



Opal's
FIGHT

— PREY —
SECURITY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JANE BLYTHE

OPAL'S FIGHT (SPECIAL
FORCES: OPERATION
ALPHA)

PREY SECURITY: ARTEMIS TEAM

BOOK FOUR

JANE BLYTHE



CONTENTS

[Foreword](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Also by Jane Blythe](#)

[About the Author](#)

[More Special Forces: Operation Alpha World Books](#)

[Books by Susan Stoker](#)

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

© 2023 ACES PRESS, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this work may be used, stored, reproduced or transmitted without written permission from the publisher except for brief quotations for review purposes as permitted by law.

Without in any way limiting the author's [and publisher's] exclusive rights under copyright, any use of this publication to "train" generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to generate text is expressly prohibited. The author reserves all rights to license uses of this work for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This book may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, please purchase your own copy.

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

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.

ABOUT THE BOOK

An unplanned pregnancy could push their friends with benefits arrangement to something more or break what they have.

Despite growing up the way she did, Opal Smith always knew she wanted to have a family of her own one day. The last thing she expected was to wind up pregnant in the middle of an undercover case. Not that it matters because she knows without a doubt that the only man she trusts with her body and her heart will step up. CJ would never let her down. Ever.

Navy SEAL Cameron John “CJ” Ulrich has a secret. One he hasn’t disclosed with anyone. Including his best friend. Even though he feels things changing with Opal, starts thinking maybe he’d like more than friends with benefits, when she announces she’s pregnant that’s it. Things are over between them. For good. But the dangers of her undercover case are lingering around her, and CJ might wind up losing Opal and the baby he believes he doesn’t want permanently.

CHAPTER ONE

December 8th

9:44 A.M.

PLEASE LET US SEE SOMETHING.

Opal Smith sent the silent prayer into the universe as she sat in the small café and pretended to look like she wasn't completely on edge.

This wasn't the type of surveillance work she and her team usually performed, but they'd been asked by local cops to assist. Prey Security often worked joint missions with all of the alphabet agencies as well as private security work and black op missions, so that wasn't what was different.

It was that this case reminded her too much of her own past.

One Opal had been thinking about more and more over the last few months.

Now wasn't the time to dwell on it though. While this case might feel personal for her and all of Artemis Team because they identified so closely with the victims, she was at work, which meant she needed to keep her focus.

Lately, she kept finding herself getting emotional about everything. Opal supposed that was pretty normal given everything that had happened over the last twelve months, but

now was not the time to get teary about her past when she was here to stop someone else suffering as she and her sisters had.

So, she picked up a packet of sugar, tore open the top, and poured it into her hot chocolate. Really the drink was more than sweet enough, but she needed to do something with her hands before anyone noticed they were shaking. Something so she didn't let the swell of emotions crash over her like a wave, dragging her down with it and leaving her a blubbering mess.

Maybe after this case, she needed to take some time off.

Watching her sisters fall in love one by one—first Ivory had met and fallen in love with Roman Morales, then Pearl had a whirlwind of a relationship with Jesse Masters, and finally Lacey had surprised them all by settling down with Benjamin Blanchett—had been a rollercoaster of emotions for all of them. It was no wonder she was feeling so exhausted.

Her tank was just about empty.

For someone who had been mothering her sisters for as long as she could remember, it was a disconcerting feeling to know she didn't have much of herself left to give.

Yep.

Definitely needed to take a vacation after this mission. Somewhere quiet where she could relax and recharge, then come back ready to support her sisters through this next phase of their lives.

Maybe she could even talk ...

Her train of thought fell away when she spotted something.

“I might have something,” she said into her cell phone as she picked up her mug and took a sip, covering the visual sweep she gave of the street outside the café. Since the location they were watching was on a busy street, they'd stand out too much if they were using comms, so they kept in contact with one another with their phones, making them look like everyone else chilling out in the café on this chilly morning.

“What do you see?” Pearl asked.

While Opal was in the café, Pearl was further down the street browsing through a bookstore, Lacey was in the hairdressers next door to the café, and Ivory was in the ob-gyn office since she had recently found out she was pregnant.

Everything was changing so fast it was hard to keep up.

Only twelve months ago it was just the four of them, a little family unit brought together by a monster. Them against the world. Only now their little family had grown so much.

Three men had joined them, and it was hard not to be happy about it when she saw the joy and love on her sisters' faces. And soon there would be a baby, too. Opal was excited, but there was no way she couldn't stand by watching her sisters meet the men of their dreams, men who adored them, worshipped the ground they walked on and gave them everything they'd missed out on as children, and not feel left out.

She hated it, it felt super childish, but she couldn't help how she felt.

No one was leaving her out on purpose. Quite the opposite in fact. She knew her sisters and their partners were doing everything they could to make sure she was included in everything.

Well, almost everything.

At the end of the day, they still went home to share their beds with their men while she went home to her empty apartment.

“Opal?”

Startling at the sound of Pearl calling her name through the phone, Opal jerked the mug she still held, spilling hot chocolate on her hand and the table. Thankfully, the hot chocolate was no longer all that hot, and she quickly set it down, snatched up a napkin, and blotted at the mess she'd made.

Zoning out on a mission was not acceptable.

Whatever it took, she was going to have to get her head back in the game.

“Yeah, sorry, was just shifting to get a better view.” Opal hated lying, but she also didn’t want to admit that she was struggling lately. The last thing she wanted to do was ruin the happy endings her sisters had managed to find.

“What do you see?” Pearl asked again.

“I’m not sure it’s anything, but there’s a young woman with an older one, old enough to be her mother, so could be the baby’s grandmother, but something looks ... off.”

There was no other way to describe it. It was a feeling, the tight way the pregnant woman held herself, the flat line of her lips, the dead look in her eyes. She didn’t look like she’d just come from a visit with her ob-gyn, getting to see her unborn baby and listen to its heartbeat. Of course, there was always the possibility that she had gotten bad news, but Opal didn’t get that vibe.

“Off how?” Pearl asked.

“The woman doesn’t look happy, and the other one is standing too close to her. Unnaturally close. Sure, maybe the woman just doesn’t have any concept of personal space and boundaries, or she’s offering comfort, but I don’t get that vibe. Something is wrong.” Opal didn’t know how she knew, she just did.

“Okay, you check it out, and I’ll call the others and let them know,” Pearl said.

“I’ll call you back once I know more,” she promised, ending the call.

Quickly finishing her hot chocolate, Opal picked up her purse, slung the strap over her shoulder, and hurried outside. It was cold out, unnaturally so for California in early December. It had all the makings of a long, cold winter ahead, and Opal decided she was going to take her vacation somewhere warm and sunny. Lounging in the sun with a good book, somewhere quiet and secluded, sounded like heaven.

