at the man who'd cut her free as though he were personally responsible for her pain.

Pain he was struggling to cope with.

He knew what had happened in this room, knew exactly how badly he had failed her, and it was driving him insane.

"Drake, I ... need to get out of here," Lacey's whispered voice shoved him into action, and cradling her close, he stormed out of the room. He didn't stop moving until he had her back in the house and up in their room where he laid her gently down on the bed on her side so there was no pressure on the wounds marring her back.

Afraid of giving her a moment to dwell on what had happened in case she fell apart—because if she did, he knew he would follow suit—he hurried straight into the bathroom, gathering supplies before returning. Pulling up a chair beside the bed, he reached out and scooped up one of her hands.

The skin around her wrist was red and torn, bleeding sluggishly, and he wanted to soothe that pain, take it from her.

But he couldn't.

All he could do was carefully clean the wounds, ensuring no fibers from

the rope were left behind. After that, he applied antibiotic cream before wrapping her wrist in a crisp white bandage.

Lacey watched without saying a word as he set down one hand and picked up the other. Before he began to clean it, he held her fingers, his thumb caressing her palm, trying to convey how sorry he was for leaving her alone, letting her get hurt.

“It’s okay, Ben,” she told him, never lifting her gaze from the small circles his thumb was drawing on her palm.

It wasn’t.

How could it be?

Since he wasn’t going to argue with her, instead he got to work cleaning and bandaging her other wrist. Now it was time to tackle the wounds on her back.

Carefully, he eased her down to lie on her stomach then sucked in a breath as he saw the mess her back really was. Her white T-shirt was pretty much in tatters, there was blood smeared all over it, and he could see that the material was stuck to the gashes.

“This isn’t going to be fun,” he warned, grabbing the cloth and dipping it in the bowl of warm, soapy water.

“Never is.” The tone of her voice told him this wasn’t the first time she had suffered these same exact injuries.

That first touch of the cloth to one of her wounds was the worst. The pained breath she sucked in was so controlled it broke his heart. Lacey knew not to complain when she was in pain, and he hated that it was because it had been tortured into her.

It was slow work as he carefully eased the material out of each of the two dozen lashes across her back. Once he had all of her T-shirt cut away, he carefully added antibiotic cream to each gash, then taped bandages over the deepest ones. Although they’d be painful none of the wounds were deep enough to require stitches.

Whipped.

She’d been whipped.

And not for the first time.

Beneath the blood and cuts were thin, silvery white lines that were evidence of previous abuse.

“How did you find me?” Lacey asked as he carefully helped her roll over and shift so she was sitting.

“When I came back to the room, and you weren’t here I knew something was wrong. When I found this ...” He paused to pull the bracelet he’d kept tucked safely inside his pocket out. Taking her hand, he placed it in her palm then gently curled each finger down over it, “... on the ground outside I knew you were in trouble. I went to Amelia’s room and demanded she show me the footage. We saw someone tase you and take you away. We didn’t know where, but I thought the tunnels were as good a place as any to start looking.”

It seemed like the most natural thing in the world to grab one of his spare T-shirts and slip it over Lacey’s naked torso. For now, he left the jeans on because he knew she’d been violated and didn’t want to upset her.

“Was it him?” he asked.

She gave a shaky nod.

“Do you know what he wanted with you?” The Master had bought young girls here. Why had he gone after Lacey? Was it just revenge or did he have plans to abduct her again?

“He said he would ... take me with him.”

From the way she averted her gaze, he knew there was more to it than that, but he didn’t push. Yet.

“Amelia is going to want answers. We can’t tell her it was him because then I’ll have to explain who I really am,” Lacey said.

Impressed by how she was already focusing on their mission, he was also concerned that she wasn’t dealing with what had happened.

Hypocritical of him, yes, given that he hadn’t dealt with his trauma, but he was worried about her, and he didn’t like this knot of fear in his gut that she invoked.

“We’ll have to just say you didn’t see who took you,” he said. She was right, telling them about The Master could ruin everything they had worked for. Besides, the raid was less than twenty-four hours out now, The Master would get what was coming to him.

Ben would see to that.

Personally.

Because this woman did have him tied up in knots, and while he couldn’t promise her or himself that anything would come of it, he wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he didn’t avenge at least one of his wives, even if she was only a fake one.

Especially since with each passing second what he felt for her was becoming more and more real.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

August 7<sup>th</sup>  
4:46 A.M.

ENERGY HUMMED THROUGH HER VEINS.

Not the good kind either.

Lacey was strung out. Way past emotional overload but doing her best to hold it together because Ben looked about ready to snap. No way could both of them afford to fall apart at the same time.

They were still in the middle of a mission. They had to hold it together, play out their roles for the rest of the day, and then be ready to assist with the raid in the early hours of tomorrow morning.

If Ben was on the verge of losing it, then she had to be the strong one.

*Hide behind a smile.*

The words whispered through her mind with an insidiousness Lacey knew wasn't actually helping her. Hiding and pretending that she was fine, that she wasn't horribly scarred from her childhood only meant that instead of working on healing those issues, she just kept layering them under brightly colored cheerful pain rather than working to scratch away the black that clung to her soul.

Kept prolonging her own suffering.

"We need to leave," Ben announced, moving toward his suitcase, presumably to pack like it was a foregone conclusion.

"We can't bail," she protested, swinging her legs over the side of the bed,

and ignoring the sting in her back.

“It’s not bailing, it’s removing you from a dangerous situation.”

“I’m not in danger, not now we know The Master knows I’m here. I won’t go anywhere alone, and he can’t admit who he is and what he did any more than I can. If he lets on we have history, then he gives away our cover, if he does that it’s all over for him anyway. His best bet is to let things play out or for him to try to slink away.”

“You’re hurt, and you were assaulted here on their estate. Amelia won’t make a fuss, so our covers won’t be blown. Nothing will change, we just won’t be here when Prey raids the place.”

“I *want* to be here.” This was important to her, maybe the key to finally moving on rather than just pretending she was okay. How nice would it be if she wasn’t pretending, if she really did learn how to be okay?

Before Ben could utter what she was sure would be a retort, there was a knock on their door.

“I’ll get that,” she said.

“Like hell you will.” Scooping her up, he deposited her on the bed then went to the door, unlocking it and opening it just enough that he could speak to the person on the other side. “What do you want?”

“Darling,” she reprimanded. “Sorry, Drake is just a little shaken up.” Earlier she’d almost ruined everything by nearly calling out Ben’s real name. She was going to have to do better, keep tighter control.

“As I’m sure you are,” Amelia’s voice came through the mostly closed door.

“Let her in, Drake.” Although Lacey kept her voice soft, it was an order she hoped he knew better than to disregard. This mission was important to her, and she was not going to allow Ben to snatch it away from her and go all heavy-handed alpha on her.

Ben growled but stepped back allowing Amelia and two of her men to enter the room along with a man in a white coat. Obviously he was a doctor, but she didn’t want a stranger touching her right now.

Just because she had been able to tolerate Ben’s touch without feeling like she needed to rip her own skin off, didn’t mean that extended to anyone else. Especially someone who worked for Amelia and her human trafficking operation.

“We are of course, very sorry this happened to you, Mrs. Parker,” Amelia said as she hurried toward the bed. When Ben moved around her, planting

himself between the two women she stopped and froze, nervousness emanating from her. “Do you have any idea who hurt you?”

Knowing that exactly what had happened to her had likely spread like wildfire through the estate made her burn with humiliation. It was one thing for people to know she had been abducted, even for people to know that she had been physically injured. But for strangers—evil strangers at that—to know that she had been sexually assaulted and found with her pants around her knees, her most intimate areas on display for the men who had found her, that was something else.

Something that cut deeply away at her already crumbling self-esteem.

The fight that had fed her while she faced down The Master was still there, but right now, in this moment, it was floundering. She needed reassurance but she was afraid to ask for it. Afraid she would fall apart or that Ben would, and afraid that they would somehow mess up this mission and all those innocent girls would pay the price.

“Unfortunately, I did not see his face, he wore a mask,” she said softly. When she dropped her gaze, it wasn’t to play her role it was because she just couldn’t bear to meet anyone’s eye. She didn’t want to see lust or interest in the guards’ eyes, and she didn’t want to see pity in Ben’s.

“We will do everything we can to find him,” Amelia assured her. “And as a gesture of our most sincere regret that this happened to you while you should have been safe on our estate, we would like to offer you a complimentary woman to take home with you.”

That was it.

Those words, thrown out so casually like it was absolutely nothing to give away a human being to smooth things over with a business acquaintance, sent her stomach into revolt, and she shoved off the bed.

Ben reached for her as she stumbled toward the bathroom, but she swatted at his hands, needing to be alone right now. It was bad enough that he’d seen her half-naked hanging from the ceiling, he didn’t need to see her throw up as well.

Slamming the door closed behind her, Lacey left Ben to handle Amelia. Not having the energy for that, she dropped to her knees in front of the toilet just in time to empty the meager contents of her stomach.

There was only so much she could handle, and she needed a break.

Wearily, Lacey pushed to her feet, flushed the toilet then turned on the tap. After scrubbing her hands, being as careful as she could not to wet her

bandages, she splashed water on her face. It did little to wash away the dirtiness she felt clinging to her skin, so she cupped her hands together so she could pour some water into her mouth and rinse it out.

“They’re gone,” Ben announced, breezing into the room, not even bothering to knock.

“I see we no longer have boundaries,” she said, meeting his gaze in the mirror above the sink.

“Think we’re past that, sunflower.”

Because they’d had sex or because he’d seen her at her most vulnerable?

Lacey wished it was the former but feared it was the latter.

How did Ben see her now?

He already knew about her past, knew The Master had trained her to be a killer, abused her, likely could assume that she had also been violated even if he hadn’t known for sure. But knowing it or suspecting it and actually seeing it with your own eyes were such very different things.

Did he pity her?

Think she needed to be handled with kid gloves?

Because that wasn’t what she needed.

What she needed was to find her control again.

Her safe place.

Sex.

As absurd as it was given what she had been through, her safe place *was* sex. It was where she wiped away every time he’d made her come against her will by coming because she wanted to.

Because she chose to.

No one else was in charge of her or her body. That privilege belonged to her and her alone.

Would Ben want her now? Even seeing her as he had a couple of hours ago?

Only one way to find out.

Turning off the faucet, she dried her hands and then closed the distance between them. His dark eyes were a stormy mess of emotions as he looked down at her. There was the guilt and grief she expected to see there, along with what was obviously concern for her, but there was something else. Something she couldn’t quite get a read on.

Placing her hands against his rock-hard pecs, Lacey stood on tiptoes and pressed her lips against his, teasing them with the tip of her tongue.

For a moment he opened to her, but just as quickly his lips closed and he grabbed her forearms, pulling her hands from his body as he took a step back.

The space he put between them hurt so bad.

He didn't want her.

How could he?

Who would want her for anything more than a romp in bed? She had nothing else to offer and Ben had found love once before, he knew what it was like to have a real woman, a whole woman.

No wonder he couldn't stomach the thought of her touching him.

After all, she'd already done what she promised. She'd helped him overcome his fear of sex, now she had nothing else to offer him.

Yanking her hands out of his grip, she ignored him when he called out her name and ran out into the bedroom. Hightailing it for the bed, she curled up in the middle of it and pulled the blankets up over her head, blocking out the rest of the world, especially Ben.

Childish though it might be, for now, she just needed to bury her head in the sand.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 8<sup>TH</sup>

12:33 A.M.

SHE WOULDN'T TALK to him, and it was driving him crazy.

Hell, Lacey wouldn't even look at him.

How was Ben supposed to figure out what was going on inside that beautiful head of hers if she was busy pretending he didn't exist?

It didn't take a genius to figure out that he'd upset her by turning her down when she'd kissed him earlier. The kiss was an invitation for more, he knew that, had seen it in her eyes. She wanted sex, but she had just, a mere hour before been sexually assaulted by a man who had already taken so much from her.

Just because he hadn't had a chance to grill her about exactly what The Master had done to her in that room, didn't mean he didn't know with absolute certainty that she had been violated. It wasn't just the fact that her

jeans had been down around her knees, it was the look in her eyes that confirmed it.

What kind of man would he be if he had sex with her when she wasn't thinking clearly?

Lacey might have been the one to instigate it, but she was traumatized and vulnerable, it would have been taking advantage, no doubt about it.

Ben might have shut down his emotions after Jemima's death. Might have pushed his family away, his teammates too, and not allowed himself to get close to any woman in case they made him care about them, but he wasn't a complete jerk. He knew the right thing to do and in this case he'd done it.

Only it looked like Lacey disagreed on what the right thing to do was.

After running to the bed and hiding herself under the covers, she'd stayed there for hours. She wouldn't come out, wouldn't talk to him, wouldn't eat anything when he'd called down to the kitchen and asked for them to send stuff up. He hadn't even been able to coax her out to drink some water and take some painkillers.

Getting her to let a doctor look her over had been impossible, and while he would have liked her to have a rape kit done, he knew she would have refused. Wouldn't have mattered anyway, they knew who had done it and when the compound was raided in about twenty minutes, they'd have the man in custody.

Assuming he hadn't already left.

Since Lacey wouldn't leave their room, he hadn't either. No way was he letting her out of his sight again. Which meant he had no idea if The Master had left along with several other auction guests. The place was being watched by Prey and they would be apprehending anyone who left, taking them into custody and the women they had bought to the hospital to be checked out and then taken to a safe place before they could be returned home. The Master could be one of those who had already left the manor or he could still be here, either way, it didn't matter, the man was going to finally be caught.

Maybe that would finally pull Lacey out of her funk.

Of course, he understood that she was dealing with trauma, he certainly didn't hold it against her, but he didn't like her hurting.

Her pain caused him pain.

Feeling anything wasn't what he wanted. Feelings led to unimaginable loss when the thing you loved was ripped away from you. Losing Jemima had cured him of ever wanting to care about anyone other than those already

in his circle, and even then, he had to maintain some sort of emotional distance.

But Lacey had come blasting into his life like the thunderstorm in which they'd met and made him care.

Part of him resented her for it, but the other part just wanted to soothe her pain.

The bathroom door opened, and Lacey stepped through it. A couple of hours ago she had finally emerged from under the covers. Not that it meant she had interacted with him in any way. She'd taken a long, hot bath, sipped a little water, and refused to even touch any of the trays of food that covered about every available surface of the room.

Dressed in black jeans and a simple black, long-sleeved blouse, she looked beautiful, but the dark colors accentuated the dark circles under her eyes and gave her a washed-out look, making her appear so much paler. While he knew it wasn't possible, it seemed like she had lost weight, she looked far too fragile.

Vulnerable.

It terrified him because in just under twenty minutes this place was going to be filled with gunfire.

Distracted as she was, it made Lacey an easy target. There was no way she was up to this right now. Between the wounds covering her back and the trauma she'd been through, she was in no condition to be participating in a raid. Human traffickers were ruthless, and as soon as they realized they were under attack the armed guards wouldn't hesitate to shoot anyone who wasn't one of them.

What if something happened to Lacey?

Those couple of hours when he hadn't known where she was or what was happening to her had been Hell on Earth. Knowing that it was his fault, that he had failed in his one job while he was here, to provide protection for Lacey so she could do her thing, that had almost killed him.

He had already been responsible for the death of one wife he couldn't be responsible for the death of another.

Lacey might not really be his wife, but she was his responsibility and he didn't want her death on his conscience.

"You don't move from my side," he told her. If it came out a little gruffly or like an order, then he couldn't help it, knowing she was soon going to be in danger all over again filled him with a vile sense of dread that made it hard

to function.

Instead of giving him any response, she merely walked past him, careful to make sure her body didn't brush against his and went to perch on the edge of the bed.

Ben would prefer that she yelled at him, blamed him for what happened, or for rejecting her, of anything at all. He couldn't take this silent treatment much longer, he was losing his mind.

As though she didn't have a care in the world, Lacey leaned over and slipped her left foot into her left boot.

Of course, he didn't miss her wince as she pulled on the wounds covering her back. It would be so much easier if she just asked for help, but of course his stubborn little pretend wife wouldn't do something as sensible as ask for help when she needed it.

With a muttered growl, he stalked across the room and dropped to his knees before her. Gently grasping her ankle, he lifted her booted foot and set it on his thigh, tying the lace for her. At his touch, she stiffened but didn't pull away.

A win as far as he was concerned.

Once he'd tied her lace into a bow, he set that foot down and picked up her other boot. Loosening off the laces he reached for her other ankle and slid her foot into the boot, tying it up.

When she went to pull her foot away, he tightened his grip on her ankle, holding it in place, needing to maintain contact with her for a little longer. All day he had ached to comfort her, reassure her, give her whatever she needed, he just hated that what she needed was distance.

"When we go out there tonight, I want you to stay close to me," he said, gentler this time, less like a command.

"I can take care of myself." Lacey said the words, but there was no heat to them, and he saw she winced as she said them. If she was thinking it was because she hadn't been able to protect herself from being grabbed by The Master he would do whatever it took to dissuade her of the notion.

"Lacey." Reaching up, he took both of her hands between his. Again, she tried to tug them away, but he tightened his hold just enough to keep his grip on them. "It's not that I don't think you can take care of yourself, I know you can. If I thought you were incapable of doing your job, I wouldn't have come with you, I would have insisted on someone else taking your place. I don't *want* you to stay close to me tonight, I ... *need* you to," he admitted.



Her eyes met his, making direct contact for the first time since they'd been in that bathroom, and he saw that her gaze had softened slightly. Pain still haunted them, but there was a little spark of the woman he had been getting to know.

“I can't have you hurt. I've already failed you once, and I promise you this here and now. I will not fail you again. Not. Ever.”

Ben prayed that was one vow he would be able to keep.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

August 8<sup>th</sup>  
2:58 A.M.

A LITTLE OF her humiliation faded away.

Ben might think she'd been ignoring him because she was angry with him or blamed him for what had happened to her, but the truth was, Lacey had been hiding because she was ashamed.

Ashamed, not just that Ben had seen her in such a vulnerable position, but that she had fallen back to her default which was using sex as a coping mechanism. No wonder he had turned her down, she must have reeked of desperation.

Lacey knew she needed to find a new and better way of dealing with her issues. Starting with actually talking about them. Maybe when she got home it was time for her and her sisters to finally have a talk about their past.

Ignoring it hadn't helped any of them.

Certainly hadn't helped Pearl and her anger, or Opal with her fears, or Ivory with her workaholicness. And it definitely hadn't helped her with her need for sex to feel in control of her fears.

Maybe talking it through together would help all of them.

Definitely couldn't hurt.

Because she had absolutely no intention of making a fool of herself in front of Ben all over again, Lacey kept her tone brisk, expression neutral. "You didn't fail me, and we'll stay close to one another. For this mission

we're partners and partners watch each other's backs."

And if she wished that maybe they could be partners of a different kind after this mission she certainly wasn't going to admit that out loud.

His features softened, and Ben reached out and palmed her cheek so softly he was barely touching her. "I *did* fail you. It was my job to look out for you and I didn't. In my book that's a pretty epic failure. Lacey." He sighed, pulled back, then stood and crossed the room. When he turned back to face her, he scrubbed a hand down his face. "I'm so sorry about what happened. I know you haven't told me much, but if you need to ... talk about it ... I'm here."

He sounded so sickened by the whole thing, like he pitied her, like the very last thing he wanted to do was listen to what happened and her humiliation snapped to anger.

"You want to talk about it?" she shrieked. Okay, not quite a shriek because she was aware that there were still some of the guests at the manor house and their rooms could be close by. "You know what happened. He hit me with his whip because he likes to see people bleed. And he raped me. Well, sexual assault I guess, depending on the exact definition of rape you want to go with. He didn't put his penis inside my vagina, but he did use his fingers, and his mouth, and oh yeah also his gun. I don't know how he smuggled it in here, or maybe he stole it from one of the guards, no idea. Is that what you wanted to know, Ben?"