Making sure it didn't look like she was anything other than another person out running errands she kept her pace steady, the distance between herself and the two women even. Though she didn't turn her head to look, she felt Lacey's eyes on her as she passed the hairdressers.

Her sisters had her back.

That hadn't changed no matter what else had.

Keeping her attention on the two women, Opal kept her cell phone in her other hand, pretending to be absorbed in it and not her surroundings. In reality, she hated when people were distracted by their phones and not paying attention to what was going on around them, but it was so common it was the perfect way not to capture the women's attention.

A string of abductions of pregnant women in the area had drawn in the cops. The women's bodies would turn up at some point but not the babies. It was the working theory that they were being taken for the express purpose of acquiring the infants, who would then be sold on the black market.

Human trafficking was big business, and it wasn't always selling women or girls as sex slaves. Baby selling brought in a huge amount of money. A desperate couple was always willing to do whatever it took to get the family they craved. They didn't ask questions, didn't want to know where the baby came from, and if the mother had willingly given it up, they just wanted a child to make their own.

The two women turned and headed into an underground parking lot. This had abduction written all over it. Wait outside the ob-gyn office, when you saw a woman with the physical characteristics you required who was also alone, you made your move.

Women in general were less suspicious of other women, so the pregnant mothers likely didn't think anything of it when they were approached. All it would take was a threat to hurt your baby, a knife or gun pressed to your swollen stomach, and you would walk away with them without causing a scene to protect your baby's life.

As Opal followed, they headed to the far corner of the lot toward the classic serial killer vehicle, a white van.

Even though she'd been shooting off texts to keep her sisters updated there was no way they would make it here in time to help her.

There was also no way she was going to hang back and let this woman be abducted.

She had to make a move.

This morning when they'd picked a clinic to survey, she hadn't expected to actually see anything, let alone be in the position to not only prevent an abduction but bring a suspect into custody.

"Ma'am, you need to step away from the pregnant lady," she called out, pulling her weapon from her purse and aiming it at her suspect.

Startled, the woman spun around bringing her hostage with her, and Opal saw exactly what she'd been expecting. The would-be kidnapper had a weapon pressed against the pregnant belly.

Without hesitation, the woman lifted her weapon and fired.

Opal felt a burning pain tear through her neck as she dodged to the side.

Warm blood gushed from the wound, and a wave of dizziness assaulted her.

As she swayed and lost her balance, she fired off a round of shots with her own weapon, praying that the sound was enough to spook the kidnapper and she'd leave without worrying about securing her victim, her survival instinct pushing her into a clean getaway.

* * *

DECEMBER 8TH

12:00 P.M.

SOMETHING INSIDE HIM FELT WRONG.

Cameron John “CJ” Ulrich didn’t know what it was, but he did know he didn’t like it.

Lately, he felt like something was missing in his life. He had no idea what it was because he didn’t think anything was missing. He had his beachfront condo that he adored, he had the job he’d always wanted, the guys on his SEAL team were his brothers in every way that mattered even if they didn’t share DNA, and he had a friends-with-benefits thing going with a smoking hot woman.

See, everything he could ever need he already had.

So why did he keep feeling like a piece of himself was lost?

It was an unsettling feeling and one he didn’t like.

At all.

He had everything he had wanted in his life. In fact, he had more than he wanted, more than he deserved.

His teammates’ families had pulled him into the fold, giving him the extended family he had lost when his own all but turned their backs on him. His friends-with-benefits situation wasn’t just with a hot woman, Opal was also kind, sweet, compassionate, giving, brave, and so very strong.

CJ would even go so far as to say the woman was indestructible.

No matter how many times she got knocked down, she just bounced right back up again. How could he not respect the hell out of that?

“Yo, dude, you want to go get a drink?” one of his teammates called out.

“It’s noon,” he reminded Rhino.

Rhino merely shrugged. “I think we all need to decompress after that.”

That was certainly true.

Talk about a mission going to hell right in the middle of things. Everything that could go wrong had gone wrong, and CJ was still amazed that they had all walked out of it not only alive but unscathed as well.

Well, relatively speaking.

There were some new bruises and a couple of soon-to-be scars to add to his collection. But no one had needed a hospital, and as far as he was concerned, that meant they were all a-okay.

“Sure, why not,” he agreed. Although no one had pressured him into going along, and he went to his car, climbed in, and followed the others to a local bar they frequented often after a mission when they were all too wired to head home, he couldn’t help but feel there was somewhere else he should be.

There wasn’t.

He was an only child. His parents divorced when he was eight, and he wasn’t close with either of them, so neither would expect a call let alone a visit when he returned from a mission. There were some aunts and uncles, a dozen cousins, and he still had one grandparent left alive, but none of them cared enough to know he had survived another mission. He had been effectively eliminated from his family when he was seven.

Outside of his SEAL team and their partners, he didn’t really have any friends, well besides Opal and her sisters, and a few other former and current military. But there was nobody who would be waiting for him to come by.

Depressing really.

Finding a parking spot was easy given the time of day, but before he got out of his car CJ shot off a quick text to Opal telling her he was home and would stop by later. It wasn’t a custom or anything, but more often than not, soon after getting home he’d stop by her place for some action.

At least that was what he told himself.

Truth was, he'd go and hang out with her even if sex was off the table.

There was no immediate response telling him she was so glad he was okay and couldn't wait to see him tonight, there was no response saying anything at all, and CJ squashed the disappointment. Opal had a job that was every bit as dangerous and unpredictable as his. She couldn't be around her cell phone twenty-four-seven just in case he sent her a message or called to check in.

Normally that didn't bother him but today ...

That mission had really messed with his head.

It was supposed to be an easy in-and-out to rescue a young family doing aid work in Nigeria. The wife's family was loaded, and someone in the area had found out about it and decided to make a quick payday. With six young children involved and a prominent businessman making public pleas for the government to bring home his daughter and grandchildren, there was never any doubt a team was going to be sent in to retrieve them.

What they hadn't counted on was everything going wrong.

Intel was off from the location where the family was being held, to the number of men at the camp, to how well-armed they were. There had been no mention of the explosions that had nearly killed them right off the bat, and alerted everyone in the camp to their presence which meant no quick and quiet in-and-out. The family had been split up and were being held in multiple locations around the camp. The husband had already been murdered before they arrived, and the oldest daughter had been critically injured, dying on their way back to the helo despite their best efforts to save her.

And at one point, he had been very literally left holding the baby.

CJ didn't do babies.

Ever.

Not under any circumstances.

Except when the choice was taken out of his hands.

Team leader Green had thrust the three-week-old infant into his arms just as they were preparing to leave, and so he'd carried the baby through a hail of gunfire, an explosion, and a jump off a cliff into a river. By the time they reached the helo, he'd been itching to offload the child onto a medic.

Dropping his head into his hands his thumbs massaged his temples, trying to alleviate the headache throbbing between them.

Babies.

He couldn't be around them without wanting to first throw up and second rip off his own skin, anything to let out the overwhelming surge of emotions.

If he never had to see a baby again it would be too soon.

A knock on the door had him lifting his head to find his team standing there watching him with worried eyes.

That freaked him out. No matter how long he was part of a team, a brotherhood, and it was a little over four years since he had joined the SEALs, he couldn't get used to the idea of people caring about him, having his back.

It seemed so foreign.

"Everything okay, brother?" Green asked as CJ opened the car door and stepped out, shoving his keys and cell phone into his pockets. He would have preferred to head home, shower, and change, even though he'd done both at the base after debriefing. His shower was a huge tiled, walk-in one with a rain shower head and a massager, it was easily big enough for two people, and he and Opal had made use of that fact on more than one occasion for some showery fun.

"Fine," he assured them because what else was there to say? He didn't even know why he was feeling strange lately, and he certainly wasn't going to go into the story of why he loathed babies. He was sure his team had noticed that he avoided holding their kids when they were infants, but no one had ever brought it up. Sooner or later, one of them likely

would, but he had no intention of ever sharing that particular story.

No one said anything else, and they headed into the bar which was a lot fuller than he had been expecting given how empty the lot was.

They found a table in the back and all took their seats, waiting for the waitress to come and take their orders. Half the guys on his team were married, another engaged, and they would likely head out after a drink, head home, and see their families. He and the other single guys might hang around a little longer, although CJ wouldn't likely hook up.

He never did.

After a couple of minutes, a waitress made her way toward them. She was new, he'd never seen her before, and she was stunning. Long jet-black locks tumbled down her back in soft curls, her olive skin was smooth and soft looking, she had large dark eyes, and her tight jeans and T-shirt showed off her curves and cleavage.

She was gorgeous, and when their gazes met, clashed, and held, CJ knew he could have her if he wanted to.

There was nothing stopping him. He was single, and yeah, he had the friends-with-benefits thing going with Opal, but they weren't exclusive. Both of them were free to have one-night stands, short-term affairs, or even date and fall in love if they wanted.

They weren't a couple and yet in the couple of years since they started their arrangement he hadn't been with another woman.

Maybe that was why he was feeling weird lately.

Maybe it was time to move forward with his life.

Maybe it was time to make room for a woman, a partner, someone to share his life. The guys on his team somehow managed to make it work so there was hope for him.

Who knows, maybe the sexy waitress was even the one.

CHAPTER TWO

December 8th

4:12 P.M.

“YOU GIRLS and your refusal to stay in the hospital when it’s where you should be.”

Opal smiled at the muttered words even as she batted Ben’s well-meaning hands away as he reached into the backseat to scoop her up.

As much as she loved these three men, and as much as they had become the brothers she’d never had, sometimes they and their alpha-ness were a little too much.

Like right now.

She was perfectly capable of walking inside to the lift, standing through the ride up to her floor, and making the short walk to her apartment front door all on her own. Yes, she’d been shot this morning, the bullet nicking her right where her neck met her left shoulder, and Opal knew she was lucky it hit where it had because a couple of millimeters over and it would have plowed through her arteries leaving her to bleed out in minutes.

But the wound was superficial at best. It had bled a lot at first, and she’d been a little woozy, but she’d been to the ER, received fluids, antibiotics, and painkillers, gotten four stitches to close the small wound, and now she felt fine.

Well, perhaps fine was a slight exaggeration. Her neck *did* hurt, but it was no big deal, and certainly nothing even close to the worst pain she'd felt in her life, so in her mind that meant she was fine.

Dinner with her favorite people, a long hot soak in her huge jacuzzi tub, and a good night's sleep, and tomorrow she would be good to go.

"Didn't you leave the hospital too quickly after you got shot in England when we were playing husband and wife at the manor house," Lacey teased her boyfriend, Ben. The two had gotten together after Ben had saved her life during a rescue mission where Lacey had jumped into the ocean in the middle of a violent storm to save an innocent girl's life.

After a very bumpy start due to Ben's past and Lacey's hidden insecurities, the two had finally gotten together. Despite the fact that it was obvious to see if you spent more than about a minute in their company that they were madly in love, they had decided to take things slow, get to know each other, and let the love and trust between them grow before they made the decision to get engaged.

"Yeah, why are we always the ones called out for not liking hospitals when you guys know you hate them every bit as much?" Pearl chimed in. "We were both hurt in Venezuela, and yet, if I recall correctly, I was the one who was stuck in the hospital while you bailed." She swatted at her husband's arm.

Jesse merely leaned down and dropped a kiss to her cheek. "You were shot, babe."

"You were hurt, too." The two of them had started out as enemies, both battling a whole lot of anger, and everyone was shocked when they fell in love during an undercover mission. Neither were impulsive, yet they'd gotten engaged a mere two weeks after meeting and married a month after that.

"I wasn't shot," Jesse returned.

"Still." Pearl huffed.

"Don't even start," Roman warned his new wife, Ivory.

“What?” Ivory asked, innocence personified. It had been almost a year since they met and fell in love. Roman had resisted at first, but Ivory was so sweet and spunky that it was hard not to fall in love with her. They’d married a little over a month ago under a stunning display of fall foliage and were expecting their baby in around five months.

It was weird knowing that soon there would be a child as part of their family, and as excited as she was to become an aunt, it felt like everyone else was moving on without her. It wouldn’t be long before Pearl and Jesse wanted to start a family, too, and she doubted Ben could last much longer before proposing. Once they were married, Lacey and Ben would want kids, too.

All married and mothers, between their families and Prey she doubted her sisters would have time for anything else.

Leaving her out in the cold.

They would never purposely shut her out or exclude her. Opal knew that without a shadow of a doubt. But there were only so many hours in the day and if something had to drop, it couldn’t be their children and husbands, and it couldn’t be their jobs, which meant it would have to be her.

Unless her sisters quit Prey.

They wouldn’t do that ... would they?

Prey had been their lives ever since they had been rescued from The Master seven years ago. Eagle Oswald, founder and CEO of Prey Security, had offered to help them do anything they wanted at his expense. The billionaire always used his resources to help people in need, but she knew it ran deeper than that for him with her and her sisters. He felt responsible for them, kind of like an uncle or even a big brother, certainly the closest thing she’d ever had to a real father.

In the end, she and all three of her sisters had unanimously decided to use the deadly skills The Master had taught them for good rather than evil, and Artemis Team was formed.

What would she do without her team?

“I think Opal’s getting a headache,” Ivory announced, sounding concerned.

“Oh, no, I’m fine,” she assured them all, pasting on a smile. There was no point in worrying about something that might not even happen. She honestly couldn’t imagine her sisters walking away from their team, from Prey. Ivory had known for two months now that she was pregnant and hadn’t once mentioned leaving Artemis Team. In fact, she had talked about looking for a nanny to help out once the baby was born. Plus, there was all of Prey, a big extended family, who would all love to help out with the baby in any way they could.