Yep, she was definitely a basket case right now.

Breathing hard, she was so mad, so hurt, so ... everything ... that she could barely see straight. Couldn't think straight.

Ben was right, she should have left. Staying meant endangering Ben, herself, and every member of Prey that would be here to raid the compound.

Punishing Ben by telling him that didn't help, especially not with the raid starting any second now. Already Prey's men were probably breaching the perimeter of the estate. They'd take out as many guards as they could as silently as they could to keep the element of surprise on their side rather than giving Amelia anything she could use against them.

Her issues were irrelevant right now, so she better find a way to get herself off the knife's edge she was balanced on.

"Lacey, I'm ..." Ben's eyes were tortured as he came toward her, and she felt awful for being the one to put that look on his face. He had been through enough, had enough false blame on his shoulders, she was a terrible person

for adding to that.

Dropping her head, she fought back tears. “I’m sorry, Ben. That was uncalled for. You didn’t need to know any of that and my timing sucks. I’ll be okay, I’ve been through this before and made it out the other side. I’ll make it there again. There is absolutely no need to worry about me, and even less to blame yourself.” Because she knew he needed it, and she truly felt awful about that little meltdown, she looked up and offered him as big a smile as she could muster.

Before he could respond, both their watches buzzed, the signal that Prey was on the property and ready for them.

Thank goodness for small mercies.

As she slipped into work mode, pushing all other things out of her mind, Lacey wondered if this was the real answer to her issues. Instead of trying to use sex to control herself and her emotions she could always just throw herself into her job.

Maybe she could even open her mind to the possibility of forever with a man.

It was such a foreign concept to her, and yet as she glanced at Ben who had also snapped himself back into work mode like their conversation and her meltdown had never happened, not as terrifying a one as she would have thought.

For now, though, none of that mattered. After all, what was potential marriage and happiness when there were lives hanging in the balance?

“Stay close,” Ben reminded her as they slipped out into the hall.

While they’d had to leave all their weapons behind when they came to the estate, they’d come up with a little loophole. The kitchen would make you whatever you asked for. Anything at all. Including steak. Which came with a nice sized knife. Not one as good as a Ka-Bar of course, but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

Staying close to Ben was a strategic decision not an emotional one. Partners watched each other’s backs, and while she might not have what it took to be someone’s life partner, she knew how to watch her teammates’ backs in the field.

Their job now was simple.

Secure Amelia Kutcher.

She was the head of the snake and you always had to cut off the head. Otherwise, the body had a way of regrowing.

Of course, another human trafficker would pop up to fill the void left by Amelia's operation being shut down, but one thing she had learned early in her career at Prey was to celebrate the wins when they happened.

No one was ever going to completely shut down the trafficking trade, it made too much money, and filled too big a need, but every operation closed down meant at least some girls were spared the horror of becoming a victim.

The halls were quiet as they made their way to Amelia's room. News of the attack mustn't have reached her yet.

At least that was what Lacey thought until they reached the corridor that led to Amelia's room.

A corridor that was currently filled with at least a dozen armed men.

And all they had to work with were a couple of measly knives.

Knives were fine for one-on-one combat, even for taking down an opponent at a distance if thrown correctly with enough strength and accuracy. But they weren't going to do them much good against a dozen men with AK-47s.

Knowing Ben trusted her enough to follow her lead, she tucked the knife into the waistband of her jeans at the small of her back and took Ben's hand.

Walking around the corner as though she had every right to be there, she ignored the weapons that spun in her direction. "I thought this was a reputable enterprise," she snapped as she stalked toward Amelia's room.

The guards moved to block her and Ben but didn't shoot them. "You can't come down here, ma'am."

"You think I'm stupid? I know what's going on, we saw armed men out our window. You're under attack and if you think my husband and I are waiting around to be arrested you are crazy. Where is Amelia?"

"She's in the safe room," a guard answered.

Lacey scoffed. "Of course she is. First, I get tased and abducted, tied up and assaulted, and now she leaves her customers to take the fall for her. Uh, uh. Not going to happen. We want in on the safe room or we're telling whoever is raiding your place everything."

"We could just shoot you here and now," a guard challenged.

She shrugged. "You could. But I don't think you will. If Amelia manages not to get caught, how do you think she's going to rebuild her business after this? Simple. She won't. She'll be an outcast, maybe even a liability to be taken out. But my husband and I would be willing to tell everyone how she kept us safe and did everything she could to hold off the raid."

Glances were exchanged and she knew the second her spiel had worked.

With a quick nod, the guard ushered her and Ben into Amelia's room and over to a panel on the wall that he touched. It swung open to reveal a reinforced door with a keypad. A moment later that swung open too.

"What are you doing?" Amelia growled.

"They want in. Made a compelling case," the guard replied.

Amelia huffed, but made no objection as she and Ben stepped into the safe room and it was closed behind them.

"Great business you're running here," Lacey snapped as Ben moved so that Amelia was between them.

"I've never had anything like this happen before." The woman looked flustered to the point of almost being in tears. "I don't know what went wrong this time."

Lacey grinned. "I do."

"Down on the ground, Amelia, hands behind your back," Ben ordered.

Amelia's eyes grew round, then narrowed in anger as she realized she had been played by them and they were the ones responsible.

If looks could kill both she and Ben would be dead.

But then Amelia did the unexpected.

As the woman pulled out a weapon, Lacey was already moving. Ignoring the pain in her back she reached for her weapon and dodged sideways as Amelia fired at her, missing the bullet by mere millimeters.

The sound was loud in the small room and her ears rang.

When Amelia turned to fire at Ben Lacey threw her knife.

While she didn't have the same love of knives that Pearl did, she knew how to hit what she aimed at and her blade sunk into Amelia's neck, severing her carotid artery. A fatal injury.

Grinning, she turned her gaze to Ben, but the smile died on her face when she saw him and the blood staining the front of his shirt.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 8<sup>TH</sup>  
3:27 A.M.

GETTING SHOT SUCKED.

Ben's hands resisted the urge to move toward the wound and instead, he reached for the knife.

He had to take down the threat.

Protect Lacey.

Nothing else mattered.

His life would be no great loss to the world, but hers would.

She brought light to so many and had certainly brought life to his own dark world. He wasn't going to let her die on his watch.

As he fumbled for the knife, Amelia suddenly dropped her weapon, her eyes going almost impossibly wide as she scrambled for the knife embedded in her neck.

Either way, the wound was a fatal one, but stupidly the woman gripped at the handle, yanking it free and blood began to pour from the wound.

Amelia swayed, tried to take a step, staggered, then dropped to her knees.

Dying.

No longer a threat.

Relief had him swaying this time and only now that he knew Lacey was safe did he press a hand to the wound just below his left shoulder.

Amelia had been aiming at his heart.

She'd missed only because Lacey had gotten her first.

She'd saved his life.

The crazy, brave, emotional, sassy, and vulnerable woman had saved his life.

"Ben!"

Lacey's panicked shriek drew his attention to her, and he watched as she ran to Amelia, ignoring the dying woman but snatching up the gun. Then she came to him and wrapped an arm around his waist.

"You got hit! I'm so sorry, I should have reacted quicker, taken her out before she could get off a shot at you."

She guided him over to a bed and sat him down. When she turned to move away, he used the hand of his injured arm to snag her wrist, sucking in a breath at the resulting pain. "You hit?"

"No, of course not. I have quicker reflexes than you do, sailor," she teased but there was no spark in her eyes, and he knew she was just doing her best to make sure he was okay.

Just how often did this woman stuff down her emotions so people didn't

worry about her?

While Ben couldn't say he was a fan of having his friends and family worry about him it did remind him that they cared.

But Lacey seemed to almost be afraid to admit that people cared about her.

He knew that she knew she was loved and supported, but she hid from that love almost like she believed she was undeserving of it.

"My reflexes are fine," he grunted, playing her game for now because his shoulder really did throb.

"All this blood says otherwise." You'd never know it by the tone of her voice because it was bright and cheerful, but he could hear—or maybe it was feel—her underlying terror.

Lightheaded, Ben sunk back against the pillows as Lacey shot him a concerned frown then tugged her hand free of his hold and bustled around the room looking for something.

A first aid kit it turned out.

Blood loss was making him woozy, but he didn't want to pass out.

Didn't want to leave Lacey alone and vulnerable.

Wasn't going to succumb ...

Like only a second had passed, Ben blinked open his eyes to find himself in a crisp white hospital room.

How did that happen?

Had he really lost enough blood to make everything that happened from the safe room until now a blank?

Obviously, he had.

At least he knew the raid had gone off as planned because he was alive, and Lacey was alive.

She was beside him, curled up in an uncomfortable-looking chair beside his bed. She'd changed into white jeans and a pink T-shirt. From the way she was sitting sideways so her back didn't press against the back of the chair, he knew she had to be in pain. Her wrists had been freshly bandaged so he also knew that she had received medical attention.

The sight of her there, waiting for him to wake up did funny things to his chest.

It felt like his heart physically constricted in an act of rebellion against the emotions she stirred up.

Why was she making him feel this way?



For three years he had been content to wallow in a pool of grief and guilt. Not a pleasant pool by any stretch of the imagination but he'd been comfortable there.

In that pool he'd found a sense of safety.

It sounded crazy because who would want to be stuck in a pit of grief and guilt, but as long as he was there, he could numb his emotions, freeze everyone out of his life, and he never had to worry about losing another person he loved.

He could have lost Lacey twice during the few days they'd been at the estate. Another time the day he met her. He barely knew her and yet her loss would cut him deep.

Ben didn't want that.

Didn't want to hurt that way again.

Losing Jemima was bad enough, no way could he survive letting Lacey in only to lose her too.

In the chair, she shifted, yawned, then blinked. She obviously saw he was awake because she rocketed up and reached for the hand that was lying on the mattress, his other arm was tucked into a sling. Her small hand was warm as it covered his and not only did he feel a jolt of attraction, but also something that ran deeper. A different kind of warmth. Like being enveloped in a hug, it brought with it a sense of peace that he had rebelled against since Jemima's murder.

"Ben! You're awake, how are you feeling? Do you need anything? Water? Are you hungry? Are you in pain? Do you want me to get the nurse to give you anything for it? I asked to make sure they were giving you painkillers in your IV but maybe it's not enough. Getting shot sucks."

Despite himself, he smiled. Exactly what he'd thought when the bullet ripped through him.

Quickly, he shut that smile down. This thing with Lacey was doomed. She only did one-night stands, and despite the awesome sex they'd had nothing had changed. Nor did he want it to.

Avoiding pain was what was important, and being with Lacey, with the job she had and the kind of person she was, was all but inviting it into his life.

"You should be getting some rest," he snapped.

Taken aback her hand withdrew, taking that beautiful warmth with it. "You were shot. I didn't want you to wake up alone," she said softly.

"Not your concern if I wake up alone." Ben felt like a jerk behaving like

this, but he couldn't blame it on the drugs, or the pain, or anything but his own selfish need to protect himself from pain. But hurting Lacey in the process ... that hurt more than anything else.

"But we ..."

"Were working together. Since I'm in a hospital, I can assume the mission is wrapped up which means we're nothing to each other. You did say you could keep the sex meaningless, didn't you?" He arched a brow while internally flogging himself at the pain that flared to life in her eyes.

"I did." With what he could tell was enormous determination she held his gaze even as she shrunk in on herself. "But I need to tell you ..."

"You don't need to tell me anything."

"But ..."

"No buts, Lacey. Thank you for your offer to help me with my ... issue. I'm glad we achieved what we set out to achieve, but that's it, it's over and done with now."

Hurt was plain to see, etched into every one of her features, but his sunflower was a stubborn one. "I understand. But I just need ..."

"I just need for you to leave," he bellowed. Didn't she know this was torture for him? He had come so close to failing her, letting her be murdered, and even though she'd lived she would have more scars now.

Scars he would see every time he looked at her.

And he wasn't talking about physical marks on her wrists and back.

Every time he looked at her, he would remember finding her with her pants yanked down and recall the words she'd hurled at him in their room at the manor. *He* was responsible for that pain she had suffered, and he would never forgive himself for it.

Bowing her head, Lacey didn't utter another word, simply turned, and walked quietly out of the room, taking with her a bigger piece of his heart than he had realized he'd handed over.

The need to call her back, beg for forgiveness until she caved, was strong, but he resisted it.

Forced himself to remember finding Jemima's body, hacked to pieces in the bedroom they had shared. Remember every biting agony as he stumbled through those first days and weeks. Then to remember how he'd felt when he learned Lacey had been snatched. Her job was dangerous, and he'd never ask her to quit it, but he also couldn't handle losing her.

Because despite the fact he'd sent her away, he ached for her presence.

Too bad he was too much of a coward to face the possibility of losing her.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

August 9<sup>th</sup>  
4:31 P.M.

“SISTER TIME.”

As Lacey opened the door, she found Ivory holding up an armful of snacks, with Pearl and Opal standing behind her with more snacks than the four of them could ever eat in one sitting.

Seeing her sisters there, ready to support her when she so badly needed them, broke the dam inside her.

Sheer strength of will, and a heavy dose of self-preservation, had helped her keep it together while she traveled back from England. She'd even made it all the way to her apartment without shedding a tear. She'd unpacked and taken a shower—not as relaxing as it seemed since her back was a mess and she had to try to keep as much water off it as she could. She'd even made herself eat some lunch because she was trying to take care of herself even though she hadn't been hungry.

But now that her sisters were back from the mission, they'd been scouting information for, she was ready to let go.

Lacey had passed the end of her rope so long ago she couldn't even see it anymore.

Strong was one thing, but no one had enough strength to handle what had been thrown at her the last few days.

No one.

Not even her and her cheery persona.

When her face crumpled, and a noisy sob burst free, surprised faces quickly turned to concerned ones. Of their little family, Opal was the emotional one in their group, she was sweet and sensitive despite their upbringing. It wasn't that Opal cried much, none of them did, it had been tortured out of them. But Lacey was always smiling, always bubbly and sassy, so she knew this sudden bout of tears had shocked all her sisters.

The tears were quickly devolving into full-on sobs, and when Ivory quickly dropped her armful of snacks onto the small table by the front door and wrapped her arms around Lacey instead, she fell into her sister's embrace.

"Gentle with her, remember her back," Opal cautioned as she ushered them inside and closed the door.

"I'm being gentle," Ivory said. "And besides, I don't think she cares about her back right now."

That couldn't be more true.

Her back was the furthest thing on her mind right now.

What were a few small wounds compared to the giant, gaping wound in her heart?

How could she be so stupid?

Lacey knew better than to go and catch feelings. It was why she always made sure that she kept things casual. Who needed this kind of pain?

And catching feelings with a man who had such heavy baggage was even stupider.

"Want to talk about it?" Ivory asked as she maneuvered them through the living room over to the couch and then sat them both down.

"We never talk about it," she said through her tears. They'd never even talked about not talking about it. By unspoken mutual agreement, they had just buried their trauma and moved forward with their lives.

Only they hadn't really moved forward.

For Ivory, it had taken meeting and falling in love with Roman for her to finally accept and deal with their past. For Pearl, it had been meeting and falling in love with Jesse that had finally opened her eyes.

For her it was Benjamin "Rabbit" Blanchett.

Not that she had fallen in love with the man, although definite feelings had developed, but he had made a big impact on her in a very short amount of time. If it wasn't for him, she wouldn't have been forced to accept the fact

she was using sex as a coping mechanism and hiding behind a sunny façade in order to hide from her problems.

She wasn't doing it anymore.

Cowards hid from their problems. Brave people faced them head-on.

And she wasn't a coward.

"I guess we thought it would be easier not to," Pearl said, sitting on the other side of Lacey.

"I don't think it's easier," Lacey said, brushing at the steady stream of tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Is this about The Master? Eagle told us what happened," Opal said gently, perching on the edge of the coffee table in front of the couch.

It was now or never.

If she held onto her secrets, and the pain that came with them, then she could kiss any hope of a normal future goodbye. Lacey hadn't ever thought she wanted marriage and a family of her own, but things had changed. Both Ivory and Pearl had fallen in love and were moving forward with their lives. They had confronted their demons and she didn't want to be left behind.

She wanted what everyone else wanted. Peace, happiness, and a place to belong. She'd never thought that place included a partner, but then Ben came along and made her reconsider everything.

"I've never made love before," she announced.

Three shocked faces looked back at her.

Obviously not what they'd been expecting her to say.

"You have never had sex?" Opal asked.

"No offense intended, but I thought you loved sex," Pearl added.

"I should clarify. I've had plenty of sex, but I've never once *made love*. I love sex, and it's always been great, fulfilling. At least physically. But I've never had a connection with a guy before. I mean, I like all the guys I've slept with, but it was never about anything emotional. To be honest until Ivory met Roman, and Pearl met Jesse, I didn't even know a connection like that existed," she admitted.

"And now you met someone?" Pearl asked.

"The SEAL? Rabbit? The one who saved you in the storm and went on this mission with you?" Opal asked.

Lacey nodded. "I like Ben. In a way I haven't liked any other man I've ever met."

"So?" Ivory prompted when she didn't continue.

“He doesn’t like me back.” It hurt to say that out loud, but it was the truth. To be honest, she wasn’t even angry about it, he’d already been in love once and was far from over his wife’s murder. She was definitely angry about the way he’d treated her though.

When he’d woken up in the hospital, she’d been so relieved that he was going to be okay. Despite assurances from the surgeon who had removed the bullet and stitched him up that he was going to make a fast and full recovery, she hadn’t believed it until Ben had opened his eyes.

She had been fully prepared to be completely honest about why she had sex and thought she could keep it meaningless, and the feelings she was developing for him.

But then he’d been so cold, so dismissive. Lacey understood him being afraid to let anyone in after losing his wife the way he had, but that didn’t excuse him from being a jerk to her. He hadn’t even let her get a word in.

“I’m sorry, that sucks.” Opal placed a hand on Lacey’s knee and squeezed.

“Yeah, it does. He’s the first man to ever make me feel anything at all other than attraction and desire, although he definitely makes me feel both,” she added with a tired smile. “He has issues, and most of the time I’m not even sure he likes me, but there’s something in him that calls out to a part of me. Was that how it was for you guys?” she asked Ivory and Pearl.

“Jesse and I hated each other at first,” Pearl said, her eyes going soft the way they always did when she spoke of her new husband. “But even when I hated him, I can’t deny that there was some invisible force pulling me toward him.”

“Roman didn’t like me at first either, I think he thought I was crazy and irresponsible. He definitely didn’t want to fall in love, but when it happens it happens. Maybe Ben isn’t the right guy for you, but that doesn’t mean that the right guy isn’t out there somewhere,” Ivory said.

“I never even considered the idea of getting married, but now ... I don’t know. Maybe I want that in my future.”

“It’s okay not to know what you want,” Opal reminded her. “Or to change your mind on what you want.”

“Before I decide I have some ... things ... issues I guess ... to work out.”

“That what you wanted to talk about?” Pearl asked.

Lacey nodded. “I’ve never told anyone this, I was too ashamed.”

“You know we will *never* judge you,” Ivory vowed.

“We are in this together,” Opal added.

“Always,” Pearl agreed. “Even though I’m married now, and Ivory is engaged, it doesn’t change the fact that we’re sisters and for so long all each other had.”

“DNA doesn’t join us together but blood does. The blood we all shed in that hellhole,” Opal said. “Nothing you can say will ever make us think less of you.”

Taking a huge leap of faith, Lacey made the admission she had been going to give Ben in that hospital room. “When The Master used to rape us I would orgasm.”

“Oh, sweetie, you know that doesn’t mean you liked what he was doing, right?” Opal asked, pulling her into a hug.