She was worrying about nothing. Opal was sure she was.

“Still, you should get inside, get something to eat in your system,” Lacey fussed.

It was kind of weird being the one fussed over instead of the one doing the fussing. Ever since she could remember, she’d been the one to mother her sisters. She was only a year older than Lacey and Pearl, two years older than Ivory, and yet she’d quickly stepped into the role. She’d always wanted children of her own, yet after so many years of abuse, she wasn’t comfortable with a man’s touch.

The reason she’d suggested—somewhat hesitantly and with a whole bunch of nerves—to CJ that they start their friends-with-benefits arrangement was because he was the first man not to make her feel afraid of intimacy. That was two years ago, and she had expected him to end it by now, have fallen in love with someone who had more to offer him than she had.

Only that hadn’t happened.

Yet.

But it would.

Maybe if Artemis Team fell apart, she could consider becoming a foster parent. Offer children in need a safe harbor like the one she had needed when she had been a newborn abandoned by her parents.

“You guys don’t need to stay,” she said as she finally managed to dodge past Ben’s hands and climb out of the car. “I have leftovers in the fridge, I can heat that up, take a bath, and go to bed.”

“Leftovers,” Lacey scoffed. “As if we’re going to leave you alone to eat leftovers.”

“Suck it up, mother hen, it’s your turn to be mothered,” Ivory informed her.

She rolled her eyes, but it felt good to have her family around her right now. She probably shouldn’t, but she needed a little reassurance that even though things were going to change—had already begun to change—they would always find time for them to spend together.

“I cooked your favorite,” Pearl told her as they all headed across the parking lot to the lift.

“*You* cooked?” she asked somewhat dubiously.

“Hey, I’m a great cook,” Pearl protested. “Jesse, tell her.”

“Umm, sure, honey. A great cook,” Jesse agreed with barely concealed amused sarcasm.

“I am,” Pearl insisted, swatting at her husband. “Besides, who can’t make mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese? Not like I need to have a degree in ... what degree exactly do chefs have?”

“No idea, but whatever it is I don’t think you’d pass.” Lacey snickered.

“Fine, then you guys don’t get to have any, it’s all for Opal.” Pearl huffed.

“Oh, umm, yay,” she said, fighting a grin. She didn’t want to make her sister think she wasn’t grateful. After all, Pearl had found time between visiting with her in the hospital and debriefings to make her dinner.

“Then none of you get any,” Pearl grumbled as the lift opened on their floor.

After moving out of the safehouse Eagle had put them in when they'd first been rescued, they'd rented apartments next door to one another. Ivory and Roman were already looking for a house to buy, wanting to be settled before the baby came, and it wouldn't be long before her other sisters were ready to move out, too.

Change.

You couldn't escape it no matter how badly you wanted to.

It was pretty much the only constant in this life. Between the good and the bad one thing stayed the same and that was that nothing stayed the same for long.

Ivory had Opal's purse and rooted around in it for the keys to the apartment. Once they were inside everyone fussed, helping her get settled on the couch, fetching her blankets and pillows, making sure the remotes were within easy reach. Dinner was served to her on a tray with a glass of water and her favorite soda, along with a small vase of flowers that had been collected from the bouquets that had been sent to the hospital from the guys at Prey and their wives.

When everyone settled around her, plates on their laps as they filled her small living room, Opal couldn't think of a more perfect moment than this.

One to treasure for when more of that inevitable change came again.

* * *

DECEMBER 8TH

8:23 P.M.

SHE STILL HADN'T RETURNED his calls.

CJ was well past the point of worried.

It wasn't like Opal at all. She always replied as soon as she could, and she hadn't sent him any texts to tell him that

Artemis Team had been called out on a mission. Of course, it happened regularly between his job and hers that plans got canceled and one wasn't there for the other. But ever since they'd become friends, they always let each other know if they were going to be away.

Kind of made them sound like a married couple but it wasn't like that.

They were just friends.

Friends who cared enough to check in on each other and to want to know when they were gone and when they got home safe and sound.

So why didn't she text him back?

Using the code Opal had given him ages ago to get into the building, CJ strode over to the lifts and punched the button for Opal's floor. He used a little more force than was strictly necessary, but he hadn't been able to settle after returning from the mission in the early hours of this morning.

Things at the bar hadn't worked out with the waitress.

Not because she wasn't willing but because he wasn't.

Turned out he couldn't get his gorgeous mahogany-haired friend out of his mind.

The fact that Opal was yet to respond compounded with the stress of the mission and having to touch—worse hold—a baby, and he was so wired he could feel the nervous energy bubbling and fizzing inside him like a can of soda that had been well and truly shaken.

He'd thought about calling or texting Opal and telling her he wouldn't be coming by later, that he'd see her in a day or two, but he couldn't make himself do it.

Here was where he needed to be.

Where he felt drawn to be.

Maybe the woman he had been looking for all along had been right under his nose all this time. Maybe he couldn't see it because they'd come to the friends-with-benefits

arrangement early in their friendship and at the time they'd both been adamant that was all they wanted.

He hadn't been ready for strings and commitment then, but perhaps he was now.

They needed to talk.

If Opal wasn't on the same page as he was, if she didn't feel anything for him beyond friendship, if there was never going to be more to what they had than friendship and amazing sex—perfect building blocks for a relationship as far as he was concerned—then maybe it was time to put a stop to their arrangement.

The spare key to her apartment was on his keychain alongside the keys to his own place, and he pulled them from his pocket and opened her door. If she had the chain on, he'd just call out and tell her he was here, but since she knew he was coming, she likely wouldn't have put it on.

When he opened her door and saw her sisters and their partners in the living room CJ stopped short.

When he saw Opal wasn't sitting in the living room along with them, he realized something was wrong.

Had she not returned his texts because she couldn't?

That had never occurred to him. He hadn't really known why she wouldn't reply, and although he'd been a little frustrated the need to see her had outweighed any anger he had at being ignored.

“Hi, CJ,” Lacey greeted him.

At first, when he'd met the sisters, Lacey had flirted with him. Although she was a beautiful woman he hadn't found himself attracted to her. It was the quiet woman with the mahogany hair and soulful brown eyes that had called out to something inside him. Some primal part that knew at first sight he had to have her.

Once it became clear there was something between him and Opal, Lacey had immediately backed off. Although she could be a little flirty in her demeanor, he'd known it was just

her personality and that she was no longer trying to make a move on him.

Now all he could focus on was the woman he should have made a clearer move on a long time ago.

“Where’s Opal?” he demanded, closing the door behind him forcefully enough it slammed shut.

“Now don’t panic,” Ivory started, of course making him panic.

Why hadn’t he realized when she never answered that something was wrong?

Instead of hanging around a bar, then moping around his place feeling sorry for himself, he should have tracked her down, and called Prey if he had to to find out what was going on.

“Honey, don’t say that. You’re going to make him panic,” Roman gently reprimanded his wife.

“Sorry.” Ivory winced and shot him an apologetic smile. “Opal was hurt today while we were doing surveillance, but she’s okay, she’s just taking a bath.”

“Hurt?” he growled. “Hurt how? How bad?” Surely her sisters and their husbands wouldn’t have let her leave the hospital if she was too badly injured, so that had to mean she was okay. Right?

“Well,” Lacey said a little nervously. “She was shot.”

“Shot?” he thundered.

“Hey now,” Pearl rebuked, “if slamming the door didn’t disturb her then yelling like that certainly would have.”

“Tell me what happened,” he forced out through gritted teeth.

“We were watching an ob-gyn clinic,” Pearl explained. “Trying to catch any leads on who has been abducting pregnant women and then killing them after they have their babies. We believe the infants are being sold on the black market. Opal spotted what looked like a woman being led

away from the clinic under duress. She followed. When she tried to stop the abduction, she was shot.”

“Yeah, you mentioned shot, you just didn’t mention where or how bad,” he snapped, making Jesse toss him a glare for being rude to his wife.

“Bullet got her in the neck,” Ivory informed him.

His vision clouded, and he had to lock his knees so he didn’t collapse. “In the neck?” How had she survived an injury like that? Were they lying to him? Was she really dead?

“What Ivory should have added,” Roman said, giving his wife an eye roll and an indulgent smile. “Is that it nicked her right at the curve in her neck. She lost a little bit of blood, not enough to need a transfusion and only needed four stitches to close the wound. Doctor wanted to keep her overnight for observation, but Opal insisted she’d rest a whole lot better at home. So, we brought her here, had dinner, and she went to take a bath before crashing. We were going to spend the night, but since you’re here now, I’m guessing that’s unnecessary.”

Having heard all he needed to, CJ was already moving.

He stalked through Opal’s apartment, through the master bedroom, and flung open the door to the ensuite.

An all-consuming need to see her for himself, offer his racing heart and pounding pulse reassurance that she was in fact alive and relatively unscathed, filled him, and as soon as the door was open and he saw her standing in the bath, reaching for a towel, his breath whooshed out of him in a rush. There was a white bandage taped to the slender column of her neck, she was pale with a slightly bruised look beneath her eyes, and a remaining fleck or two of blood on her shoulder where she must have been trying to be careful and not get her wound wet as she bathed.

“CJ.” Opal looked startled to see him, and when he closed the distance between them in a single step and hauled her into his arms, she let out a squeak of surprise.

Burying his face in her wet hair, he held her tight against his chest until he could draw a breath without his lungs aching

in fear.

“What are you doing here?” she asked when he finally loosened his hold.

“I texted you earlier today to tell you we were back from our mission and that I was going to stop by tonight,” he replied, pulling back just enough that he could see her face.

“Oh. I never got your message. My phone got cracked when I was shot, and I haven’t even thought about replacing it yet, although someone from Prey probably has and will have me a new phone with all my data transferred ready for me tomorrow.” After offering him an apologetic smile, her eyes searched his. “How was your mission? Are you okay?”

This woman’s capacity to love and care about others regardless of her own circumstances almost took him to his knees for the second time in as many minutes.

She was the one who had been shot, and yet, she was worried about him.

Maybe he shouldn’t be so surprised by the depths of his concern for her. Opal was his friend, and his lover, maybe it was just natural that sooner or later it would grow to be something more.

“CJ? Are you okay? Tell me what happened. What do you need? How can I help?”

Taking the towel from her hand, he wrapped it around her, gathered her into his arms, and held her close. Placing a kiss against her temple, he drew in the soft, sugary scent of her shampoo and body wash.

“You’re already helping, already giving me what I need, Piccolina,” he whispered against her wet skin.

Opal couldn’t give him absolution for the past, but maybe she could give him a future.

CHAPTER THREE

December 8th

8:39 P.M.

“YOU SURE YOU’RE OKAY?” Opal asked as she touched soft, comforting kisses along CJ’s chiseled jaw. She could tell something was wrong, anxiety was all but bleeding off him, but there were also shutters in his eyes she didn’t think he was going to open for her.

It was part of the curse of only being friends-with-benefits.

They were close, yes. He’d saved her life, and she’d felt a companionship with him from the very first moment, something she hadn’t felt with any other man. In her line of work, you spent a *lot* of time working with men, big, burly, alpha men. While she wasn’t intimidated by them per se, she was when it came to any sort of intimate relationship.

After being rescued by Prey when she was nineteen, she’d only attempted sex with one other person, and it had been a complete disaster. The guy was just some random man she’d met at a restaurant. He’d seemed nice, and they’d gone out a few times. But when it was time for them to take the next step—she’d been anxious to take that step because she wanted to prove to herself that she was making progress in her recovery—it hadn’t gone well.

The man hadn’t hurt her.

Not in the physical sense anyway.

And he hadn't done anything to her that she hadn't wanted.

But it had quickly devolved once he'd seen the scars littering her body. He'd been repulsed by them. He'd pretended that he hadn't, but she could see it in his eyes.

Despite that, they'd plowed onwards, but the man was clumsy, didn't know much about a woman's body or how to pleasure it, and given her only sexual experiences were being raped by The Master, she didn't know what she liked or how to make herself come.

She hadn't come and ended things before they went any further. The man had complained that he hadn't gotten what he needed and placed the blame for her not orgasming on her rather than himself.

Opal had sworn off men after that, but then she'd met CJ, and everything had been so easy. They'd been friends for a full year before she'd tentatively proposed a proposition to him. They would sleep together but remain friends, no strings, and no expectations. Since they were only friends, nothing was stopping them from sleeping with or dating other people.

She had fully expected him to meet someone and end things pretty soon after they started, but here they were two years later, and their arrangement was still going strong.

For how much longer?

Every time she saw him, she worried about the answer to that question.

CJ turned his face so her next kiss landed on his lips. "I'm fine. Promise. The mission was just a ... rough one."

They didn't talk a huge amount about the missions they worked on. Both of their jobs required a level of secrecy they understood so they never pushed. Sometimes they shared certain aspects that they could, but there were never any expectations because again ... friends only.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. Opal knew what that was like. Some missions just had a way of getting under your skin, exploiting your weak spots.

“I’m not, not now, not with you here.” This time he was the one who kissed her, and while her kisses had been soft and gentle, intended to comfort him because she could tell he was suffering despite his insistence that he was all right, his kiss was fiery and passionate.

“My sisters are here, and the guys,” she said. She was sure he knew that already because the panic on his face said he knew she’d been shot before he walked into her bathroom. “We can’t have sex with them in the other room.”

How embarrassing.