“Monster that he is, I bet he took advantage of that,” Ivory seethed.

“He did,” Lacey said, voice muffled since her face was tucked against Opal’s shoulder. “Boy did he ever.”

Grabbing her shoulders, Pearl pulled her out of Opal’s embrace. “You have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. *Nothing*. Damn, I would love nothing more than to rip that man to pieces with my bare hands.”

“Stand in line,” Ivory grumbled. “I know we all want a piece of him.”

“There are no words to describe his level of evil,” Lacey said softly. “He used to tell me I was lying when I said I didn’t want him to touch me, that my body and its reaction to him spoke the truth. But I didn’t want him. I hated it. I felt so betrayed by my own body.” She needed her sisters to believe her because in her darkest moments it was a struggle to believe what she knew to be true. That she hated every single touch he gave her and the pleasure it brought was no pleasure at all.

“Of course you didn’t want him,” Ivory said like believing anything else was insanity.

“That’s why I like sex so much,” she continued, may as well get everything out in the open. “I get to control not just who touches me but how I feel about it. I didn’t want anyone ever making me orgasm again without my permission, so I used sex as a way to hide from my fears. Not just sex but a smile too. When you’re smiling no one ever asks if you’re okay, so you don’t have to tell them the truth. That you feel like you’re drowning in your insecurities and secret fears, that you feel dirty inside and out, that your life feels like it’s so black there isn’t enough color in the world to cover it all up.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Opal said again, pulling her in for another hug.



“I’m going to get the snacks ready because I think we all have a lot to talk about,” Pearl said, heading for the table where everything had been dumped.

“We should have done this a long time ago,” Ivory agreed.

“We should have, but it’s not too late. I don’t think it’s ever too late to change the course of your life.” Lacey prayed that was true because she had realized she wasn’t happy with the direction her life had been going and was more than ready for a change.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 13<sup>TH</sup>

5:25 P.M.

BEN HAD VOWED he would never come back here.

He had always believed there was nothing to be gained by stepping foot inside the house he had once shared with his wife.

Now he knew he had been wrong.

For three years, he had done nothing but hide behind a wall of guilt because it made dealing with the grief that much easier. When all you did was focus on the blame you heaped on your own shoulders, you didn’t have to feel that cutting pain that came with knowing the woman you loved was gone and you would never get to see her again.

Young love was something sweet and special. There was an innocence to it that disappeared as you got older. As deeply as Ben knew he had loved his wife, he also knew that had he met her now, he wouldn’t have given her a second glance.

Jemima would always occupy a huge part of his heart, nothing would change the fact that she had been his first love, or that they would have spent the rest of their lives together had she not been killed.

They would have been happy too.

This house would have a baby in it by now, maybe even another one on the way. There would be toys strewn about, a cutely decorated nursery, and a swing set in the backyard. There would likely also be a stack of dishes in the sink, a pile of clean laundry yet to be put away, and leftovers in the fridge. Jemima would have been a great mother, made their child the center of their

lives, and put him or her first above everything including household chores. He would have helped out when he was home, but there would have been long stretches of time when Jemima would have all but been a single mother to their child.

What would it be like to have a baby with Lacey?

The child would be a tornado of energy, of that he was certain. The sassiest little sunflower that would ever exist. Or maybe a charming little boy with dimples who knew just how to get what he wanted. Juggling both of their demanding jobs would be difficult, they both had unpredictable hours, and could be gone for days, weeks, or sometimes even months at a time. He had no idea how they would make it work or ...

Why was he thinking about it?

Lacey wasn't his and after the way he'd treated her, he doubted she would give him the time of day if he turned up on her doorstep.

Not that he would deserve any attention from her given how he'd pushed—no not push, he'd violently shoved—her away from him when he woke up in the hospital.

A couple of long days sitting alone in a hospital bed gave him plenty of time to think.

About the past and the future.

About what he wanted.

About Jemima's murder and the things Lacey had said to him about it.

Everyone in his life had already told him all those same things, that it wasn't his fault, that there was nothing he could have done to prevent it from happening, that just because he had forgotten to take out the trash didn't make it his fault. But somehow hearing them from Lacey made them sound different. Perhaps because she had no personal investment in him. She wasn't his mom or dad, one of his sisters, or a member of his team.

She was just a woman he'd recently met, and she had no reason to lie to him.

So ...

Maybe it wasn't his fault.

Or at least not *all* his fault.

Which meant maybe there was a chance that he could move forward. Find happiness. Jemima had been a sweet woman with a big heart, and he believed she would want him to find a way to fall in love again, share his life with someone. He'd want the same for her. If he hadn't made it home from one of

his missions, he would have wanted her to get back out there and fall in love again. He wouldn't want her to be alone and grieving him forever. He would have known it wasn't that she didn't love him anymore, or that she wouldn't miss him every day of her life.

If he would have wanted Jemima not to be lonely and she would have wanted the same for him, then maybe he wasn't doing anything wrong feeling something for Lacey Smith.

There was no way he could deny those feelings anymore.

He might not want them, but they were there just the same, and along with the guilt for moving on—something he had vowed never to do—there was also a sense of excitement.

Like he was living again.

Which was why he'd come back here.

If he wanted a future, then he had to find a way to lay the past to rest.

Not an easy task. There was nothing easy about losing the person you had pledged your life to. Nothing easy about coming home to find them horribly murdered and knowing you played a role—even a small one—in that murder. And nothing easy about deciding that it was time to accept that while your loved one was gone you were still alive.

And he was still a young man with a lot of life left in him. Did he really want to spend the remainder of his years being bitter and angry at life for throwing him such a horrible curve ball?

A month ago, he would have said yes.

Spending the rest of his life consumed with his guilt and grief was exactly what he had planned.

Then a sassy, sunshiny woman with more bravery than common sense came storming into his life and everything changed.

He owed it to Lacey if nothing else to at least give them a chance.

To that end, he reached out—noting that his hand was trembling slightly, not a good thing for a SEAL—and turned the doorknob.

As he pushed the front door open and stepped inside, he was hit by the musty smell of a house that had been locked up and empty for three years.

The metallic scent of blood was heavy in the air too.

Logically, he knew that smell had faded over time, but memories from that night were so ingrained in his mind that he could still smell that overwhelming scent of blood.

So much blood.

Nothing had changed in here except the things that had been disturbed by Jemima's killer and the cops and crime scene techs who had thoroughly gone through the house later. Jemima's magazines were scattered across the coffee table. A pair of her running shoes were discarded on the floor beside the front door. Jemima loved to run, was good at it too, she had speed and endurance, and could keep up with him on the days he was home and they worked out together.

Slowly he made his way through the house. The kitchen was clean, and he remembered them cleaning up after dinner that last night. Through the open laundry door, he could see the hamper overflowing with dirty clothes, laundry was Jemima's least favorite chore, and while he did it when he was home, he was away so often.

Knowing how much time he had missed out on with Jemima started up a new ache in his chest.

Fisting his hand, he rubbed it above his heart as he made his way up the stairs. There were three bedrooms plus the master, one of them they'd already cleared out, ready to turn into a nursery once Jemima got pregnant.

For now, he bypassed all the rooms heading for the one he had shared with his wife.

No matter how long he lived he would never be able to rid himself of the sight of Jemima's butchered body strewn around their bedroom.

Tears burned the backs of his eyes, and his throat clogged as he stepped into the room that was as close to hell as he'd ever been.

There were dark stains, the bright red they'd been that night turned dark brown by now, but they still stood out against the white carpet, and the pastel wallpaper. There were even dried streaks of blood on the ceiling.

The bed was ruined. Left as it had been that night. The covers were mussed since Jemima had just gotten into bed to read when she was attacked. Her Kindle had been face down on the carpet about three feet from the bed when he'd found her, but had been collected for evidence.

It felt so empty in here.

His emotions crescendoed.

All the pain and loss he had repressed suddenly grew too big to contain. Across the room, sitting untouched on the rocking chair by the window, sat a ragdoll he'd won for Jemima at a fair on one of their first few dates.

She'd loved the thing, wanted to give it to their firstborn daughter so it would always be loved.

Only now the only person left to love it was him.

Gently picking up the toy, he clutched it to his chest as he sank to the floor. However he felt about it he cared for Lacey, the idea of losing her as he'd lost Jemima was all but paralyzing. Images of her hanging from the ceiling, bleeding and violated, mixed with ones of his wife, hacked to death by a madman.

Could he risk possible loss for a second chance at happiness?

Clutching the ragdoll, Ben finally allowed himself the release of shedding tears for his beautiful wife.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

August 14<sup>th</sup>  
7:47 A.M.

WAS THERE anything better than sun, sand, and surf?

Lacey didn't think so.

Growing up in the icy cold of Alaska, she had been the one who was always complaining about the cold. Her sisters didn't love the cold, well Pearl did, but they didn't seem to hate it the same way she did.

This was her happy place.

Clear blue sky, the sun a huge golden ball of delicious heat, the sand warm under her toes, and the sound of the waves crashing against the shore soothing her tired mind and rejuvenating her soul. So long as she wasn't *in* the ocean, she loved watching it and listening to it.

Today was going to be the first day of the rest of her life.

A life where she truly was happy rather than pretending to be.

Talking with her sisters yesterday had been a lot more cathartic than she thought it would have been, and this morning she'd called Prey's temporary psychiatrist to set up a session. Lacey would have preferred to speak with Prey's on-staff counsellor, but Piper Hamilton had just been through a horrific ordeal and was still recovering. Would be recovering for a long time to come. The woman had been through hell and had physical and psychological injuries that would leave scars. After their talk yesterday, she and her sisters had packed a care package of things they hoped would help

Piper at least a little bit and sent it off to New York.

At least Piper wasn't alone.

According to Prey gossip, Piper and Alpha Team member Antonio "Arrow" Eden had gotten together and were head over heels in love. Lacey was so glad that Piper would have his support as well the support of all of Alpha Team, plus team leader Bear's wife Mackenzie, and Mouse's new wife Phoebe.

Prey was like one big family made up of a whole bunch of smaller families. Her own little family had grown a lot over the past few months with Roman and then Jesse joining them, but Ben wouldn't be part of it.

He wouldn't be there for her now or in the future. Ben had been more than clear about what he wanted, and it wasn't her, so she had determined she wasn't going to waste another second worrying about him.

What could have been obviously wasn't meant to be, and so it was time to figure out what was going to be.

She was in control of her life. She could do or have whatever she wanted. It was time to stop trying to scramble for control of herself and accept that she was free now, had been for a while, and that anything was possible.

Lacey didn't know yet if her future would include a man, but she did know that for now she was done with the one-night stands. She knew she hadn't been doing anything wrong, but in a way, she had because she'd been having sex for the wrong reasons. Controlling her own orgasms didn't help her move on from her past, accepting her issues and addressing them would.

It was freeing, to let go of that burden, and she wished she'd done it a long time ago.

As she stared out at the waves she watched as a couple of kids chased each other through the shallows. They looked so happy and carefree, so normal. If she ever had children, this was the kind of life she wanted them to have. The complete opposite of what she'd lived.

A little boy ran through the sand in front of her, the string of a kite in his hand. The kite was fluttering behind the child, not really flying, but it was staying off the ground at least. Eyes sparkling in delight, a toddler was following along behind, clapping her hands, and squealing like the kite was soaring high in the sky.

No way could she watch them and not smile. When you witnessed such innocent joy, it put everything in perspective. While that mission with Ben had cost her a lot personally, they had saved a lot of innocent women and a

lot of people had been taken into custody.

She did good in the world, and that soothed a lot of the pain of her childhood.

The Master was still out there. Somehow he'd slipped away after attacking her, and while that definitely put a damper on the mission she wasn't going to focus on it.

Life was too short to dwell.

So she wasn't.

Happiness was where you found it, and she intended to find it in her family, her friends, her job, and herself.

Stretching out her legs, she was just lying back on her towel, ready to close her eyes and soak up some rays when someone stumbled over her legs.

Oops.

She'd stretched out before even checking to make sure nobody was around. "I'm so sorry," Lacey said, scrambling onto her knees and over to the older woman she had just tripped over. "Are you okay? Did I hurt you? I'm so embarrassed."

The woman looked up and gave a smile. She was pretty with light gray hair pulled back into a low ponytail, huge, long-lashed brown eyes, and only a few wrinkles around her eyes, laugh lines more than anything else. "Not a worry, dear."

"Oh, it is. I'm not usually so unaware of my surroundings. I was just watching the kids with the kite, and then I thought I'd lie down. I'm tired, a nap sounded perfect, and I just dropped," she finished sheepishly.

Casting a glance at Lacey's bandaged wrists the woman nodded. "Looks like you could use a good nap, they cure just about everything."

"Amen," she agreed. A nap in the sunshine with the sand as a comfortable mattress and her fluffy towel a soft blanket would prepare her for her call with the shrink later this afternoon.

"I'll leave you to your nap," the woman said.

"Let me help." Jumping to her feet, she took the older lady's elbow and helped her get back up onto her feet. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think—ow," the woman broke off mid-sentence as she tried to take a step and her ankle gave out on her.

"I did hurt you," Lacey exclaimed, feeling awful. One moment of distraction and she'd caused some older lady to injure herself. "Are you here with someone?" There was no way she would leave the woman to make the



trek back across the sand and up to the parking lot alone. Or what if she'd walked here from one of the nearby houses or apartments? If that was the case, Lacey would drive her home or take her to the hospital.

"I'm here alone. Husband walked out on me a long time ago, my son is all grown up so it's just me. I come down here every morning to watch the sunrise and get my steps in for the day. My car is in the lot."

"I'll help you up there."

"Oh, no, dearie, that's not necessary."

"Necessary or not, I'm not taking no for an answer."

Bracing the woman's elbow with one hand, with her other Lacey grabbed her towel and the large beach bag she'd brought with her. Then she stuck her feet back in her flip flops and turned to find the woman watching her with a funny expression. "What?"

"Nothing." The woman blinked and then smiled again. "Was just thinking it's not going to be a fun trek."

"Maybe I should call an ambulance. If it's broken you shouldn't be walking on it."

"Oh, no. It's not broken. Not sore enough. Just not as young as I used to be."

"I should at least drive you home then," Lacey offered as they started walking toward the parking lot.

"Wouldn't dream of it. I've been managing on my own for a long time now. Would love some more grandbabies, then I wouldn't be so lonely. My first lot are grown up, struck out on their own, I miss them."

"I'm sure you do. Maybe one day you'll have more."

"I pray I will. Every single day." The loneliness in the woman's voice was evident and Lacey felt sorry for her. It must be hard to feel all alone and forgotten.

They made it to the parking lot and Lacey scanned it. "Where are you parked?"

"Old black van over in the corner," the woman replied. "Don't like parking as much as I did when I was younger, so I always take the spot furthest away where no one else likes to park unless they're desperate."

Lacey laughed. "Makes sense."

Together they crossed the lot. As they reached the vehicle the woman pulled her keys from her pocket and unlocked it.

"You sure I can't drive you home?" The idea of sending an older woman

off alone with an injury she had caused didn't sit right with her.

"Positive."

"At least let me get the door." Lacey moved to open the front door and lulled into a false sense of security by the busy parking lot filled with families and couples out for a day at the beach, she didn't even notice the side door slide open and a hand dart out.

Pain zapped through her body, and as she slumped sideways, she was maneuvered by her assailant and the old lady into the back of the van.

Tased.

Again.

Lacey tried to move, knew she had to fight. The chances of being found after being put in a vehicle during an abduction dropped to close to zero, but another jolt of pain slammed into her and brought with it enclosing blackness.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 14<sup>TH</sup>

2:40 P.M.

THIS WASN'T GOING to be easy.

Ben was fully prepared to both grovel and fight for the woman who had somehow opened the door to the past he had so carefully and thoroughly barricaded. Surprisingly it wasn't as bad as he'd thought it would be.

The powerful onslaught of emotions had brought him quite literally to his knees, but after he'd purged the bulk of those pent-up emotions, he'd actually felt a lot better.

A lot freer.

Guilt over his role in Jemima's death was still there, always would be, but he actually felt closer to his wife than he had in a long time, not since the very early days of their marriage. Jemima would want this for him, he was sure of it, and she would love Lacey. Ben could actually see Lacey being a great influence on Jemima, helping her come out of her shell a little.

His girl was a firecracker of sass and heart, and he was falling hard and fast.

Which meant failure here was not an option.

He hadn't come empty-handed.

Nope.

After spending the rest of the previous day reconnecting with his family, something that was way overdue, and by his mother's tears something she had thought might never happen, he'd done some shopping.

Raspberries. Lacey was obsessed with them, so he'd gone on a spree, anything he could find that had raspberries in it, or smelled like them he'd bought. Shampoo and conditioner, body wash and hand cream, soaps in the shape of raspberries with a strong fragrance, and some sort of goop you put on your face. He'd bought her a recipe book that featured only raspberry recipes, and even though he was a terrible cook he'd baked her some white chocolate and raspberry muffins. Chocolate-covered raspberries, raspberry ice cream, raspberry sauce, and that raspberry juice she loved. He'd even found raspberry-scented lip balm he couldn't wait to kiss off her lips. And of course, he had a whole basketful of the fruit as well.

Ben was praying it was enough to get him in the door.

If he was a betting man, he'd give himself maybe a ten percent chance of Lacey hearing him out. Not great odds.

But better than nothing.

Balancing the basket with his peace offerings in one hand, he rapped once on Lacey's front door. His shoulder tugged a little at the movement, but he'd ditched the sling as soon as he left the hospital and the wound was healing well. With a little physical therapy, he'd be back to full strength in no time.

The hallway was quiet and he felt self-conscious standing out here where any of her neighbors could see him. Jemima had been easy to woo, she hadn't required him to put in much effort, he had a feeling Lacey would be the opposite, she'd make him work for it.

Like she was already doing.

Another knock went unanswered.

If she thought he was giving up she was sorely mistaken. He'd already made the mistake of pushing her away once and had to live with knowing he'd hurt her and hadn't been there for her when she needed him, he had no intention of repeating it.

"Lacey, I know I don't deserve a chance to explain, but I'm asking for you to give me one, please." Ben wasn't above begging if it was what it took. Life didn't always hand you a second chance at happiness and he had been a fool to throw it away. Throw Lacey away like she didn't matter.

He knocked again, and again.

As each one went unanswered, he began to get an uneasy feeling.

Something felt wrong.

Lacey was no coward. If she was in there and she didn't want to talk to him she'd come out here and tell him, not hide away. He was the one who had been hiding from what was growing between them, hell, he'd spent the last three years hiding from anyone and anything that might force him to confront what had happened with Jemima.

But not Lacey.

She didn't hide, she faced her fears head-on.

She was the bravest woman he'd ever met, and he knew with absolute certainty that if she was in there, she would have opened the door and either given him a chance to talk or told him to take a hike.

Pulling out his cell phone, he tried calling her. He had her number because they'd been working together and while he thought she might have blocked him the call went through, it just wasn't answered.

Second-guessing himself only meant that if something was wrong he'd waste time. Time Lacey might not have if she was in trouble. If he was wrong, and she was fine, and just hiding out in her apartment—or one of her sisters'—and just not answering his calls then at least he'd know.

Pulling up another number he dialed it. The call was answered within the first two rings.

“Rabbit, what's up?” Eagle asked. While he couldn't say he knew the man well at all there was one thing he knew for certain. Eagle Oswald was always calm and in control. Focused. The man on the other end of the phone sounded distracted. Confirmation that something was going on.

“I can't get in contact with Lacey,” he said bluntly.

A long pause grated on his already frayed nerves.