“Don’t think they were sticking around once I showed up.”

“That means they know what we’re going to be doing.” She scrunched up her nose at the thought. Still embarrassing. She didn’t hide her friends-with-benefits arrangement with CJ from her sisters. They knew she was close with him and that they had an intimate relationship. And she knew that her sisters had sex. They were all in serious relationships, and Lacey had always loved sex even before she got with Ben, and Ivory was currently pregnant. But still, her sisters knowing what she was going to be doing here tonight mortified her.

CJ laughed. “They’re all big girls, and so are you. What the two of us choose to do together in the privacy of your bedroom is no one else’s business.”

“I know, it’s just gross.” Her nose scrunched up again. She was sensitive about sex, again not surprising given her upbringing and the torturous hell she had lived through at the hands of a sadistic psychopath.

“You’re adorable, Piccolina,” CJ said with another laugh. Setting her on her feet before him, he grabbed the towel and ran it over her body, drying her off. When he was done, he let the towel fall to the cool tiles beneath their feet. “Have I told you lately how gorgeous you are?”

Opal blushed as she always did when CJ gave her a compliment. They might be just friends-with-benefits, but he still always went out of his way to say sweet things to her, and she loved when he called her Piccolina. It meant little one in

Italian, a nod to his heritage, and the term of endearment made her feel like she was special to him. He loved her reddish-brown locks and the light dusting of freckles across her nose. He definitely loved her breasts and had been known to spend hours just playing with them, teasing her nipples with his fingers and his tongue.

There were other parts of her he loved to taste as well.

CJ never missed an opportunity to put his head between her legs, he loved it when she came all over his face almost as much as she did.

“You’re such a sweet talker,” she teased because if she didn’t, she was going to get emotion lodged in her chest. Lately, she’d been thinking that ... maybe something more might happen between her and CJ. He’d never said anything to give her any indication that he wanted to change their relationship, but maybe he was just like her, scared to ruin what they had by asking for more.

“You’re the sweet one,” he said, scooping her up into his arms and carrying her into her bedroom. Of all the rooms in her house, her bedroom was her favorite. She loved the mahogany wood furniture, the dresser and nightstands, the rocking chair and chest of drawers, and the huge canopy bed. The curtains on the bed were white and lacy, matching her curtains and the decorative pillows and bedspread.

It was pretty and girly and she loved it.

She loved it even more when she wasn’t the only one lying on top of her soft white sheets.

“When I’m on a mission, and we’re in a tight spot, you know what I think about to relax and refocus?” CJ asked as he laid her down on the bed and moved down her body.

“What?”

“You. This. How sweet you are inside and out.”

His dark head settled between her spread legs, and Opal didn’t think there was a more erotic sight. She sucked in a breath at that first swipe of his tongue. The first time he’d told her he wanted to taste her she had been so embarrassed by the

idea. Men didn't put their mouths on a woman's most private area.

But he'd insisted that he wanted to, that it would bring him pleasure, and in the end, she'd been curious and given in.

Now she loved it.

As his tongue teased her bundle of nerves, he circled the pad of a fingertip around her entrance. After two years he knew exactly what she liked, how to turn her on, how to drag things out making her orgasm that much more powerful.

When his finger began to edge its way inside her, Opal moaned. Sensations began to swirl through her and her hands automatically moved to tangle her fingers in his dark hair, holding him in place even though she knew nothing would make him stop until he'd brought her pleasure.

Adding another finger, he curled them both, brushing against that magical spot inside her as his mouth never let up, licking and sucking, driving her wild.

Feelings built.

Sensations grew.

The pressure inside her almost became too much.

Then, just when she was sure she couldn't bear it a single second longer or she would explode, that pleasure finally crescendoed and burst inside her sending waves of intense pure bliss washing over her.

"That never gets old," CJ said as he kissed his way up over her stomach. When he got to the wound on her neck, he very lightly pressed his lips to the top of the bandage. She could feel his concern for her and was touched. Even if friendship and amazing sex were all that was ever between them, she knew he cared about her a lot. He was a good friend. The best.

"You know what else never gets old?" Opal asked as she reached out to stroke his erection. "You, inside me."

CJ chuckled as he unbuckled and shoved his jeans down his legs.

Since they had been together for so long now, they didn't bother with a condom. She was on birth control, and since she wasn't sleeping with anybody else, she knew she was clean. She assumed CJ hadn't been with anybody else either because he never mentioned getting checked or insisted they needed a condom.

Opal wanted to hope that meant something, but she didn't think she should.

It was a surefire way to get her heart broken.

Did she have feelings for CJ that ran deeper than friendship?

Maybe she did.

To be honest, she was too afraid to examine her feelings too deeply.

"You love this, baby girl?" CJ asked as his tip nudged her entrance.

"You know I do." She gasped as he thrust inside her, burying himself deep, so deep she knew he would leave a lasting mark on her soul no matter what ended up happening between them in the future.

"You love this too, don't you, baby girl," he said as he took one of her breasts into his mouth.

With his slow, steady thrusts and the heat of his mouth around her nipple, all she could do was moan in response.

Her body was already ultra-sensitive after he'd just made her come with his mouth, every nerve ending standing to attention, and each thrust made mini fireworks go off inside her body, hinting of the coming attraction.

Hooking her ankles around his waist, Opal drew him deeper inside her, she didn't want to ever stop feeling him. Even if they ended up with other people the impact he'd made on her, in her life, would never leave her.

CJ increased his pace, thrusting harder, faster. His mouth feasted on first one breast and then the other.

“Touch yourself, baby girl, come for me, let me hear you cry out, let me feel you clamp around me,” CJ ordered.

One of her hands clutched his shoulder while the other went to where their bodies joined and stroked her fingertips across her sensitive bud. Her overstimulated body shattered all over again, and she cried out her release as CJ thrust harder and faster until she felt him hit his own release, exploding inside her.

As they both floated down from their high, Opal couldn't bring herself to release her hold on him. She felt vulnerable today, getting shot, knowing how drastically her family's lives would be changing soon. She was feeling adrift, uncertain of where she was going or even where she wanted to go.

In the middle of all that uncertainty stood CJ.

Her anchor.

Letting him go seemed so daunting, and yet the reality was, he wasn't really hers to keep.

* * *

DECEMBER 9TH

2:14 A.M.

DAMN, she was beautiful.

So beautiful it hurt.

Asleep like this, Opal looked so peaceful. She was the kind of woman you never saw look flustered, anxious, or stressed. She didn't lose her temper, and while she was open with her emotions, she wasn't what you would call overly emotional.

Opal was just the kind of person who put others' needs first. She'd get out of her sick bed to take care of you if you were sick, too. She looked for little ways she could make a practical difference in someone's life. CJ remembered not long after they'd become friends, he casually remarked one day that

he missed homecooked meals but how it was too much effort to cook a whole meal just for yourself. About a week later, he came home to find his freezer stocked with precooked meals and a note from Opal telling him she hoped he enjoyed the home cooking.