“Why do you want to talk to Lacey? I don't make it a habit to get involved in the personal lives of my employees, what they do on their own time, or even on a mission so long as it doesn't compromise the objective, is not my business. But those girls are special. They've been through enough. Lacey in particular thinks no one sees through her smiles, but I do. I know she's hurting and won't talk about it. I know about your past, about your wife, and while I'm so very sorry for your loss, I won't allow anyone to hurt one of my girls.”

That Eagle was protective of Lacey and her sisters was more than

obvious. Given that they had been rescued by Prey he likely felt a responsibility for them that went beyond what he felt for the men and women working on his other teams.

“I made a mistake,” he admitted. No one liked admitting when they were wrong, but everyone knew he was so pretending otherwise was futile. “One I came to rectify. I’ve ... laid my demons to rest. I’m ready to stop living in the past and focus on the future. I know it won’t be easy, and I can’t promise I won’t hurt her again, but I can promise I’ll never walk away again.”

A vow he’d made when he walked out of the house he’d shared with his wife to go straight to a realtor to have it put on the market.

A vow he hadn’t made lightly.

A vow he intended to honor no matter what. No matter how his grief and guilt taunted him, urging him to give in to their darkness, let it consume him. He had his family back, his team back, although they’d been there physically all along they had been miles away emotionally. And he had an amazing woman who’d taken a chance on an angry, cold, hard man like himself.

“Lacey was supposed to have a phone consult with Prey’s temporary psychiatrist, but she never made the call,” Eagle told him. Although the retired SEAL hadn’t mentioned what happened in the hospital in England again, Ben assumed since he was handing over intel that Eagle had determined to give him a chance to make things right with Lacey.

“If she said she was going to make the call then she wouldn’t just back out.” Again, he was in awe of how brave Lacey was. Obviously, bad memories had been stirred up by the assault in England, and there she was handling things like a rockstar.

“She’s not answering her phone, even for her sisters and me, and there’s no way she would decline a call from any of us let alone all of us. If she’s not answering you either, then that’s further proof something’s wrong.”

“What are you doing about it?”

“She told her sisters she was going to go hang at the beach this morning. We pinged her phone’s location and it’s still there, but when Ivory and Roman went to check it out they couldn’t find any signs of her.”

If her cell phone was there then she had to be there.

At least he prayed she did.

Because the alternative wasn’t something he was able to acknowledge.

The alternative was that someone had taken her, not an easy thing to do. Even injured as she was Lacey was fit, strong, and smart, making a move on

her would require a worthy opponent.

Ben hoped that opponent wasn't The Master. That psychopath had already caused enough damage to Lacey and her sisters.

"Where are you?" Eagle asked.

"Standing outside Lacey's apartment."

"Pick the lock and wait for me inside, I'll be there shortly."

As Ben did as Eagle said, he sent a silent message to his girl.

*I'm coming for you, sunflower. I failed you twice now, there won't be a third time.*

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

August 14<sup>th</sup>  
5:19 P.M.

PERHAPS NOT THE most appropriate emotion to be feeling right now given she had been abducted, but Lacey was bored.

How else was she supposed to feel when she was locked in an eight-by-eight cell handcuffed to a bed?

There was anger there too, not a whole lot of fear, annoyance at herself for falling for the older woman's ploy more than anything else.

How stupid could she be?

Lacey knew better than to allow herself to get distracted by anything. Even an old woman who had supposedly injured herself.

Just because someone didn't look like a threat, didn't mean they weren't.

Apparently, she needed a refresher in that particular lesson.

With an irritated sigh, she shifted in the putrid bed. The mattress was old and stained with so many substances she didn't even want to think about what it had been through. She'd added to its filth when she peed herself earlier.

Normally, she had great bladder control—thanks to The Master and one of his sick games where he would force them to drink copious amounts of water then not let them go to the bathroom—but she was still recovering from her assault, and the taser was messing with her body.

While certainly uncomfortable lying on the urine-soaked mattress, Lacey

couldn't say she was embarrassed. This was typical Master mind games and if he thought she was going to crack under that pressure then he was sorely mistaken.

Plus, he'd tipped his hand.

She might have no idea who the woman was or how she figured into all of this, but her abduction and captivity had The Master's fingerprints all over it.

The small, dark room. The filthy bed. The way the bindings on her wrists had been so carefully placed so they completely covered her wounds from the manor. The way the dirty mattress was covered with a scratchy wool blanket he knew would irritate the wounds from his whip.

Classic Master.

So where was he?

Why lure her to him then bring her here—wherever here was—and not show himself?

Did he really think she was unaware that he was behind her kidnapping?

No.

He wasn't stupid and he was the one who had trained her so he knew that she would figure out he had staged her abduction.

There was some other game he was playing, she just had no idea what it was.

At least Lacey knew someone would be looking for her within hours of her abduction. When she didn't make her call with the shrink, the woman would call Eagle to let him know. She didn't have a doubt in the world that Eagle would know she would never bail on something like that.

Eagle was like a big brother, or maybe an uncle, the closest thing she'd ever had to a father even if he was only thirteen years older than her. He had taken her and her sisters under his wing and he knew her better than practically anyone.

Prey was coming for her, and they would find her. Again she had no doubts about that. Her job was to hold on until they got here.

Which she would do no matter what.

When she was this close to finally laying her demons to rest, she wasn't going to allow the man who had created them to ruin that.

So, she had no choice but to lie here in the dark, being bored, and waiting for the man she hated most in the world to tip his hand.

Sooner or later he would.



Arrogance would see to that.

If there was one thing she knew about The Master it was that he had an ego the size of the ocean. Eventually, it would be his downfall, she just hoped that was sooner rather than later.

A slight click was the only indication she got before bright light suddenly flooded the room. Of course, her eyes protested after being trapped in the dark for so long and reflexively scrunched closed.

Doing as she'd been taught, she cracked them a little to filter just a bit of light in and by the time she could open them without feeling like her brain had been set on fire, she saw she was no longer alone.

The Master stood there along with two little girls. One was about nine, and in her arms, she held a baby who looked to be a little over a year old. The simple white cotton dresses the girls wore were replicas of the ones she and her sisters had worn when they were growing up.

Both girls shared the same shade of strawberry blond locks, with the same smattering of freckles across their noses, they looked like biological sisters. From the expression on the older child's face, it didn't look like they had been here all that long.

Certainly not long enough for acceptance to sink in.

Since he was the one who held all the cards right now and she had nothing constructive to add, Lacey just waited.

Didn't take long for the egomaniac to fill the silence.

"I've made a decision," The Master announced.

Instead of asking what that was, she merely arched a brow at him. Silently asking why she should care.

"These are the beginnings of my new army."

Right. She got that. Didn't explain what he was all giddy about. "Took you a long time to build a new one after you lost us." One of many questions they'd never gotten answers to about The Master. Why had it taken six years for him to start acquiring a new army of girls after she and her sisters had been rescued? And what did he want with his own personal army anyway?

Scowling at her, he took a step toward the bed, leaving the girls cowering by the door. "I had another army. Tried taking older girls, teenagers, thought it would make things easier, but it didn't. They killed themselves rather than do what I told them to do."

Pain lanced her heart.

How awful.

Those poor girls. Lacey could only imagine what it had been like for them. At least she and her sisters had been taken as babies or toddlers, too young to remember anything about their lives before The Master. But those girls would have had families, and friends, school and extracurricular activities. They had lives they'd been snatched away from and that must have been devastating to them.

"If you think I'm going to feel sorry for you about that you're more insane than I remember."

"Watch your mouth." Fury contorted The Master's features as he stormed toward the bed.

Tied up as she was, Lacey was helpless to do anything to avoid his backhand. Her cheek stung where he'd hit it, but she eyed him defiantly. "I'm horrified those girls felt that was the only way out, but I'm only horrified for them. And I'm glad Ivory saved those girls you tried to buy, and then Pearl rescued the next lot. I'll do whatever I can to get those two out, you can count on that."

"Well, I'm certainly glad you feel an affinity for them because you will in fact be spending a lot of time with them. You are going to be their new mother."

Her brow furrowed.

Mother?

Obviously, she was missing something.

Why did he need a pretend mom in this sick and twisted game of his? Did he think he could play house with her and these two little girls? If he did, he really was more insane than she gave him credit for because the first chance she got she was getting those children out of here.

"Their mother?"

"Don't you remember your mother, Lacey? The woman who cared for you when you were very small?"

Okay.

He'd gone off the deep end.

There had been no woman here when she was small. The only people she had ever met in her life before being rescued by Prey, were The Master, Opal, Pearl, and Ivory.

That was it.

No one else.

The Master's hand closed around one of her breasts, fondling it like they

were lovers. “She’d be so hurt to know you’ve forgotten all about you. She loved you, you know. She loved all of my beautiful girls, but I think she loved you the most because you were the one.”

“What one?” His hand on her body repulsed her but was nothing new, her mind on the other hand was reeling from his revelation. There had been a woman at the compound in Alaska? How had she never known that? And where was that woman now?

“She knew how your body responded to mine, that it made me happy to know what effect I had on you. The others were to be sent off to fulfill my plans but you, you were always going to be mine.”

“Yours?”

“My wife. The mother of my children.”

She was going to be what now?

His wife?

The mother of his children?

No way in hell.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 14<sup>TH</sup>

8:36 P.M.

BEN HAD COME to the conclusion that the world was too big with too many places to hide.

*Lacey, where are you?*

If only she could answer his unasked questions.

Hours had passed since Lacey had disappeared off the face of the earth. Her sisters had gone down to the beach where she usually went and found her beach bag and towel lying discarded at the side of the parking lot. They were sitting there like someone had placed them there, not like they’d been tossed or dropped.

But why would she carefully place her belongings on the sidewalk and then disappear?

None of this made sense.

Lacey wasn’t the kind of person who would just disappear without a

trace. Even though she'd been through a rough time with the mission to the estate in England, and coming face to face with The Master again, he knew she would never bail.

His brave sunflower didn't have it in her.

She worried too much about the people in her life and whether or not they'd be okay. Hiding behind a smile and pretending she was fine, that he could have bought. But his girl was even too brave for that. She'd come right back home and faced her demons, deciding she needed some help to fight them, and sought it.

Bailing would never have entered her mind.

"Anything?" he asked, for probably the hundredth time in the last hour.

The look Olivia Oswald shot him was infinitely patient. Not once had Eagle's wife complained when he leaned over her shoulder as she tapped away at her keyboard or interrupted her to ask if she'd found any information on Lacey. She hadn't lost her temper a single time, and even when he knew that every other person in the room—including Eagle, Lacey's sisters, their partners, and a Delta Team who had volunteered to help as soon as they learned Lacey was missing—had all about reached the end of their rope when it came to him.

"Not yet. Hang in there though. Believe it or not, we *all* understand what you're going through," Olivia told him. Her long blonde hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun, and the lavender sundress she wore showed off a small baby bump, but it was the empathy in her blue eyes that held him back when he wanted to snap at her to work faster.

How much time did they think Lacey had?

His gut was telling him he knew exactly who had taken her, the problem was he had no idea why.

The why was everything.

It either meant his woman had been murdered while believing he cared nothing for her, or they still stood a chance at finding her and bringing her home.

Ben knew he had no one to blame but himself for the fact that Lacey had no idea he cared deeply for her. Might even fall in love with her one day. She just thought he was a cold, angry jerk who was so stuck in the past that he was incapable of moving forward.

A week ago he would have agreed with that assessment.

Now he was trying to do better. To *be* better.

Because of her.

For her.

And she didn't even know it.

"We get it, man, we really do," Keane "Ghost" Bryson told him. Since he'd heard the story of how close Ghost had come to losing the woman he had wound up falling in love with during a hostage situation in Egypt, he believed the man when he said that.

"It's why we came as soon as we heard," Beckett "Coach" Ralston added. Olivia had filled him in on the backgrounds of the Delta Team when he got to Prey's West Coast office, so he was aware that they had helped rescue both Ivory and Pearl earlier in the year. Apparently, Coach in particular had bonded with both the women and Lacey and Opal as well.

"I appreciate that," he said, hating that the wary and borderline hostile looks he'd been getting when he first showed up had morphed into pitying ones. Ben got the feeling that it wasn't just having the women they cared about in danger that the Delta Team could empathize with, but messing things up with them too.

One chance.

That was all he was asking God for.

A single chance to make things right with the woman who had shined a light into his dark world.

"I ... she ... Lacey doesn't ... I messed up," he admitted. "I assume you all know that my wife was murdered three years ago. I was stuck. Trapped in that grief and guilt. Didn't even want to find a way out. Then Lacey came storming into my life and she's so bright, so brave, so strong, I don't know how she did it, but she changed ... me. I need her back, need a chance to make things right."

"Lacey will fight," Opal assured him, reaching across to brush her fingertips across the top of his clenched fist which was resting on the table.

"She's strong and smart and sweet, she cares more about making everyone else happy than finding her own happiness. She needs someone who'll take care of her, put her first, make her smile because she wants to not because she thinks she has to." Ivory's words held a clear warning, one he intended to heed.

"She has that," he promised.

He would spend the rest of his life making sure Lacey never doubted for a second that she was loved and protected, the center of someone's world. He

would do whatever it took to make sure she knew he could be her safe place, her place of rest, where she never had to pretend anything.

“I think I got something.”

At Olivia’s announcement, all attention snapped to her.

“What did you find, sweetheart?” Eagle asked, leaning over his wife’s shoulder to get a look at her screen.

Since Ben was on the other side of Olivia’s chair, he did the same. “There she is,” he said a horrible mixture of relief at seeing Lacey mixed with fear over what they were about to watch.

“I picked her up arriving around six thirty,” Olivia told them. “She parked, walked down toward the beach and I lost her. I kept fast-forwarding until I picked her up again.”

Security cameras were a godsend and possibly the only shot they had at finding Lacey alive.

“She’s with an older woman,” he said, disappointment washing away any of the hope that had just been brewing. An old woman wouldn’t have the strength, timing, or skill to take down someone with Lacey’s training.

“No way an old lady takes down Lacey,” Cormac “Fletch” Fletcher said confidently.

“Agreed,” Eagle said. “She’s too well trained.”

“Doesn’t look like she thinks the old lady is a threat,” Olivia added, watching the footage. “Maybe whatever happened to her happened afterward.”

“Lacey has her arm around the woman’s waist like she’s supporting her,” Dane “Fish” Munroe noted. “Like maybe the woman was hurt.”

“She has her bag and towel with her,” Graham “Hollywood” Caverly said. “So whatever happened to her either happened now with the old lady or immediately afterward.”

“She could have gone back down to the beach again,” Aspen “Blade” Carlisle suggested.

“If she’s worried about the old lady she wouldn’t have gone back down,” Hollywood said.

“She didn’t,” Olivia said, her voice tight.

As he watched on the screen, Lacey helped the woman over to a black van parked in the furthest corner of the parking lot. Just as Lacey went to open the driver’s door the side door of the van opened, and arms snaked out.

Forced to watch in horror as his sunflower was snatched from the parking

lot and dragged into the back of the van, Ben felt his entire body go taut.

Ready to snap at a moment's notice.

Preferably when the man who had stolen his woman was standing in front of him.

Ben had never had an opportunity to face down the man who had killed Jemima, but he would love that chance to take down Lacey's abductor.

Painfully.

And slowly.

"It has to be The Master," Pearl growled, looking as furious as he felt. "But who's the old woman?"

Olivia's fingers flew across her keyboard so fast they were almost a blur and he prayed she got them all the answers they needed.

The Master had gone unpunished long enough. Not only was it clear that he intended to keep abducting more little girls to replace Lacey and her sisters, but he was a constant reminder of all that they'd lost.

"Oh my ..." Olivia trailed off as she looked at her screen.

"What, honey?" Eagle didn't hesitate to wrap an arm around his wife's shoulders.

"I got a hit on the license plate. The van is registered to a Mable Matthewson. She has a son. The picture matches The Master. His name is Mervin Matthewson. The Master is Mervin Matthewson."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

August 15<sup>th</sup>  
4:59 A.M.

ONE MOMENT she was slumbering restlessly, the next, a shrill alarm was startling her awake.

Lacey blinked open sleepy eyes. She hadn't gotten anywhere close to enough sleep. After tossing and turning as best as she could, still tied to the bed for what felt like hours, she had eventually drifted off.

That had to be all of maybe an hour or so ago and now she was being woken up again.

Part of The Master's plan to break her.

Only unlucky for him, she wasn't some terrified child anymore who didn't know better. Now she was an adult, a highly trained adult, who was going to do whatever it took to get herself and those little girls out of here.

After she killed The Master.

"Rise and shine, my beauty."

His overly cheerful voice made her cringe. Not so much because she knew he was trying to annoy her, or even because the sound seemed to reverberate inside her head like a gang of wasps, but because she suddenly realized how awful fake cheerfulness could be.

How many times had she pretended that all was perfect in her world and sounded as fake as The Master did right now?

Too many to count.



Or maybe she was a good enough actress that nobody had ever guessed. Either way, she didn't want to ever pretend again. If she got out of this mess and back home, she was going to learn how to be her true self, the flirty, bubbly, sassy side that everyone knew as well as the more vulnerable one who battled insecurities on a near daily basis.

She was who she was, and she shouldn't have to apologize for it or hide from it.

"How is my beauty this morning?"

"Cold, tired, sore, and grumpy," she snapped. The words coming out of her mouth shocked her. Never before had she spoken to this man in this cavalier manner. As a child and a teen, she had been afraid of him, terrified he would kill her, or worse her sisters and leave her alone with him.

For a moment he froze, glared at her, then snapped, "I don't like my woman having a smart mouth."

"Good thing I'm not your woman then." The very thought of the idea was enough to make her empty stomach churn.

"You will be. You'll become my wife, the mother of my children, take care of us all, be everything they said I would never have." There was a wistfulness in his tone she'd never heard before. Or maybe it was just that she'd been too young back then to think of the man as anything other than the one who tortured her daily, turning her into someone she didn't want to be.

They'd never known what made The Master tick. What led him to become a monster who would abduct innocent babies and toddlers and mold them into killing machines.

"They?" she asked, trying to make it seem like she didn't really care whether or not he gave her an answer.

"They tormented me, said I'd never be anything," he snarled, although she suspected not at her but at these people who had caused him pain.

Almost absentmindedly, he came to the bed and began to untie her. Lacey would love nothing more than to fling herself at him and kill him right here and now, but unfortunately her limbs were heavy and lacking normal blood supply from so long being tied up.

If she attacked him now, she would fail.

Failure didn't just mean her own potential death but the deaths of those little girls as well. They were so young, had their whole lives ahead of them, and she didn't want them to wind up The Master's pawns forever, or like the other girls who had thought ending their lives was better than enduring any

more of The Master's hell.

So instead, she listened.

Gathered evidence she could use against him later.

"They called me Merv the Perv but I don't understand why."

The Master looked truly perplexed while all Lacey could do was silently rejoice that they finally had a name for the man who had tortured them. Granted it was only a first name, but it was still miles better than they'd had before, which was absolutely nothing.

"I wasn't a pervert," Merv continued. "I've never even had a girlfriend. How can I be a pervert?"

If Merv didn't see how raping little girls as young as ten made him a pervert, then there was no hope for the man. He was so delusional that he actually believed abducting her and her sisters and all the other girls he'd taken and forcing them through torture to learn to kill was no big deal.

"They said ... they said ... vile things about me," Merv continued. His face had darkened, his navy eyes appearing almost black like he had been possessed. "They said I watched girls because I was too scared to touch them, too stupid to know what to do but they were wrong."

Lacey's stomach dropped.

She had a feeling she knew what Merv was going to say next.

Still, she asked quietly, "Why were they wrong?"

"Because she taught me *everything*," Merv's tone was triumphant, but all she saw was the horrors that he had likely endured as a child.

"Who taught you?"

"Mother did. It was her job you see."