She hadn't done it for the attention or the kudos, she had just genuinely wanted to help.

The more he thought about her good qualities and strengths, the harder it got to figure out why exactly he'd never asked her out.

Maybe it was fear of losing her.

They had a good thing going. While they weren't technically a couple in a lot of ways they may as well be. They hung out together watching TV or would go out and catch a movie and a meal. They talked and made each other laugh. Plus, the sex was phenomenal.

But if he asked her out and she said no, that friendship was all she wanted, then he knew what they had would be ruined forever.

There would be no going back.

Better to stick with what they had than risk losing it.

Besides, he wasn't even sure that he *did* want to date Opal. Although he couldn't deny his feelings for her seemed to be growing. When was the last time he'd come home from a mission and not checked in with her within twenty-four hours?

Within twelve hours?

Hell, most of the time it was pretty much the first thing he did.

What was the longest—not counting when he was away on a mission or she was—that he'd gone without seeing her?

A week?

No, he never went that long.

A couple of days?

Possibly a day at the most, and even when one of them was away they usually texted when they could.

It was like they were dating but not officially.

Did she realize that?

Did she want it?

Letting people get close wasn't easy for him, not after his own family had shunned him. If even the people who had created his life could turn on him then how could he ever expect anyone else not to?

Sure, he and Opal got along great now. But what about ten years from now? Twenty? Thirty?

Could he trust her not to turn on him?

As she sighed softly in her sleep and turned, burrowing closer to him, her body plastered against his side, her face pressed into the crook of his neck, her breath warm against his suddenly chilled skin, all of a sudden his emotions felt too much.

Space.

He needed space.

Usually, if he spent the night at her apartment, or she spent the night at his condo they'd have breakfast together in the morning, shower, and get dressed there too. He even had some clothes, a toothbrush, and other toiletries here, and she had a whole bunch of her stuff at his place.

Again, they were together, but they weren't.

He didn't know what she wanted, didn't know what he wanted, just knew that he had to leave now.

Hoping he wasn't going to hurt her feelings when she woke up to find he was gone, CJ slipped out from under the covers.

Opal moaned, and he froze, willing her to settle back to sleep.

Her lashes fluttered, and then she rolled over, and a moment later, he could hear the soft snuffle of her snoring.

Quick as he could, he scrounged around for the clothes he'd folded and set on her dresser. Opal hated a messy bedroom so he always made sure he left his things tidy and organized before getting into bed. Carrying his shoes in one hand he paused by the bed and studied her in the thin moonlight coming in the window between the unclosed curtains.

She was beautiful, she was sweet, she was loving, she was strong, she was ... everything.

Everything he wasn't sure he dared to hope for.

He'd had a family once, been happy, and thought it would last forever. Then one day it was just gone.

CJ wasn't sure he could go through that again.

Actually, he knew he couldn't.

Sneaking through the bedroom door, then through the quiet apartment, he felt like he was doing the walk of shame only he had nothing to be ashamed of. If he was confused, he had every right to be, they acted like a couple but weren't. Opal hadn't asked for anything to change, and this last mission had thrown him.

If he needed a little time, a little distance, to sort himself out there was nothing wrong with that.

Opal would understand.

And she was sweet enough not to hold it against him.

Flip side she was also sweet enough not to want to hurt his feelings so she wouldn't tell him if his creeping away in the middle of the night upset her.

Too late to do anything about it now.

Conflicted, CJ hurried through the quiet building and out to his car. In the early hours of the morning the roads were empty, most people at home tucked into their beds. Where he

should be. Where he could still be if he hadn't panicked like a coward.

His house was dark when he pulled into the driveway, and quiet. Too quiet. It felt empty. Lonely.

Solitude wasn't something he was unused to. As a child, he had more often than not been left alone, sometimes for days on end with no one to make sure he ate dinner, did his homework, or went to bed at a reasonable hour.

Over time he'd gotten used to it, but then he joined the SEALs and became part of something bigger than himself. There was an inbuilt family involved, once a SEAL always a SEAL, and he would do anything for one of his brothers, who he knew would also do anything for him.

Opal's role in his life shouldn't be a big deal, he had everything he needed, and yet he couldn't imagine her not being there. Especially in moments like this when he parked his car, walked up his front steps, and unlocked his door, stepping into what felt like a black hole of emptiness.

Three years.

Three years since he'd saved her from that pack of dogs a suspected terrorist had turned loose on Artemis Team and his SEAL team during a joint mission. He remembered how her hand had trembled as she'd had to shoot one of them to save her own life but hadn't wanted to kill an innocent animal. It wasn't the dog's fault, it had been trained and mistreated and turned into an angry attack animal.

They'd both shed blood that day, and through that they had forged a bond.

A bond that had only grown over these three years.

Years that felt like they had both lasted a lifetime while simultaneously passing in the blink of an eye.

What would the next three years look like?

Would Opal find a man to fall in love with? Someone who could give her all the things he wasn't sure he could? Give her the things he knew for sure he couldn't?

And there in a nutshell was the crux of his problem.

He knew Opal, knew what she wanted out of life. He knew that one day she wanted to have kids and shower them with all the love she knew her own parents hadn't given her, instead abandoning her in front of a fire station when she was a newborn.

Children were something he could never give her.

Ever.

Wasn't something that was up for discussion.

Babies weren't something he could do. He didn't want to be near them, didn't want to touch them or even see them. And he certainly didn't want to produce one he would be forced to be responsible for.

How could the two of them ever hope to be more than friends-with-benefits when the thing that was most important to her was something he couldn't stand?

Simple answer was they couldn't.

There was no hope for them to be anything more than they were right now no matter what his changing feelings told him.

Didn't matter what he felt.

Didn't matter if Opal decided she wanted more from him.

They wouldn't work as anything more than they were right now. Anything else was asking for the impossible.

CHAPTER FOUR

December 9th

9:03 A.M.

OPAL WAS glad for this morning's meeting.

Anything to get her out of her apartment.

Waking up to find that CJ had snuck out of her bed and left without saying goodbye had confused her. There had been times when she'd been spending the night at his place or him at hers, when he'd been called in to join his team for a mission, and times when Artemis Team had been called in, too. But if that was the case, they usually woke the other to say goodbye, that was if they hadn't both woken to the sound of the phone anyway.

Maybe he just hadn't wanted to wake her because she'd been shot and he knew she needed the rest.

Still, if that was the case, he could have left her a note.

Since she didn't have a phone yet, she couldn't even send him a text or call to make sure he was okay.

Something had happened on that mission he'd returned from yesterday that had spooked him. Opal knew it even though CJ had kept insisting that he was fine. They might not be a couple, but they were good friends. She hoped he knew he could open up to her and tell her what was on his mind without judgment.