As despicable a person as she knew him to be, her heart cracked for the small, innocent boy he had once been. Lacey had no idea why he was telling her all of this now, maybe it was because he had decided she was going to be his wife, but whatever reason, she was glad for information she could use against him.

It might seem cruel since he was confessing the abuse he had suffered as a child, but this man was a monster not some innocent victim even if at one time he had been. This was war, her life was at stake, those children's as well, and in war you didn't spend time feeling sorry for your enemy, you just used anything you could to make sure you survived.

Swallowing down the bile burning her throat, Lacey asked, "What about your dad? What did he think of his wife teaching you?"

Merv had already untied her legs—although they rested heavily against the filthy mattress as painful pins and needles ravished them—and had moved on to her wrists, but at her question he viciously clamped his hand around her left wrist, almost crushing the bones. “Don’t you mention him again,” he hissed. “He was no father, no husband. He left us. Just walked away and abandoned us. Wasn’t there to teach me all the things a father is supposed to teach his son, but my mother taught me. When he left it was my job to take over as head of the house. To provide, to guide, to pleasure the woman. I did that. I always did that. I took care of you, and your ungrateful sisters. I fed you, clothed you, and put a roof over your head. The others never cared, they never showed their appreciation, but you did.”

What she saw as her body betraying her by orgasming against her will had been viewed very differently by Merv. He’d seen it as her way of thanking him for all the horror he had put her through.

“That is why you are the one I have chosen to marry. My mother is getting old, she’s sick, dying, won’t be around much longer. She won’t be able to take care of the next generation like she took care of you and your sisters. But you will. She will teach you everything you need to know and then together we will raise my army.”

Still on about the army.

What on earth did this twisted man need his own army for?

It didn’t seem that he particularly cared about money, he’d been perfectly happy living in their off-the-grid Alaskan compound. Nor did it seem like he was in it for power. Never once had he mentioned anything about the government, wanting to destroy them or take over.

So, what did he want?

And how did having his own tiny army of well-trained killing machine girls factor into it?

His grip on her wrist was still much too tight, and Merv was breathing heavily, still clearly being controlled by his anger. Her question could push him over the edge, but then again what could he do to her that he hadn’t already?

If she had survived eighteen years with him then she could survive this too.

“Why do you need an army? What were my sisters and I supposed to do for you if we hadn’t been taken away?”

Evil danced in his dark blue eyes and the smile he gave her was anything

but pleasant as his hand gripped her tighter, almost to the point of snapping bones. “Revenge.”

\* \* \*

AUGUST 15<sup>TH</sup>  
6:12 A.M.

“Wow.”

Ben looked over toward the small table where the Delta team were sitting. After researching everything there was to know about Mable Matthewson down to the tiniest detail, they’d eventually come up with two possible locations for where The Master, aka Mervin Matthewson, might be hiding out.

One was in Australia, a property where his mother Mable had lived for a while as a child after her mother’s death. Mable had been two at the time, and her father, not wanting to be stuck tied down to raising a child as he enjoyed his truck driver lifestyle, had sent her to stay with his parents.

Living on the remote cattle station deep in the Australian outback had been difficult for young Mable. There had been no other children to play with, no contact with anyone other than her grandparents and the people who worked for them.

At sixteen her father, forced to retire after a bad accident, had decided it was time for his daughter to return home to care for him. Which Mable did until he passed away six years later.

Even though she had inherited the ranch from her grandparents as their only living relative following her father’s death, she had never returned to it. They could only assume that whatever happened there shaped the woman into the person she had become.

Since Mable hadn’t been back to the cattle station, and to the best of their knowledge never taken her only son there, they believed the second location was the more probable one. While Eagle, Lacey’s sisters, and Prey’s Bravo were checking it out, he along with Ghost’s Delta team were moving in on the second location.

After her father’s death, with no real education and no means of

supporting herself except for returning to her grandparents' ranch, Mable had married within six months. Their only son Mervin was born less than a year later. For a while, things seemed to be going fine, until Mable's husband decided to move the family to New Zealand for a business opportunity when Mervin was seven.

Three years later, he ditched his family leaving them alone in the tiny New Zealand town. From there, things appeared to go downhill.

And fast.

"What?" he asked, shifting his attention from aimlessly staring out the private jet's window and worrying about Lacey, to Ghost who had just received some sort of intel if the way he was staring at the laptop screen was anything to go by.

"Olivia sent us more information on Mervin," Ghost replied.

Standing, Ben moved from the seat he'd taken at the back of the plane, away from the others, to join them at the table. Taking a seat next to Ford "Truck" Laughlin, he readied himself for whatever he was about to hear.

Whatever it was he'd listen and process, use it to make sure he got his girl back.

"Looks like life for little Mervin was rough," Ghost said.

"Abuse?" Hollywood asked.

"Rumors that the relationship between him and his mother was inappropriate in all ways," Ghost confirmed.

"So sexual abuse?" Fish asked.

Ghost nodded. "Never confirmed, but suspected by pretty much everyone in the town from the cops, to the doctor, to the teachers."

"No one did anything to get him out?" Fletch asked. As a man who has slipped seamlessly into the role of father to the little girl of the woman he'd fallen in love with, it was likely near impossible for him to fathom someone not stepping up to help a child in need.

"Some official reports were filed by the teacher after Mervin wrote a creative writing story for class that tipped them off. Doctor reported seeing some bruises and scars on the boy's back. Both reported to the cops and called in CPS. Child protective services came out and did a visit, but Mervin was adamant that no one had ever touched him and that he loved his mom and she loved him."

"That was the end of it?" Beatle asked.

"Mom played it out like the boy was upset about his dad leaving and had

taken some of the things the man sent him in letters and blown it up in his young imaginative mind. Even produced some letters supposedly from the father with some age-inappropriate things in them,” Ghost replied.

“So, CPS stepped back and believed that,” Fish said, shaking his head.

Ghost nodded again. “Told the mom not to let the boy read any more letters from his father and that was that.”

“Only it wasn’t,” Ben said. Letters from the dad didn’t explain marks on the boy’s body. The mom was the one abusing the child and whatever she’d put him through had turned him into the monster who had so viciously tortured Lacey and her sisters.

“It wasn’t,” Ghost agreed. “Things got worse after CPS became involved.”

“So why weren’t they called back?” Truck asked.

“Because it wasn’t at home where things got worse,” Ghost replied. “It was at school.”

“Teachers or peers?” Blade asked.

“Peers.”

“He was bullied?” Coach asked.

“Oh yeah.” Ghost’s face was grim. “Badly. You know how small towns can be, everyone gossips. Kids hear things, take them out of context, or only hear part of it, and they run with it. There were a few other boys in his class who made it their mission to torment Mervin constantly. Called him Merv the Perv, said he was in love with his mom and that they slept together in the same bed each night and had sex.”

“Probably not untrue,” Truck said.

“Probably. At school Merv had no friends. He was quiet, kept to himself, didn’t like sports so he was already on the outs with most of the boys, was of average intelligence but worked hard so he was considered a nerd. After the rumors that he and his mom were intimate no girl would date him, so he was truly alone. He worked odd jobs around the town from the time his dad bailed, went to work or right home after school, never got invited to other kid’s houses for play dates or birthday parties.”

“He was an outcast,” Hollywood said.

“It was just him and his mom, them against the world, no one to model appropriate behavior to him,” Coach added.

“Don’t make excuses for him,” Ben hissed. As sorry as he was for Mervin the boy who had been abandoned by his dad and left to be raised by an

abusive mom, Mervin the man was a monster who raped and tortured at will.

“I’m not, man,” Coach said soothingly. “None of us are. Just trying to understand how Mervin Matthewson became The Master.”

“The bullying became physical around the time the boys hit their teenage years,” Ghost continued. “They’d ambush him as he walked home from school and beat him up, holding him down as they each took turns hitting him. Then they’d steal his clothes as he was changing after gym class, take pictures of him naked, and post them around the school. Break into his house and hide then jump out and attack him with a knife.”

“No one did anything to stop it?” Fletch asked, looking horrified. “I mean, I know school can be rough, and bullying exists, but this was the meticulous and planned stalking of a minor.”

“A few times teachers at the school brought it up with the boys’ families, and Mervin’s mother but it never went anywhere. Boys’ parents would assure the school that they’d talk with their sons, but that their precious children weren’t involved and it was the other boys. Merv’s mom said bullying was part of life and it would make a man out of her son.”

“Made something out of him all right,” Ben muttered, frustrated with everyone involved in the situation. If something had been done about the abuse and bullying he was enduring, Mervin Matthewson might not have grown up to become an evil monster.

“Right before graduation things escalated. Mervin was found in the parking lot of a movie theatre late at night unconscious and bleeding. He’d been sexually assaulted. Cops became involved that time, but Merv insisted that he had no memory of who attacked him so there was little they could do. Everyone knew it was that group of boys though,” Ghost said with a disgusted shake of his head.

“That’s what he wanted with the girls,” Ben said as everything clicked into place. “Why he wanted his own little army. He intended to train a bunch of girls to kill so he could send them in after the boys who tormented him. Even if they were expecting Merv to eventually retaliate it wouldn’t be with a woman. He sends in one of the girls, they seduce the men, then exact Mervin’s revenge for him, and he gets to sit back and be the one in control for once.”

A simple plan but an ingenious one.

“All his life he never had any control. Couldn’t stop his dad from leaving, couldn’t stop his mom from likely exacting out her own control after she was

similarly abused, couldn't stop those boys from bullying him. The Master. He chose that name for a reason. He abducted those little girls and controlled every aspect of their lives while he trained them to do what he needed them for. But why take Lacey now? What purpose does that serve?"



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

August 15<sup>th</sup>  
7:00 A.M.

LACEY GROANED as she caught a glance at the clock and saw it was only seven in the morning.

She was already exhausted.

After getting her up at five, The Master had made her run for miles with her arms tied behind her back. He added five-kilogram bags of sand for her to carry every half mile until she'd been trying to run with thirty kilograms strapped to her.

While she trained pretty much every single day, it was nothing like the brutal regime The Master had put her and her sisters through when they were his prisoners. Her body was no longer used to this level of stress and had given out on her numerous times.

Covered in scratches and bruises by the time they finally made it back to the house, he had stripped her naked in the front yard, handed her a bar of soap, and turned the cold hose on her. Since it was by far not her first rodeo, Lacey simply washed herself and her hair as quickly and efficiently as she could, not knowing when she would be given another chance to wash and not wanting to waste this one, even if the water was freezing and The Master was watching hungrily.

Now he was leading her through the hall and into the kitchen where she presumed she was going to begin taking care of his new little army. While he

hadn't told her anymore about his past other than that he'd initially taken her and her sisters to use for revenge, she assumed it had to do with more than just his mother abusing him. His mom was the old woman who had tripped—or pretended to trip—over her legs on the beach so it was clear that Merv and his mom were still in contact. Still working together.

Whoever he wanted revenge on, it wasn't his mother.

“Thirty seconds,” Merv announced.

“Huh?” Lacey looked over her shoulder at him, not as easy as it seemed since he had fitted her with a bulky shock collar earlier. With that locked around her neck she wouldn't be able to escape, but it certainly didn't and wouldn't stop her from looking for a way to get those children out.

The sigh he gave was long-suffering like she was the one bothering him instead of it being the other way around. If he didn't want to deal with her then he shouldn't have kidnapped her.

“You've forgotten our game?” he asked, gripping her wrist—the same one he'd been crushing earlier—and twisted it up behind her back.

Pain immediately shot through the joint that was still sore from him hanging her from the ceiling in the cell back in England. Her wrist also protested his harsh grip, and Lacey stood on her tip toes in an attempt to ease the pressure.

Of course, that only made Merv yank her arm up higher. “It's very disappointing that you have forgotten so many of the lessons I taught you, but I suppose reteaching you will be entertaining.”

For him maybe.

For her, it would just be painful.

“Thirty seconds to memorize the layout of the room,” he said, maintaining his grip on her while he pulled a blindfold from his pocket with his free hand.

Right.

Somehow, she'd forgotten that game.

After the thirty seconds were up and the blindfold was placed over her eyes, she would be punished for any time she bumped into anything or was unable to find what he asked her to. She'd actually been pretty good at the game, especially with the motivation of pain for failing, but it had been a long time since she'd done it.

Not wasting any more time because Merv was likely to take off the time he'd had to spend reminding her of the game, she quickly scanned the room.

On her first visual sweep, she focused on the big things, size of the room and furniture placement, on the second she took in as many details as possible.

“Times up,” Merv announced gleefully, obviously pleased he hadn’t given her enough time to memorize everything which meant he could have his fun dishing out punishments later.

The blindfold was good quality, and it blocked out everything, including light she could have used as a cue.

Rendered blind, when Merv released his hold on her she almost reached out for him. Instinct attempting to dictate that she hold onto the only known in her suddenly dark world.

But she knew better than to reach out to him for anything, and as she issued a command for her heart not to race, and her breathing not to speed up, she brought up a picture in her mind of what the room had looked like.

“Make breakfast for the children while I go take a shower and get dressed,” Merv ordered, and she could tell from his retreating footsteps that he was leaving the room.

Without his presence she actually calmed more. Any time spent away from him was good as far as she was concerned.

Plus, Merv had just given her something he hadn’t intended to.

The answer on how she was going to get these two little girls out of here.

“It’s okay, I’m not going to hurt you,” Lacey said, turning in the direction of where she could sense someone watching her. The Master had been obsessed with training her and her sisters to use all their senses, and now she could smell the faintest hint of baby powder, and hear the soft intake of air with each breath the little girl and her baby sister took.

When the girl didn’t speak, Lacey crossed the room, avoiding the large wooden table and chairs, to the fridge. She had no idea if Merv was watching her constantly with cameras but if he was monitoring her every move, she wanted to make him think she was doing as she’d been ordered.

Because she knew how anal The Master was about how the fridge was organized, she was able to quickly find the bottle of milk. Likely milk that came from a cow on the farm, but she hadn’t been given the grand tour yet.

“Quick, drink something and I’ll make you some toast, then you need to go.”

Soft footfalls indicated the older girl was coming closer. “Go? We can’t go, he’ll be mad.”

The fear in the child’s voice broke her heart. She remembered when she

and her sisters had been that terrified of The Master, too scared to even attempt escaping.

Not any more though.

Now that fear had morphed into hatred.

Even knowing that he'd been abused couldn't take away that hatred. Abuse was no excuse for hurting innocent people. Merv had chosen to do what he'd done to them because it was what he wanted to do, nothing took away his responsibility for his actions, not even past pain.

"You let me worry about that, sweetie-pie. See those keys hanging on the wall by the door?"

"Yes," the girl answered a moment later.

"I know where the car is." At least she hoped she did. The Master had kept a vehicle hidden a mile from the house in their Alaskan compound. It had been hidden deep in the trees where no one was likely to find it, and he was careful to always wipe away the tire tracks.

She knew this because she'd stumbled on the car one day while she was out gathering wild berries. For weeks they had searched for the keys as they secretly planned their escape. Only The Master had found them before they could drive away. They'd been punished so badly they hadn't tried again.

Until now anyway.

"I can't drive," the child said, tears evident in her voice.

"Is that your baby sister in your arms?" she asked as she slotted the bread into the toaster.

"Yes."

"You love her." A statement not a question, but still the girl answered in the affirmative.

"I wanted a baby sister for so long, I asked Santa every Christmas, and when Mommy told me she was having a baby I hoped so hard it was a sister."

"You've been taking good care of her."

"She's just a baby."

"She's counting on you, and I already know you're not going to let her down because you love her so much. I know you can do this, but it doesn't matter what I know, *you* have to know it too."

"M-maybe I can do it."

The little girl's hesitation was clear, but Lacey jumped all over it. "Course you can. You're going to take the keys and your sister, you're going to find the car where I tell you. If you don't you just keep going and don't stop till

you find someone. I'll keep The Master busy. All you need to worry about is you and your sister. When you get to the car you put her down on the floor in front of the passenger seat. Gas pedal is on the right, brake beside it, all you do is turn on the engine and drive as fast as you can out of here. Can you do that, sweetie-pie?"

There was a long pause, but when the child spoke again her voice was infused with confidence. "I can do it. But how will you keep The Master busy?"

"That's for me to worry about, sweetie-pie." No way was she going to let the little girl know that the only way to keep The Master busy so he didn't go after the children was to let him hurt her.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 15<sup>TH</sup>  
8:24 A.M.

WAITING until tonight would give them the cover of darkness, but Ben couldn't wait any longer.

They had to know now whether or not Lacey was here in New Zealand.

While he had the utmost confidence in the abilities of Ghost's Delta Team, and his own skills, this wasn't their usual mission.

Just because Mervin Matthewson had been at the auction in England a mere few days ago to purchase more little girls, didn't mean that he didn't already have some here with him. If there were little girls here that he had trained to be his own personal little army then Ben knew the man would use that to his advantage.

None of them wanted to be forced into a situation where it was either die, let a teammate be killed, or take out a brainwashed child.

Best case scenario was that it was just Mervin, his mother Mable, and Lacey here. That way they could take the Matthewson mother and son duo into custody and bring Lacey home. Ending this whole ordeal once and for all.

Worst case scenario is that they would find Mervin and his mother had somehow managed to slip away, any little girls here had been trained to kill

intruders leaving him and the Delta Team no choice but to protect themselves, and Lacey was already dead.

In between those two scenarios was the one where they were all in outback Australia. Ben needed Lacey in his arms now. It wasn't just knowing she was in danger and had likely been injured in some way, that had him wired tight, it was knowing that she believed he felt nothing for her.

Pushing her away out of fear of losing her had been a stupid decision.

A cowardly one.

And one that had cost him her anyway.

Now he was itching to hold her, kiss her, and plead for her forgiveness. There was no way he was able to even consider the possibility that she wouldn't even give him—them—a chance. For now, he had to believe he could convince her not to give up on him, if he didn't there was no way he could function.

The farm was remote, in a heavily wooded area, and they had no idea what sort of surveillance system the man had. Right now, they still didn't know how he'd been able to infiltrate CPS records to identify girls who wouldn't have families that would make a fuss if they went missing. If the man had hacked the database, he might have the skills to have this whole place monitored.

So far luck seemed to have been on their side.

No one had approached them yet. There had been no traps, no bullets whizzing in their direction.

Nothing at all.

And it was making him edgier.

If Mervin wasn't hiding out here, then he could still be in Australia but what were they going to do if he wasn't in either of those places?

What was he going to do if they found him, and Lacey wasn't with him?

There was always the chance that Mervin hadn't taken her because he wanted her for some reason but rather to just kill her.

Maybe he'd decided to eliminate all four of the Smith sisters.

After all, they had made it more than obvious that they weren't going to give up on finding him. That they'd keep looking until they had him in custody. Or he was dead.

Eliminating a threat was smart, especially since it was clear that Mervin hadn't yet met his objective. Olivia Oswald had found evidence that two of the six boys well known to be some of the ones who had relentlessly stalked a

young Mervin Matthewson had both reported incidents of stalking over the last few years. Another one had reported regular break-ins, and another had reported to the cops that he kept getting hang-up calls to the point he had to change his number. Twice.

Mervin was the one stalking his abusers, Ben was positive that he was, which meant they were right about why Merv had abducted the girls. He planned to use them, and perhaps he suspected that Lacey and her sisters knew enough to possibly bring him down.

Whatever his plans, Lacey would never truly be safe until Mervin was no longer in the picture.

Ben had no intention of losing another woman he ... loved?

No, not loved. Love was too strong a word, he didn't know Lacey well enough, hadn't known her long enough, to say that he loved her, but he *had* fallen hard and fast, and he could see himself falling in love with her.

Which was why he wasn't going to lose her.

"You hear that?" Ben asked, freezing as a sudden noise caught his attention.

"Sounds like an engine," Ghost said.

They had split into three groups of three to approach the main farmhouse. He was with Ghost and Coach, and they were approaching from the back of the building. Besides the farmhouse, there was a barn and another half dozen outbuildings. Mervin could be in any one of them as could Lacey.

"Vehicle approaching," Coach confirmed as they all saw a dark gray SUV weaving through the trees.

"Whoever's driving it looks drunk," Ghost muttered, and Ben had to agree. The vehicle wasn't moving smoothly it was weaving all over the place, scraping along trunks and branches, jerking like whoever was driving it had never sat in the driver's seat before.

"Can't see the driver," Coach said as they moved to block the vehicle's path.

Although the car came continually forward, he couldn't see anyone behind the wheel, it was like it was being driven by a ghost, or an invisible man.

Or a small child.

"What if—"

"It's a kid," Coach finished for him.

"Olivia and Raven were going through missing persons reports for all

girls under the age of ten, they pinged several that fit The Master's MO," Ghost added.

Because there was no way to know that it was indeed a small child attempting to drive the vehicle, they moved to surround the oncoming SUV. None of them wanted to fire at it to make it stop in case it really was a little girl driving.

"Stop the car," Ghost called out.

Immediately the vehicle rolled to a stop mere inches from where they were standing. There was still no one visible inside, but whoever was driving had stopped upon Ghost's order, so they were aware that they were no longer alone.

"Someone's moving inside," Coach murmured as they rounded the sides, weapons drawn, ready to take down a threat.

But there was no threat.

As Ben moved so he could see through the driver's side window he saw a tiny figure sliding down between the passenger seat and the front of the car.

Before he could say anything, he heard a small cry.

A baby's cry.

Quickly putting his weapon away, there was no way he was pointing one at an infant, or a child, even if the child had been brainwashed into becoming one of The Master's minions.

"We're not going to hurt you," he said, keeping his voice calm even as he wanted to grab the child and demand to know if she knew anything about Lacey.

Whoever was in the car didn't make a sound, but he could hear heavy breathing.

Scared breathing.

The poor child was terrified.

Easing open the door, he moved a mere inch at a time as he slid into the driver's seat, making sure to keep every movement slow and measured. Startling the child, who could very well be armed, was the last thing they needed.

"It's going to be okay, we're going to take you home, you're going to be okay," he soothed. Kids weren't his thing. It wasn't that he disliked them, he had several nieces and nephews, he just hadn't spent much time with them. Three years of shutting himself off from his family was a lot of time to miss out on with them. But right now, he'd do whatever it took to get information



on finding his girl.

“W-who are you?” came a small, scared voice, and a face peeked out at him.

“My name is Ben, but most people call me Rabbit.”

The face scrunched into the most adorable frown. “They call you Rabbit?”

“You like Beatrix Potter? Benjamin Bunny, I convinced my friends to change the nickname to rabbit rather than bunny, seemed a bit more manly.”

“Not to me. How come you need a nickname?” A little girl edged out, a baby wrapped in her arms, held tight against her chest.

“Well, I’m a SEAL.”

“Like the animal?”

“Nope, like in the Navy.”

“Like GI Joe?”

“Just like GI Joe.”

“My brother likes GI Joe.” The girl moved so she was sitting in the passenger seat. “The Master left him behind when he took us. Is he okay?”

“I don’t know, honey, but if you tell us your name my friends can find out.”

After a short hesitation, the girl nodded. “I’m Miranda, and this is Alicia. Our brother’s name is Jeff. Can you please find out if he’s okay?”

Ben nodded at Ghost who immediately pulled out a cell phone and began to type out a message. Then he focused his attention on Miranda again. “Was there a woman there?”

Miranda nodded. “He brought a lady, he said she was going to be our new mommy, but I don’t want a new mommy, I already have a mom and I want to go see her.”

Tears brimmed in the child’s eyes and he hated pushing her, but he needed answers before she fell apart. “Do you know where she is?”

“She told me to take the keys and take Alicia and find the car. It was right where she said it would be. I wanted her to come with me, but she said she had to stay behind.”

“Why did she say that, honey?”

“Because she said she had to keep The Master busy.”

Miranda’s words sent an icy chill through him because he knew exactly how Lacey planned on keeping Mervin busy.

By letting him hurt her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

August 15<sup>th</sup>  
9:09 A.M.

RIGHT NOW, Lacey was rethinking her love of sun, sand, and surf.

Not that she could see the sun from this dark underground room. There wasn't any sand here either, the floor was rough concrete. No surf either. In fact, there was no sound at all in the small cell.

More an oversized coffin if you asked her.

It certainly felt like a coffin even if she knew The Master—Merv but she wasn't used to thinking of him as anything other than The Master—had no intention of letting her die down here.

Nope, he'd just put her down here as a punishment.

One she was well and truly used to.

While she didn't know what he used to heat the room it was unbearably hot. If she had to guess the temperature was well above one hundred degrees. Maybe if she was at the beach, floating in the cool ocean shallows, sipping on a chilled raspberry juice, she wouldn't mind the oppressive heat.

But down here it was hell.

Literal hell.

Okay, not literally since she'd never been to hell although she enjoyed knowing that Merv would burn there for all eternity.

Still, the horrible heat would eventually kill her if she didn't get out of here. The Master would wait until she was dehydrated but not so badly that

she would need a hospital. He had extensive medical knowledge and had had his own little hospital set up at his place in Alaska, she assumed he had the same set up here. Once she passed out, he'd come in and get her, hook her up to an IV so he could replenish her body's fluids, and cool her down with ice to lower her body temperature.

Then he would bring her right back down here.

He'd repeat the process until she told him what he wanted to know.

Only she wouldn't ever tell him.

Eventually, he would figure it out, when he actually took the time to clean up the mess she'd made in the kitchen, he'd realize that the keys to the car were missing and she hadn't just hidden the girls somewhere but actually given them a way to escape. At least she prayed they were now well and truly on their way to someplace safe. So long as Miranda believed in herself, she could drive the car well enough to find a road, and then a house.

But The Master was lazy.

That and he was a sadist who enjoyed inflicting pain.

Instead of cleaning up the kitchen himself, he would leave it in a mess until he tortured her into telling him what he wanted to know and then make her do it.

All things considered, down here wasn't so bad.

Better than being up there with Merv.

Up there he wouldn't just torture her physically, he'd torture her sexually as well.

After England, all of those feelings and emotions were too raw. She'd rather not have to go through that again. If she had to she'd deal, but she would much rather be down here by herself, even in the stifling, breath-stealing heat.

"You can come out, Lacey, all you have to do is tell me where they're hiding," Merv's voice echoed through the room. It was rigged with a PA system so he could talk to her—probably watch her too—without having to come into the room with her.

He wouldn't lower himself to suffer the conditions he inflicted on his victims.

Besides this little underground oven he'd made, there was also a cold room that served the same purpose as this one, only the opposite. Then there was the torture room that held a mixture of whips and canes, ropes for binding, knives, and blades.

“Lacey,” Merv snapped. “I’m glad that you are already taking your role as mother to those two beautiful children so seriously, but I want to know where they are.”

She was sure he did.

Because she was sure there was a camera in here somewhere—no way could he deprive himself of an opportunity to watch them suffer—she smirked.

A growl rumbled through the PA system making her laugh.

Just because she didn’t have all the power here didn’t mean she didn’t wield just a little.

The shock collar might make it difficult for her to fight him physically, but all she needed was to get her hands on a knife or other sharp blade and she could throw it, sever his carotid artery just like she had done to Amelia Kutcher in the saferoom in England. For now, he might be being cautious, not letting her near anything he knew she could use against him, but in time he would grow complacent.

Or if she was lucky this whole ordeal would be over soon. If the girls found help then someone would come for her. This time The Master wasn’t going to slip away.

“Lacey,” The Master roared this time, his anger coming through. It was never far away, hovering just beneath the surface, all it took was one tiny slip up and it would erupt with all the force of a volcano.

How many times had she been abused for a mistake most adults wouldn’t have even noticed, and if they did, they certainly wouldn’t have issued a punishment?

“You can keep asking but it’s not going to change my answer ... which is nothing. I won’t tell you where they are.” And she wouldn’t. She could take any punishment he dished out, and every minute, every hour she bought gave the girls a better chance at getting away.

After making them a quick breakfast, she’d sent the girls and the keys on their way then proceeded to trash the kitchen to cover the fact that the keys were gone. Lacey knew The Master well, and she knew he would never clean up a mess, it was her and her sisters’ job to wait on him, likely because his mother had taught him that was the woman’s job. That distraction meant he still had no idea she knew where he would likely hide the car and that the girls had taken it and fled.

There was always the chance she was wrong about where the car would

be, but she didn't think so. The Master was nothing if not a creature of habit.

Another angry howl echoed through the speakers, and she laughed again.

It felt so good to hold something over the man who had tormented her for most of the first eighteen years of her life. Merv thought that his brainwashing had given him four completely compliant slaves, but he was wrong. The fact that he'd given them an inbuilt support system in each other meant they had clung to one another instead of binding themselves to him as he had likely hoped.

"Tell me where they're hiding right now or I turn the temperature up," Merv threatened.

"Turn it up. Turn it all the way up if you want to. Turn it up so high that you roast me alive, I don't care. I'm not going to be your wife, I'm not going to give you children, I'm not going to be mother to some little girls you kidnapped, and I'm not fulfilling whatever sick plan of revenge you wanted me to. Simple as that. Deal with it. Kill me or don't but stop being so delusional as to think I want you or ever did."

Her tirade sapped a large portion of her strength and the temperature in the room rose several degrees, making her head swim as she quickly reached out to place a steadying hand to the wall.

"You think you can defy me after everything I've done for you?" Merv screamed.

His voice was too loud for her already aching head, and she pressed her free hand to her ear, trying to muffle it a little.

"I can do whatever I want to you and there's nothing—"

"Hey, put that down."

Lacey's head jerked up.

It sounded like ...

No.

It couldn't be.

Could it?

The temperature in the room soared, her already sweat-soaked body protested, and this time when she swayed she wasn't able to prevent herself from collapsing to the floor.

The concrete was rough beneath her skin, and it had absorbed the room's heat making it feel like she was lying against a stovetop.

Her pulse thundered as her body scrambled to try to conserve what it could, and her mind pleaded with her for water.

*I'd give it to you if I could.*

But she couldn't.

It felt like the room kept getting hotter with each second that ticked by, but Lacey had no idea if that was just her mind playing tricks on her or if Merv really was continuing to up the temperature.

“Lacey!”

She could have sworn that was Ben calling her name, but that made absolutely no sense and she had neither the strength nor the inclination to even attempt to figure it out.

Darkness beckoned.

Giving into its call seemed like the only logical thing to do.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 15<sup>TH</sup>

9:27 A.M.

“YOU THINK you can defy me after everything I've done for you?”

The words were roared at top volume and full of fury.

If they hadn't already located Mervin Matthewson in the master bedroom of the large farmhouse, that scream would have led them straight to him.

After leaving the girls with Blade, and Fletch who had a young daughter similar in age to Miranda, the rest of them continued on toward the farmhouse. Along the way, they'd cleared every building and each time they turned up empty Ben lost a little more hope.

They knew for a fact that Merv was here, and when they'd shown Miranda a picture of Lacey the girl had identified her as the woman The Master said would be their new mother, so it wasn't that he thought Lacey had been murdered shortly after being abducted. But this place was so vast and from what he'd read up about what Lacey and her sisters had endured at Mervin's hand, he was terrified that the man had killed her when he realized the girls were gone or squirreled her away someplace they might not find her.

That fear was all but realized when he stepped into the master bedroom to find Mervin standing in the middle of the room staring at a screen. He was wearing a pair of jeans and a short-sleeved shirt that was unbuttoned. There

were boots on his feet but no socks, and his hair was damp. It was like he'd gotten dressed in a hurry and not quite finished.

Given the state of the kitchen downstairs, Ben could guess why.

Lacey must have trashed the room. He didn't know why but he could assume it had to do with her keep The Master busy plan.

On the large screen covering a huge portion of the wall opposite the metal framed bed was an image of Lacey.

At the sight of her, his heart clenched.

She was alive.

Something inside him relaxed at that.

That relief was short-lived as he took in more than just the sight of her alive. She was partially bent over, leaning toward the wall where she had one hand placed. Her other hand was pressed against her ear, and her head was hanging as though it were too heavy to hold up.

Dressed in a flowing, white cotton dress he noted there was no red indicating she was bleeding, but the material was clinging to her slim frame as though she were drenched in sweat.

"I can do whatever I want to you and there's nothing—"

"Hey, put that down," Ben ordered as he realized what was happening. The room Lacey was in was too hot, an oven specifically designed to try to torture her into telling him what he wanted to know, presumably where the little girls were. That was why Lacey's cheeks were flushed, her forehead dotted with moisture.

Mervin was killing her.

Slowly.

And the small device in his hand must control the temperature of the room.

At the sound of his voice, Lacey's head jerked up and Mervin spun around to face them. Even though every cell in his body called out at him to go to Lacey, find where she was, reassure her, and save her, he kept his attention focused on The Master because that was the only way to save her.

"What—? You can't ... How did you ... Who are you and how did you find me?" Mervin demanded, looking utterly furious.

"Put the controller down," Ben repeated. Lacey was swaying on her feet, and he was terrified that the temperature in the room she was locked in was continuing to rise.

"I'm in charge here, nobody tells me what to do," Mervin screeched.

There was a wildness in the man's dark blue eyes that spoke of every horrific thing he had endured as a child and every horrific act he had committed as an adult.

Ben was under no illusion that Mervin could be reasoned with. The fact that he had been abandoned by his father, abused by his mother, and tormented by his peers didn't mean he had an ounce of empathy for Lacey or any of his other victims.

The man was a monster.

Without conscience.

And would not go down easily or give up.

"We know who you are, Mervin," Ghost said, his tone a whole lot more soothing than Ben could have made his own. "We know everything. About your mom and what she did to you. The kids at school, how they bullied you. We know you want revenge on those boys and that you took four baby girls twenty-four years ago."

Instead of either confirming or denying their claims, Mervin merely shot daggers at them with his eyes. "My mother loved me," he hissed.

In the man's twisted mind, Ben was sure he saw his mother's abuse as her love, but he couldn't be more wrong. They had no idea of the extent of Mable's involvement but at the very least she had helped her son abduct Lacey, likely she had helped him with a whole lot more.

"It's over, Mervin. You aren't leaving here unless it's in handcuffs or a body bag and I hope you choose the handcuffs," Ghost said.

Ben hoped the opposite.

He wanted the man dead.

There was not a hint of doubt in his mind that Mervin felt the same way.

The man needed control, needed to make up for everything that had been done to him as a child by inflicting that same pain on others, no way would he survive a jail cell.

"If I'm dying today, I'm taking her with me," Mervin snarled. Pressing something on the controller he held at the same time he reached into his waistband.

Ben didn't hesitate.

He fired.

Mervin dropped.

Leaving the Delta Team to deal with the man, he turned his attention to the screen. "Lacey!" he cried out when he saw that she had collapsed.



“We got the weapon,” Fish announced.

“And the controller?” he asked, unable to take his eyes off Lacey’s still form. She hadn’t reacted when he’d called her name and he had to assume that if she wasn’t already dead from heat stroke, she was close to it.

“Broken,” Beatle replied.

“Damn,” Ben muttered. They needed to find where Mervin had put Lacey or she wasn’t going to survive. He’d be forced to stand here and watch as she took her final breath. Placing a hand on the screen he traced Lacey’s crumpled body with a fingertip. “Hold on, sunflower.”

With a last look at the woman who had done the impossible and made him want to live again, he turned and rounded on the man who had tried to steal away what was his.

Nobody stopped him as he stormed across the room, grabbed Mervin around the neck, and hauled the man to his feet.

If Mervin thought he was in control of his destiny he was wrong.

He wasn’t getting a quick and easy death.

Nope.

He was going to have to face the consequences of his actions.

“Tell me where she is,” he ordered as he slammed Mervin against the bedroom wall.

Mutinous blue eyes stared back at him.

They didn’t have time to waste.

*Lacey* didn’t have time to waste.

Gripping the gunshot wound in the man’s shoulder he squeezed, making Mervin howl in pain. When his gaze darted to the Delta Team Ben gave a cold, harsh laugh.

“If you think they’re going to stop me you’re crazy. They know that woman in there is mine. You took her, hurt her, I want nothing more than to beat you into a bloody, unrecognizable pulp.”

Mervin gulped, he stunk of fear.

“Tell me where you put her. Where is that room?” he demanded, pointing at the screen.

More sullen silence.

Ben slammed a fist into the man’s face, barely satisfied when he heard the crunch of nasal bones breaking. His second blow was aimed for the gunshot wound. Both hits made Mervin scream in agony. He didn’t even feel the pain in his shoulder where his own gunshot wound was still healing. Later

he might, but in this moment he cared about only one thing.

“Ready to tell me where you put her?”

When Mervin didn't say anything, he rained down blows. With each one he pictured Jemima's bloody body, Lacey's face as she hung from the ceiling, bleeding and violated. He thought of the future, how dark it had seemed, how endless, a tunnel of pain that only ended in more pain.

Now that future seemed brighter.

Because of Lacey.

He wasn't losing her.

“Tell.” Punch. “Me.” Punch. “Where.” Punch. “She.” Punch. “Is.”

“Hold up, man. I get it. We all do, but you do much more and he won't be able to talk, then Lacey pays the price,” Coach said quietly from behind him.

Blinking to clear the red haze of rage, Ben saw that Mervin was a bloody, sobbing mess, cowering as best as he could with Ben's hand still around his neck, holding him up.

“Last chance,” he ordered. “Where is she?”

“U-under the g-greenhouse,” Mervin stammered.

Ben dropped the man and ran out of the bedroom. He took the stairs three at a time and then burst through the front door running for the greenhouse. They'd cleared it earlier and found nothing inside but plants.

Now he scanned it, looking for a trapdoor, or door that might lead to stairs down to an underground room.

There.

Down one end of the greenhouse was a storage area with a table full of pots, potting mix, trowels, shovels, rakes, and other gardening paraphernalia. Beneath it, he could see what he now recognized as the outline of a trapdoor.

When he took off toward it he heard footsteps behind him.

Coach and Truck helped him drag the table out of the way to find a padlock on the trapdoor.

“I'll tell Ghost we need the location of the keys from Mervin,” Coach said.

Ben didn't want to wait.

Snatching a shovel, he rammed it into the lock until the wood around it splintered. Dropping to his knees he yanked what was left of the trapdoor open and dropped down into a small space.

He growled when he found another locked door.

“Bolt cutters,” Truck said, holding them out.

Ben took them, cut the padlock, and threw the door open.

Then finally—*finally*—he was at Lacey’s side.

The room was swelteringly hot, and as soon as he’d touched his fingers to her neck, confirmed that she was still alive, Ben scooped her into his arms and carried her outside.

Winter in the Southern hemisphere meant that it was cold out, only around fifty-five degrees, and he hoped that helped cool her body down. Sitting down, he settled Lacey between his knees, resting her torso against his chest as Truck, the Delta Team medic, knelt beside them.

“How bad is she?” he asked, dreading the answer.

For a moment Truck didn’t reply, focusing instead on checking Lacey’s vitals, taking her pulse, blood pressure, and fitting an oxygen mask over her mouth and nose. When his blue eyes finally met Ben’s, they were concerned but not panicked.

“Pretty sure we got to her in time,” Truck told him.

Coach appeared beside him with a stack of towels and washcloths, and with the use of the hose, they soaked each one and placed them on her neck, groin, and under her armpits. Then while Coach ran the hose over Lacey’s overheated body, and Truck set up an IV, Ben just held her and prayed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

August 17<sup>th</sup>  
2:46 P.M.

TWO DAYS in the hospital and Lacey was beyond thrilled to finally be heading home.

Well, almost thrilled.

After almost dying in that underground oven Lacey, had had enough heat to last her for a good long while and returning to California's steamy summer wasn't her idea of fun right now.

What would she give for a huge pile of fresh fallen snow, flakes still fluttering through the air, everything crisp and cold?

Heaven.

Since snow and home were noncompatible she would have to settle for about a million cold baths until the heat that seemed to have seeped into her every pore finally dissipated.

Right this second she'd settle for just a cold drink.

Anything to wipe away the feel of sweat clinging to her overheated skin.

"Here."

Turning from the window, she saw Ben had slipped into the seat beside her and was holding out a bottle of her favorite raspberry juice. She could tell it was cold because she could see the condensation dotted on the glass bottle.

Automatically, she reached out to take it before hesitating and pulling her hand back so it rested in her lap. While she couldn't say she was angry at Ben

exactly—okay maybe a little about the cold harsh way he'd dismissed her in the hospital in England—she was hurt.

It was okay for him not to be ready to move on after the traumatic way he'd lost his wife.

It was even okay for him never to be ready.

Hypocrisy at its finest would be blaming him for not being able to move on when she struggled to move on from her own trauma a lot more than she allowed people to realize.

When she wasn't feeling so exhausted and emotionally raw, they would talk and she would assure him that there were no hard feelings. Maybe one day they could even be friends if he decided to stop shutting everybody out. For whatever reason—guilt likely—he had come to New Zealand to find her, and she respected that, liked it even though she was trying not to.

Getting any more attached to Ben was a one way ticket to getting her heart broken.

Right now, she needed to focus on herself, on getting in a better place, then when she was ready she and Ben could talk and then she'd be free and clear to move forward with her life.

Ben didn't say anything, and his face was a blank mask so she couldn't get a read on why he'd brought her a drink, or why he'd come to New Zealand, or why he'd sat beside her hospital bed the entire two days she'd been there.

“It's just a drink, sunflower, not a marriage proposal.”

The joke—lame though it might be—coming out of her serious SEALs' mouth—okay, not her SEAL but still—was too much.

Not wanting to be rude, she took the drink, enjoyed the way cool seeped into her palm from the bottle, and stood. “I can't do this now,” she mumbled as she scooted past and into the aisle.

The plane was large enough that the Delta Team had kept to the front, giving her space when she'd immediately headed to the very back row. Now she smiled at the guys—who had once again dropped everything for her team—and chose a seat next to Coach.

She liked Coach, the man had been there for Ivory after her ordeal last January, and then for Pearl when she'd been shot in April, and now here he was again. What wasn't to like about a man who had been so supportive of her sisters, taking the time not just to save their lives but to make sure they were okay, offer care and compassion?

“You know you guys could make a full-time job out of rescuing Artemis Team lately,” she joked as she plopped down beside him and opened the bottle of raspberry juice Ben had given her. That first sip was heaven. Even though she was rehydrated and had avoided organ damage, the ordeal had shaken her up, taken a toll on her already struggling body, and the cool liquid sliding down her throat was exactly what she needed.

“You should talk to him,” Coach said without preamble.

Lacey arched a brow. “You team Ben?”

“Nah, I’m team Lacey. Army all the way.”

That made her laugh. “I was never in the army, and you know it.”

“But you would have chosen army over navy any day.” He made a face as he said navy making her laugh again.

“You know I’m a water baby. I hate to disappoint you, but I think I would have gone with the navy,” she teased.

“Get out.”

His straight face combined with the twinkle in his hazel eyes made her laugh once again and it felt so good. “In case you didn’t realize we’re in a plane. I can’t get out.”

“I’m sure Eagle has parachutes on board. And since we’re currently flying over the ocean, and you call yourself a water baby, I’m sure you wouldn’t mind the landing.”

“I like the water, never said I liked the ocean.” She shuddered and was only half playing.

“Then it’s a good thing you have the SEAL on board to help you out if you get into trouble.”

Her good mood faded.

Why did he have to go and bring up Ben again?

And talking about Ben helping her in the ocean only made her remember the first time they’d met. Ben hadn’t liked her then, he’d thought she was reckless and irresponsible even though she would have bet everything she owned he would have made the same choice if he were in her shoes.

Two weeks later and after everything they’d been through together, she wasn’t sure he liked her any better now.

Lacey sighed. “What were you doing?” she asked, gesturing at the iPad resting on his lap.

“Puzzles. Logic puzzles,” Coach replied.

She scrunched up her nose. “And you actually find that fun?”

“Love it.”

“Read me one.” Logic puzzles didn’t sound like her idea of fun, but she needed the distraction.

The look he gave her told her clearly that he knew she was attempting to avoid conversation about Ben, but he read her a puzzle anyway. “Three men are lined up behind each other. The tallest man is in the back and can see the heads of the two in front of him; the middle man can see the one man in front of him; the man in front can’t see anyone. They are blindfolded and hats are placed on their heads, picked from three black hats and two white hats. The extra two hats are hidden, and the blindfolds are removed. The tallest man is asked if he knows what color hat he’s wearing; he doesn’t. The middle man is asked if he knows; he doesn’t. But the man in front, who can’t see anyone, says he knows. How does he know, and what color hat is he wearing?”

Huh?

“Umm ...?”

Coach laughed. “Black, he’s wearing a black hat.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he knows that if he and the man in the middle were wearing the same color hat then the man at the back would know he had a black hat. And if the middle man saw him in a white hat then given the man in the back’s answer he would know his hat was black.”

“Okay,” she said slowly. “And that’s really fun for you? Figuring that out?”

Coach laughed and reached over to ruffle her hair making her swat his hand away. “Yes, it’s fun for me figuring that out. Now stop avoiding, what’s up with you and Rabbit?”

“Nothing,” she answered honestly. When Coach arched a dark brow, she sighed but added more detail. “He saved my life a couple of weeks ago when Artemis Team was rescuing some girls and we got caught in a storm. I ... asked him out and he said no. Then we worked together in England and had to pretend to be married.”

“You guys slept together.”

“What, just because it’s me you assume we had sex?” she huffed.

“No, honey. I assume you two had sex because Ben is staring at you like he’s terrified you’re going to disappear, and in my experience, men only look at a woman they’ve been intimate with and have feelings for like that.”

“You need to get your eyes checked. Absolutely positive he doesn’t have

feelings for me. Unless being ... disgusted ... by me counts.” She wasn’t sure Ben exactly felt disgusted, but he certainly looked down on her like she was dirty for using sex the way she did, and he hadn’t even given her a chance to explain.

“No way, honey. That man is into you. *Way* into you.”

“You’re wrong.”

“I’m right.”

“Wrong.”

“Right, and don’t interrupt me again,” he warned making her roll her eyes at him. “I know about his wife, he was open about everything. Including the fact that he knows he messed up a chance at having the best thing that could have happened to him when he let you go. He came to California for you, Lacey. That’s how he knew you were missing. He wants you, badly, you just have to decide what it is you want.”

As much as she wanted to refute Coach’s words, she wasn’t sure she could.

After all Ben *was* here.

Coach took her hand and squeezed it. “No right or wrong answer, honey. You do what’s best for you.”

Problem was, she didn’t know what was best for her.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 17<sup>TH</sup>

7:07 P.M.

WAS it possible to miss something you never even had?

As Ben watched, Lacey was enveloped in hugs by her sisters who ushered her into a waiting SUV, and he could absolutely attest to the fact that yes it was.

Lacey had never been his. He’d thrown what she had offered back in her face, and in a deliberately cruel way.

At the time, he hadn’t been able to see past his fear of allowing himself to care about someone he didn’t already have to. Grief and guilt had been barriers he hadn’t known how to overcome.



It wasn't until she wasn't there anymore that he realized she had already changed him in ways he thought he couldn't be changed.

Unfortunately, he had realized what a mistake he'd made in letting her go when it was already too late.

She couldn't stand to be around him.

Had avoided him and ignored him when she couldn't get away from him.

Was he fighting a losing battle?

He'd promised himself he wouldn't walk away from her again, but if it was what she wanted would he do it?

After everything she had been through, it didn't seem fair to her to force himself on her. She'd had enough of being forced to do things she didn't want to to last a lifetime. Adding to that seemed plain cruel.

"She just needs time."

Ben turned to find Coach standing behind him watching the SUV Lacey had climbed into drive away from the small private airfield Prey owned. Lacey seemed to like the man, she'd spent the majority of the flight back home talking with him, he'd even made her laugh a few times.

Even as he wished he was the one who had brought that pure joy to her face, Ben had loved watching her relax and become the woman he'd grown to know again. Despite her spine of steel, her bright light, and her determination to put other people's needs before her own, there was a fragility she fought so hard to hide.

He didn't want that for her.

He wanted her to be free.

Free of her fears, her insecurities, and of the pain of the past.

But that was something you could never truly rid yourself of. The marks of the past were part of you, they stayed with you until the day you died. There was nothing you could do to erase them, but you could learn to live with them. Perhaps it was in the learning to live with them that their hold on you finally began to fade.

He was doing his best to learn to live with his scars.

Grief would always be sitting heavily on his back. He'd lost the woman he loved, and guilt would always be there too, a constant companion whispering in his ear that he didn't deserve happiness. That one moment of laziness had stolen a life.

But if he didn't learn to live with his scars then he was as good as dead already.

That seemed dishonorable to Jemima as well as a waste. He would have swapped positions with Jemima if he could have, but he couldn't. He was still alive, he had a family who loved him and was always there for him. A team who hadn't abandoned him even though he'd given them every reason to. And he had the woman who had so selflessly offered him her body for no-strings attached sex even though she had no idea what she was getting herself into.

"I'm not sure there's enough time in the world for her to want to talk to me. I was ... a jerk," he admitted. Okay, so he had been way worse than just a jerk, but putting a label on his bad behavior didn't change it.

"She's met jerks before," Coach said, amusement in his hazel eyes. "She's not going to break."

No.

Lacey would never break.

She was much too strong for that.

But she could bend and still be in pain.

And she was bent up inside, he knew it, recognized it because it was the same pain that had him all bent up inside. It wasn't that he thought Lacey needed him to save her, but maybe he needed her to save him.

Or at least be there to guide him through the dark as he battled to find his way again. He'd never want her to feel burdened with the responsibility of his sanity, his happiness, or his life. Ben knew he didn't deserve her light and warmth, but he wanted it anyway.

Craved it.

Was terrified that it was already outside his reach.

"I hurt her." As much as he hated saying it out loud it was the truth, and you could only change what you acknowledged. And he wasn't going to run from what he'd done, or hide it, he'd pushed her away out of fear, prioritized his own feelings above hers, and he wanted to make it up to her if only she'd give him a chance.

One little chance and he'd jump all over it.

"You regret hurting her though," Coach said, a statement not a question.

"More than anything. It was supposed to be one time, I think—I know," he corrected himself. She might not have outright said it, but it was more than obvious that she wanted to see what could happen between them. "Lacey wanted more, I did too, and I hated that I did. It felt like a betrayal to my wife, but in the end, I betrayed Lacey." Jemima would always be part of him,

but he didn't want to add his wife as a third person to any relationship he might have with Lacey.

"Rayne and I were only supposed to have one night," Ghost said. "Never figured on falling in love. Didn't even think about it. Sometimes it happens when you least expect it."

"I didn't expect it, didn't want it either, but now ..."

"Now you can't think of anything else," Beatle finished.

"When it happens it happens, lightning strike you can't ignore," Fletch added.

"I've accepted it, I'm not even unhappy about it anymore. I've made my peace with Jemima's murder as much as I'm ever going to, and I already decided that I want a future with Lacey. Problem is, I don't think it's what Lacey wants. At least not anymore."

"She's dealing with a lot," Coach said. "Doesn't mean she doesn't care about you."

"When you two are in the same room her gaze keeps searching you out," Blade told him. "In the hospital, the plane, no matter what she was doing every few minutes she'd look around, and once she saw you, she'd calm."

She had?

He hadn't realized.

All he'd seen was the way her gaze skittered over him like she was afraid of letting it linger in case he somehow caused her more pain.

These last couple of weeks had been so rough on her and the thought of pushing her now when she was so vulnerable made him want to back away.

But on the other hand, he knew if he walked away now he would lose the only chance Lacey might give him to make things right.

He needed that chance.

"You have to fight for what you want in life," Truck said. "Lacey will come around. She's a sweetheart, and I've never seen her show interest in a man like she has with you."

"How do I use that though?" It felt kind of like junior high to be talking about girls like this with the guys, but he needed all the help he could get.

"Lacey's sweet, flirty, and only looking for a good time," Truck said. "Men see her as only one thing, good for a hot night of sex. Don't tell Mary I said that though, okay? Big gestures are all well and good, but it's the little things that show how much you care. You need to show Lacey that you see the real her. Do what none of us ever did and see the woman behind the

bubbly smile. We all let her down, not just you. She's real good at showing people what they want to see, not what's really there. Don't let her do that. Don't let her hide. Make her be real. It's what she wants deep down, and I think what you do too."

"Wow." Ben was speechless. That was really good advice.

They might have chosen completely opposite strategies, but he and Lacey had been doing basically the same thing.

He'd been hiding behind a cold, hard shell, keeping everyone out because it hurt too much to care about others especially when you held yourself responsible for your wife's death.

She'd been hiding behind a perky smile and a whole lot of sass, pretending all she needed was a good time and nothing more.

No more hiding.

For either of them.

It wasn't going to be easy for him or Lacey, change never was, but in the end, by hiding they were hurting themselves and everyone around them.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

August 18<sup>th</sup>

11:28 A.M.

“I’VE DECIDED I am never getting out of bed again,” Lacey declared as she snuggled deeper into her soft mattress and tucked the fluffy blanket tighter around her shoulders.

When she’d gotten back to her apartment last night memories of being tied to the bed at Mervin Matthewson’s farmhouse in New Zealand had threatened to push their way to the surface, but she’d shoved them back down.

Later.

There would be time to deal with everything that had happened later.

For now, she was going to give herself a whole twenty-four hours to just be happy that she was safe and that the man who had hurt her and her sisters had finally been caught and was currently in jail. Well, technically, he was still in the hospital recovering from the beating Ben had given him, but he was under constant police guard and once he was well enough he would be extradited back Stateside.

It was over.

Well, kind of.

Mervin’s mother Mable was still out there, and they knew she had been an active participant in pretty much every crime her son had committed. They needed to find her and arrest her too, but at least the man who haunted her

darkest moments was no longer a threat to her or the people she loved.

That deserved a celebration even if it was an in bed one.

“Not even for raspberry pancakes?” Opal held a plate stacked high with her favorite breakfast and moved it about under her nose.

The smell was divine.

“And I can’t have them in bed why?” she asked, managing to snatch one and shoot her big sister a smirk as she took a bite.

“Because there are too many treats,” Ivory replied. “We’ve got muffins, cookies, ice cream, bottles of that juice you love, and fresh raspberries. We don’t eat everything now then it’s either going to go stale or rotten.”

“Wow, you guys really went all out,” she said, touched. They’d had a sleepover last night, all of them piled into her huge king-size bed like they used to do when they had first been rescued. Ivory and Pearl had even left their guys behind for the night so they could celebrate The Master’s capture just the four of them.

“Wasn’t us,” Pearl informed her.

“Huh? Oh. Did the guys stop by while I was taking a bubble bath?” Even though she’d woken at six to go take a nice, long hot bath—apparently her aversion to heat was over already—she’d gotten right back into PJs and bed straight after. “Those SEALs pretend they’re all tough and macho, but they are just a big bunch of softies.”

Opal laughed. “I’ll tell Fox and the guys that when I see them next, I’m sure they’ll be thrilled to know you think they’re big, soft marshmallows.”

“Hey, I never used the word marshmallow,” she protested. The idea of anyone calling Shark, or any of those guys really, a marshmallow made her giggle. They might love the people in their circle with a ferocity to rival any mama bear, but they didn’t want anyone to know just how much they cared. Probably thought it messed with their tough guy images, crazy alpha males.

“I paraphrased,” Opal teased with a shrug.

“It wasn’t the guys either,” Pearl told her.

“Eagle?” After checking in with her at the airfield last night, he and Olivia had flown back to New York, but she could imagine him arranging something sweet like this for her.

“Nope, not Eagle either. No one at Prey,” Pearl said.

“Then who?” Who else did she know? Her entire life revolved around the Oswald family and Prey Security. She knew a lot of people outside of Prey of course, but none of them were close enough that they would even know about

her obsession with raspberries let alone go to all the trouble of sending her some. And how would any of them even know that she needed cheering up right now? “The Delta guys?” she threw out another guess, they were just as sweet as any of the Prey guys.

“No, not Ghost’s team,” Pearl said.

Lacey frowned at her sister. Of the four of them, she and Pearl were the closest in age, only three weeks apart. They loved each other fiercely but they also drove each other crazy.

Which seemed to be what Pearl was intent on doing today.

“You going to just keep saying no or are you actually going to tell me who *did* send them?” she snapped. “Why all the secrecy?”

“Because we’re not sure you really want to know the answer,” Opal said gently, setting the plate of forgotten pancakes down on the nightstand.

“I don’t understand. Why wouldn’t I want to know? I asked, didn’t I?” What was going on with her sisters this morning? They were being really weird.

“So, you want to know that this was all Ben’s doing? And that there’s a whole bunch more raspberry-themed stuff out there? Lip balms and shampoos and soaps?” Ivory asked.

Lacey groaned. “On second thought I’m sorry I asked.”

“You were the one who wouldn’t let it go,” Pearl reminded her.

“You guys could have just told me I wouldn’t want to know,” Lacey huffed. Okay, so it was really her own fault for pushing, but she just wanted one day where she didn’t have to think about the man who had completely upended her world.

“I think,” Opal said gently, “that maybe you really *did* want to know. Maybe you needed to hear that he cared.”

“I heard all about how much he cared from Coach pretty much the entire flight back home,” she muttered, but ... maybe her sister was right, and she did need to know that he cared about her.

“He was a mess while you were gone,” Ivory said.

“You don’t even know him so how would you know if he was a mess?” she scoffed. Only maybe she wasn’t really scoffing and more pleading for reassurance. It was silly. Ben had told her in no uncertain terms he wasn’t interested, and she had accepted it even though it sucked.

Now she was so confused.

Ben had been there in New Zealand, and apparently, he’d come to

California to see her. He'd brought her all these sweet gifts because he knew she loved raspberries, but she wasn't sure she could allow herself to hope for something she had already come to terms with not having.

"Not hard to tell when someone is terrified out of their mind," Ivory said in her sweet way. Not much ruffled her baby sister.

"He was married before, she was murdered," Lacey told them. They'd mostly caught her up on The Master's background once she got home. She had no idea how much they knew about Ben and his past, they hadn't talked about him at all.

"We know. He said he wants a chance with you, that its why he came. But he doesn't think you'll give him one," Opal explained.

"Will you?" Pearl asked.

Would she?

Right now, it was too exhausting to think about.

"I'll talk to him, I just need a couple of days, you know? These last few weeks with everything that happened, all that bad stuff I thought I had buried has resurfaced. I just ... need time."

"You have all the time in the world, but ..." Opal trailed off, a troubled look on her face. "Just make sure you don't back yourself into a corner you can't get out of."

None of them knew what to make of their big sister's cryptic statement, but from her tone it meant something.

Something Opal wasn't ready to share yet.

That was the moment Lacey knew what she had to do.

Fear and self-recrimination had held her back all these years, leading to her using sex as a coping mechanism, and a way to keep people at a distance. She'd buried her feelings and tried to hide the darkness and pain she felt under a myriad of bright, cheery colors. But it didn't take away that pain.

Ben had done the same thing. He'd hidden his anguish over losing his wife by heaping guilt on his shoulders that wasn't his to carry.

She was ready to move forward, to change.

Maybe Ben was too.

If Opal was doing what she and Ben had, making the same mistakes they'd made, then she hoped something would come along to open up her sister's eyes.

They had all suffered so much, it was time to find peace.

While Lacey might not be ready to talk to Ben just yet, she still needed



some time to get her head on straight, and maybe since she'd made a move last time and been rejected, she needed Ben to make the next move. Childish perhaps, but it was more about protecting herself. She was a little vulnerable right now and couldn't handle any more rejection if Ben was here out of guilt and not because he truly wanted her.

Still, as she fiddled with the charm bracelet Ben had found on the estate in England and held onto because he knew it was important to her, she knew she had to do something.

"No corners, no more hiding," she promised as she reached for her cell phone and tapped out a message to Ben thanking him for the gifts.

It was a start. To what she wasn't sure, but it felt good.

It felt right.

\* \* \*

AUGUST 21<sup>ST</sup>

3:13 P.M.

HE'D GIVEN her all the time he could.

If he didn't see her soon, Ben was pretty sure he was going to lose his mind. It was hell being this close to her but not being able to go to her, spend time with her, touch her, and kiss her.

But he was trying to do the right thing.

In reality, it had only been four days since he'd last seen her, but it felt like so much longer. Felt like he had been waiting for her and the bright light she brought with her for three long years.

Part of him might even have been waiting for her forever.

Knocking on her door, he found himself holding his breath as he waited for her to answer.

Would she answer?

He suspected that she would, it was what kind of reception he would receive that was worrying him the most. Lacey was a warm, forgiving person, but you could only push someone away so many times before they took the hint and left.

Ben was praying she wasn't at that point yet.

After maybe forty-five seconds the door opened and there she was. Something inside him settled as he finally laid eyes on her. Although logically he knew she was okay, they'd gotten to her before the extreme heat made her organs fail, she had not received any life-threatening injuries. She was alive and whole, she wasn't going to suddenly drop dead, his brain just needed to see her to reassure itself she was okay.

Or maybe it was his heart.

Whatever it was, seeing her standing before him was sweet relief.

They hadn't spoken since she walked away from him on the plane, but she had texted him that first morning after they'd gotten home. When he'd seen the text come through, he'd been so overjoyed that she'd reached out, even if it was only a single word.

Even if he hadn't been the one to give her the gifts he'd chosen, he was thrilled she was enjoying them. Thrilled he'd done something right. After so long doing everything wrong it filled him with a weird sort of pride to know he'd made Lacey happy.

He only wished he'd been there to witness the smile on her face when she'd opened the gift basket.

A smile she wasn't gifting him with right now.

Suddenly awkward, Ben resisted the urge to shuffle his feet and stuff his hands in his pockets. He'd given her time and space, but now it was time for him to be there for her.

"I was hoping we could talk," he said, making himself meet her brown eyes directly. There was no anger in them, but neither was there any welcoming warmth. Guess he'd have to take what he could get.

"Of course." Lacey stepped back to allow him to enter her apartment and Ben had to curl his fingers into fists so he didn't reach for her.

She made no move to reach for him either.

When they'd been in England pretending to be husband and wife, she'd touched him all the time. Holding his hand, smoothing her fingers over his cheek, resting her palm on his thigh or his chest, now she wrapped those arms around her waist as though holding herself together and she looked so damn vulnerable his heart cracked.

"I'm sorry." After spending the last few days saying them to his parents, his sisters, his nieces and nephews, his teammates, the words slid easily off his tongue. While Lacey might have been in his life the shortest amount of time, he couldn't help but feel he owed her the biggest apology.

The way he'd treated her, the things he'd said, he hadn't just closed himself off and shut her out, he'd been cruel.

Deliberately so.

Because he needed to get her as far away from him as possible, not trusting himself to be able to stay away from her.

"The way I treated you was unforgivable," he forged onward when Lacey made no comment to either accept or refuse his apology.

Naked pain in her eyes made him falter. He'd hurt her worse than he'd realized, and he didn't even know how.

"I pushed you away because I was scared," he continued, pacing the length of her living room because it was either that or haul her into his arms and kiss her until she agreed to forgive him.

"You made me feel dirty," she whispered, her voice barely audible but the pain in it coming through loud and clear.

His heart constricted. "I never meant to do that, sunflower, you have to believe me. It wasn't about you, it was about me. I hadn't been attracted to a woman since Jemima and I resented you reawakening that part of me."

"I understand lashing out when we're hurt, or scared, or even angry. But in the hospital after you got shot, you never even gave me a chance to talk. I wanted to explain," she said softly.

Unable to resist any longer, he stalked over to her, gently grasped her hands, and guided her over to the couch. "Talk now. I'm listening. To whatever you have to say."

Part of him expected her to tell him it was too late, and she didn't want to talk, but instead, she drew in a slow, controlled breath, and he got the feeling she was preparing herself to bare her soul.

Hard as whatever she might have to say could be to hear he wanted that.

Wanted there to be nothing between them.

"You know The Master—Mervin, I'm not used to thinking of him as that yet—tortured and abused me and my sisters." At his tight nod she continued. "It wasn't just physical torture," she said slowly.

"He sexually abused you." The words came out in a growl he hoped she knew had nothing to do with her.

One side of her mouth quirked up. "I don't think you'd get away with beating him up again."

"Don't care." The man deserved to have every sick thing he'd done to Lacey done to him.

She gave a small laugh and then her smile faded. “I orgasmed,” she admitted, using that barely there whisper again.

Ben froze.

The ramifications of what she’d said left him feeling numb.

When Lacey—obviously misinterpreting his reaction—moved to pull away he hauled her into his lap and banded his arms around her.

“That’s what you wanted to tell me in the hospital?” He asked it as a question even though he already knew the answer.

“I realized I’d developed real feelings for you. I’d also realized that I was using sex as a way to try to control my body and my life. If I had sex when I wanted to, with who I wanted to, then each time I orgasmed it was because I wanted to.”

His heart broke for her. “Oh, sunflower. Your body reacting to stimulation the way it’s supposed to doesn’t mean you wanted what he did to you. It doesn’t make it okay. You know that don’t you?”

“I know. For a long time I didn’t, but now I ... well maybe I still need to hear someone else say it,” she admitted.

That she was sharing her most intimate fears with him had to mean something, didn’t it?

Ben was afraid to hope there was a chance for them in case it all blew up in his face.

It would serve him right with how he had behaved since Jemima’s death. The way he had ruthlessly shoved away the people who loved him, who were grieving too. The way he had treated Lacey.

“I knew in the hospital that I felt something more than attraction for you. It terrified me. I’d almost lost you once, how could I let you in knowing next time I might not find you? That I might lose you too? But as scared as I was, I also felt ... hope for the first time in years. The first thing I did when I got home was go to the house Jemima and I had shared. I never lived in it again after her death. I didn’t want to go back there but it was the only way.”

“The only way to what?” she whispered.

“To have you in my life. So, I went there, I found a way to make peace with what happened so I could move forward. Then I went and apologized to my family and my team. They put up with a lot from me these last few years. After that I came here.”

“To me?”

“To you,” he confirmed. Lifting his hand he cupped her cheek, caressing

her soft skin. “To my bright, bubbly sunflower, who shined the light back into my life.”

Her gaze dropped to her lap. “Ben, I ... I can’t ... I’m not ... I don’t want to be just a light in the dark to you. I’ve done a lot of soul-searching these last few days and I ... I have a problem with pretending everything is okay when it’s not. Pretending *I’m* okay when I’m not. Of smiling even when I don’t feel like it so nobody knows I’m struggling. I don’t want to do that anymore. I don’t want to keep painting bright colors over the black on my soul, I want to get rid of the black so the colors feel real. I don’t want to shut people out because I feel dirty and unworthy.”

Resting his forehead against hers, Ben tightened his hold on her. “I’m not with you because I want you to be my light. I came because I want you. All of you. The good and the bad. The dirty little secrets as well as the cheerfulness you share with everyone. I don’t want to hide myself from you and I don’t want you to hide from me. When I touch you, I feel peace. When I kiss you, I feel happiness. When I make love to you, I feel complete. I’m here because I care, because I want to be, because I want a future with you. I’m not offering a marriage proposal. We don’t know each other well enough for that yet, but I want to get to know you. I want to date, take you out, show you off, and learn everything there is to know about you. I want to build a future with you. Is ... is that what you want?” Never before had he felt as vulnerable and as raw as he did asking that question.

Instead of giving the answer he longed for—or the answer he dreaded—Lacey blurted out something that felt incredibly random.

“I don’t let men take charge when we have sex like you did in England.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

August 21<sup>st</sup>  
3:40 P.M.

THE LOOK on Ben's face would have been comical if she hadn't felt utterly mortified.

When his expression morphed from confused to crestfallen, Lacey shoved aside her embarrassment and forged on. She'd come this far, she could make her final confession.

"What I meant is, I need control during sex. After what The Master—Merv—did to me, making me come even though I didn't want to, I need to know that everything that happens is because it's what *I* want and not what *someone else* wants."

"I'm sorry. If I'd known, I wouldn't have taken over."

"I know." Because she wanted him to truly understand what she was trying to tell him, Lacey shifted, swinging a leg over his thighs and moving so she was straddling them.

"What are you—?"

"Ben, I liked it. That's what I'm trying to tell you. I don't let men take charge in the bedroom, I don't want them submissive, but I want us to be equal partners, equal participants. I don't put my hands on the wall and leave them there while a man touches me because it makes me feel like sex is being done *to* me rather than *with* me. I didn't feel that way with you because you're different."

A smile slowly curled up the corners of his mouth and his hands moved to cup her backside, kneading. “Different, huh? I’m thinking that’s a good thing.”

“A *very* good thing,” she corrected. Framing his face, Lacey feathered her fingertips across his forehead. “I trust you, Ben. In a way I haven’t with any other man. When you turned me down, I told myself it was no big deal but it was. I can’t explain it, I just knew from the moment we met that you were special somehow. I shouldn’t have offered you no-strings sex because even though I did it all the time, if I wasn’t lying to myself I would already have known I couldn’t do it with you.”

Lacey paused, she didn’t want to make Ben feel bad. After all he’d faced his demons for her, come to apologize and ask her for a chance, and helped save her life. But he had been open and honest, and she had made a promise to herself that there would be no more hiding.

So she forged on. “In the bathroom after you found me in the basement, when you turned me down, I needed sex to feel in control again. The Master messed with my head all over again even after I’d told myself I was done with him controlling me. I thought I needed to orgasm of my own free will to feel better.”

A pained groan rumbled through him. “I’m sorry, sunflower, I should have said yes. I thought it would be taking advantage and I was already developing feelings. I didn’t want to be that guy to you. If I’d known why you needed it, I would have said yes.”

Leaning forward she touched her forehead to his like he’d done earlier. “You were right. It would have been taking advantage. I wasn’t thinking clearly, and I would have been using you. I’m glad we don’t have that between us. At every turn you’ve given me what I didn’t even know I needed. These last few days I kept wondering why you didn’t come if you’d already come to California for me. But I needed this time to get my head on straight, to begin sorting out what I need and what I want. To be ready for this,” she said, brushing her lips across his.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.” The last few nights she had ached for his touch, and each time he didn’t come, didn’t call or text, she doubted everything she’d been told about Ben and how he’d acted while she was missing.

If he wanted her, why didn’t he come?

But now he was here, and they’d talked, and there was nothing standing

between them anymore.

*They weren't standing in their own way anymore.*

“We do this any way you want, sunflower. Hard and fast, slow and sweet, you in control, both of us in control, me in control, it's up to you.”

She knew he meant that.

Whatever she needed he'd gladly give her.

Which was why she was able to answer the way she did.

“I trust you, Ben. Make me feel good, make me fall apart, help me be free.”

Ben growled and hauled her closer so she was plastered against him. “Do you know how hot it is to know how much you trust me?”

He nipped at her lips as he kissed her, his hands moving to grab the hem of her tank top. Tearing his lips away from hers, he pulled the top over her head, baring her chest to him. Since she hadn't had plans to go anywhere today, she wasn't wearing a bra and she liked the flare of arousal in his eyes.

Large hands gripped her hips, and he lifted her, placing her on her feet in front of him, and when he hooked his fingers into the waistband of her leggings, she almost begged him to hurry up and touch her.

There was no way she could stand the throbbing pressure building inside her much longer.

But she'd promised to step back, not fight for control, just be in the moment.

Slowly, Ben eased her leggings down her legs. “These are absolutely you.”

“Got them while we were in Australia last year. Great company, they make all these brightly colored leggings, so cute, and they have some with pockets.”

“I knew you were a sunflower,” he said as one of his hands grasped her ankle and he lifted it so he could pull her foot through. “Tall, beautiful, bright, standing up so tall and straight. My beautiful sunflower.”

*Aww.*

His words were the sweetest, and made her heart go all warm and mushy.

When she put these on today, she'd been thinking of him and the nickname he'd given her. Wearing them had been like having a piece of Ben with her.

Once he'd pulled her other foot free, he picked up her clothes and tossed them aside before leaning back against the couch. “Spread your legs and let



me get a good look at what's mine."

It shouldn't turn her on that Ben had already claimed her even though technically she hadn't given him an answer when he asked what she wanted, but it did.

The throbbing inside her grew exponentially.

Lacey had always enjoyed sex, but never had it been anything like this. The emotional connection was making every nerve ending extra sensitive, each feeling so much stronger.

It was exhilarating.

Spreading her legs, she let her hands hang at her sides as Ben's appreciative gaze roamed over her. Each place his eyes touched seemed to spring to life, heating as though his eyes were shooting small arrows at her.

By the time he pushed up and moved closer, she felt like she would combust if he didn't do something to put out the raging fire burning inside her.

"Hands don't move," he warned as he touched a kiss to the sensitive pulse point behind her ear.

Barely able to breathe now his lips were finally touching her, she might have nodded or uttered an answer, Lacey really had no idea.

With excruciating slowness, but equally as much care, he trailed kisses down her neck and along her collarbone before he captured one of her nipples and tugged it between those full lips of his.

As he suckled, he flicked her nipple with his tongue, making it pebble and it took everything Lacey had not to grab his shoulders, urging him to give her other breast the same attention.

But she didn't.

Because she'd promised.

Because she didn't have to worry about anything with Ben.

She was safe with him.

Eventually, he moved to lavish her other breast with the same attention. Never before had she been so torn between wanting someone to never stop what they were doing but also to hurry up and move on to the next stage.

Ben however didn't appear to be having that same problem.

He took his time, kissing, licking, suckling, enjoying, feasting.

Time had no meaning. All that existed was feeling.

Sensations zinged through her body, flooding her system with so much pleasure she could hardly stand it, and he hadn't even gotten to the really

good stuff yet.

When he did eventually tear his mouth away from her breasts she mewed a small protest, but then he was kissing his way down her stomach, and the next thing she knew his face was between her spread legs.

His breath was warm against her soaked core and again she had to fight not to grab his hair and urge his mouth to the part of her that was begging for his touch.

“So sweet,” he murmured against her skin as he flicked out his tongue and swept it across her center.

Light kisses touched her entrance and then her needy little bud.

A content moan rumbled through him, and the slight quiver in his lips had her insides quivering in response as pleasure continued to build.

How was she going to survive this release when it finally came?

It already felt so big.

Returning to her entrance, his tongue flicked out, teasing her, slipping inside her then out again, stroking and sweeping until her legs began to tremble.

Then he moved back to her bundle of nerves, latching onto it and sucking hard. He didn't let up, sucking, and licking, driving her crazy.

Making her lose her mind.

“Uh, uh,” he rebuked, capturing her wrists and pulling her hands away from his hair. Lacey didn't even remember entwining her fingers through his thick, tightly curled locks. “I decide how I touch you, I decide when you come. You gave me that gift already and you can't take it back.”

“Mmm,” she whimpered, not capable of giving a more coherent response. She was so close, and so desperate for that release it was all she could think about.

“I should stop, go back to the beginning and start over.”

“Y-you wouldn't,” she stammered, almost positive it was true.

“I might. But I think I'm addicted.” As his lips touched her bud, he slid a finger inside her hooking it so it grazed that magical spot that made her vision blur and the pressure inside her crescendo.

Ben's name fell from her lips as every muscle in her body went taut and pleasure exploded, firing through her so rapidly that it almost became too much to bear.

Never letting up, Ben's finger thrust in and out, hitting that spot each and every time, and his mouth never stopped attending to her bundle of nerves,

dragging out her pleasure until tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Only once he'd rung out every ounce of pleasure he could from her did he finally let her go.

"That was ... that was ..." Lacey couldn't even come up with an ending to that sentence because the orgasm had short-circuited her brain.

"Perfection."

Honestly, she couldn't think of a better word to describe it.

The bulge in his jeans drew her in like a reel, but when she bent her knees and leaned in toward it, Ben stopped her.

"I want to play now," she pouted.

"Later, sunflower, I promise. Right now, I'm going to lose my mind if I'm not inside you in about the next three seconds. Condom?"

The question caught her by surprise. She *always* used a condom. But this was Ben and ... "I'm clean, and on birth control."

"I'm clean too, but the ball is in your court."

In answer, she reached out and unzipped his jeans, yanking them and his boxer shorts down and freeing his impressive length.

"I want to feel everything, nothing between us," she said as she placed her hands on Ben's shoulders—careful to avoid the healing gunshot wound—and used them as leverage to climb up onto his lap.

Gripping her hips, Ben held her steady and thrust into her in one smooth move. When his fingers touched her where their bodies joined, she reached out and stopped him.

"I'm too sensitive and I can't come again this quickly."

"Didn't you promise me all of you? Everything I wanted?" he asked, gently nudging her hand out of the way so he could press his thumb to her still-pulsing bud. "I want to feel you clamp around me as you come."

She *had* promised to let him be in charge.

And when he continued to work her bundle of nerves a second orgasm began to build.

Ben's thrusts were lazy, but somehow at the same time still powerful, and with the ministrations of his fingers it wasn't long before she was screaming her release into his mouth as he claimed her lips in a fiery kiss.

She felt him stiffen, then grunt as his own release emptied inside her, filling her in a way that made her feel not quite complete as she hadn't been empty before, but at the same time, she had been missing something.

Missing Ben.

“Not yet,” she murmured when he moved to pull out of her, not ready yet to have their connection severed. Instead, she snuggled against his chiseled chest and tucked her face against his neck.

“You know,” he drawled as his hand smoothed the length of her spine. “You never gave me an answer. What do you want, sunflower?”

“I thought that was obvious.” Pressing a kiss to Ben’s neck she lifted her head to meet his gaze. So much had happened since she met this man, he’d totally turned her world upside down, but in a good way. “You, Ben. I want you.”

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USA Today bestselling author Jane Blythe writes action-packed romantic suspense and military romance featuring protective heroes and heroines who are survivors. One of Jane's most popular series includes Prey Security, part of Susan Stoker's OPERATION ALPHA world! Writing in that world alongside authors such as Janie Crouch and Riley Edwards has been a blast, and she looks forward to bringing more books to this genre, both within and outside of Stoker's world. When Jane isn't binge-reading she's counting down to Christmas and adding to her 200+ teddy bear collection!

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USA Today bestselling author Jane Blythe writes action-packed romantic suspense and military romance featuring protective heroes and heroines who are survivors. One of Jane's most popular series includes Saving SEALs, part of Susan Stoker's OPERATION ALPHA world! Writing in that world alongside authors such as Janie Crouch and Riley Edwards has been a blast, and she looks forward to bringing more books to this genre, both within and outside of Stoker's world. When Jane isn't binge-reading she's counting down to Christmas and adding to her 200+ teddy bear collection!

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