“New phone for you,” Owen “Fox” LeGrand announced as he and the rest of the former SEALs who ran Prey Security’s West Coast offices—consisting of her team and Athena Team, another all-woman team—entered the conference room.

After being summoned this morning to come in for a meeting, not a big surprise since they needed to properly debrief after yesterday’s surveillance efforts, she’d headed straight in, the first to arrive. Twitchy this morning, she wasn’t sure if it was because of being shot, CJ’s strange behavior, or whatever news they were going to receive today.

Had there been a lead in locating the pregnant woman’s would-be abductor?

Had the pregnant woman, who had survived her ordeal, known something that would help them identify the kidnapper?

“Thanks,” she said, picking up the cell phone and quickly scanning through it.

“Raven made sure all your data was transferred. I don’t think you lost much,” Fox added.

“I’ll thank her as soon as we’re done here.” The Oswald family were all such wonderful people who always went the extra mile for the people they loved, but Opal had always felt particularly close to the oldest sister. Maybe it was because after their parents’ murders, Raven had become the stand-in mother for her younger siblings—Eagle was already an adult and in the military—and Opal had always mothered her sisters so they had that in common.

“Why are we here?” Lacey asked.

“We learn something from the pregnant woman?” Ivory asked, placing her hand on her barely noticeable baby bump. Opal knew this case was hitting her youngest sister hard as she identified closely with the victims, picturing herself and her baby in their position.

“We did,” Grayson “Chaos” Simpson said fiercely. In addition to his three-year-old son, his wife Juliet was close to

giving birth to the couple's second son, so just like Ivory he was identifying closely with the victims in this case.

Really all the guys were. Fox—who was still the team's leader even though they had retired from the SEALs—and his wife Evie were parents to six-year-old Sullivan and four-year-old Sally. Ryder “Spider” Flynn and his wife Abby had a seven-year-old son RJ and a five-year-old daughter Talia. Abby's brother Eric “Night” McNamara and his wife Lavender had seven-year-old Anastasia and five-year-old Christian. Logan “Shark” Kirk and his wife Claire had an adorable set of four-year-old twins, Maya and Mia. Rounding out the team was Charlie “King” Voss and his wife Faith who had a two-year-old daughter Indigo.

All sweet, precious little angels who she loved dearly. How awful would it be if one of the women she considered family had been taken, their lifeless bodies thrown in dumpsters once they'd given birth, and those beautiful babies sold. Sure, infants were often sold to couples desperate to have a child, their lives could have been okay, but there were no guarantees. They could have ended up with someone who abused them.

Even if they didn't, no one would have loved those babies like their mommies and daddies.

Opal didn't even want to think about how it would feel for those women, snatched and held captive, knowing your baby would be stolen from you and there was nothing you could do to stop it from happening. Your baby would never know you, never know how it was loved and wanted.

It was tragic.

“We need to stop them,” Opal said quietly. Her team almost exclusively worked sex trafficking missions because of their past and their passion. No kind of trafficking was okay or in any way not the most horrific thing that could happen to a person, but selling newborns snatched right from their mother's wombs? There were no words to describe how horrific that was.

“We will,” Fox vowed, meeting her gaze and holding it.

She nodded. As much as this sickened her, she also had faith in her team and Prey as a whole.

They *would* dismantle this trafficking ring.

“So, what did we learn?” she asked. For now, she had to push away her emotions regarding the case because too much emotion at the wrong time could cost her her life, or the lives of one of her sisters, or even a victim.

“The woman whose kidnapping Opal interrupted yesterday said that she and her husband had been trying to get pregnant for a long time now,” Spider explained.

“They’re older, were running out of time with her biological clock ticking, so they had already looked into adoption,” King added.

“We went back through all the cases of the previous victims to see who else had looked into adoption first,” Night said. Sometimes it was confusing when the guys all took turns briefing the team, but she’d gotten used to it. Mostly. Although Opal did think it would be easier if one of them passed along the information. If they had to, they could take turns with each case.

“And they had,” Pearl guessed.

“Yes, but they wouldn’t have been able to go through with the adoptions,” Night said.

“How come?” Ivory asked.

“Didn’t have enough money,” Night replied.

Opal felt her eyes widen as she realized what that meant. “So, they go and enquire about adoption only to find out it’s outside their means, then they wind up pregnant and go missing. That means someone from an adoption agency is involved. They’re following up on them, keeping tabs.” It was a risky move because there was every chance most of those women wouldn’t wind up pregnant on their own.

“Not all the women had looked into adoption, but half of them had,” Fox said.

“So, what’s our next move?” Opal asked. How could they take this information and use it to their advantage? There had to be a way that this could give them an in, an opportunity to get on top and take down this ring.

“Undercover op,” Fox replied with a grin. They’d had a few undercover ops this past year, and each time they had, one of her sisters ended up falling in love.

That wouldn’t be happening this time.

Who would she even fall in love with?

“Which one of us?” Lacey asked.

“Since the cover story will be a woman desperate for a kid, willing to do whatever it takes to make it happen, money no object, we don’t want to send in Ivory since she’s actually pregnant. I don’t think Roman would like the idea of her going undercover right now, and besides, if they find out she is actually pregnant it puts a target on her back,” Fox explained.

“So, one of us.” Opal looked at Pearl and then Lacey, wondering which of them had been assigned this mission.

“Whoever does this won’t be going in alone, you’ll have a husband. The cover story will be that you got married to try to improve the chances of adopting,” Fox said. “Given Pearl is married, and Lacey is dating Ben and we all know it’s just a matter of time before those two get married, we didn’t think that Jesse or Ben would appreciate watching their women cozying up with another man even if it is pretend. Besides, there is only one person we would have chosen for this.”

His gaze fell on her, and Opal felt the pressure.

If this mission was going to be successful, it was going to all come down to her and how well she could play this role.

“Opal is an easy choice,” Fox continued. “You already love kids, we all know it, you’re great with them. If anyone can convince an adoption agency they want a kid it’s you.”

She prayed that was true.

“Who’s going to be playing my husband?” she asked, looking from man to man.

“None of us,” Fox replied. “We’re all too old for you. Eagle has a couple of ideas, but if you know someone who can handle the pressure and you’ll feel comfortable with then you can certainly let us know.”

“CJ Ulrich.” Before she thought, the name was bursting out of her mouth. It wasn’t until she said it that she realized it was likely a mistake. CJ’s head wasn’t in the game for a reason he didn’t want to share with her, and he’d bailed last night and she had no idea why. Still, going undercover wasn’t usually her thing, and CJ would make her feel safe.

Mistake or not, he was the only man she wanted pretending to be her husband.

* * *

DECEMBER 9TH

10:48 A.M.

“THANKS AGAIN, and no, I won’t take any unnecessary risks, I swear,” Opal was saying into her phone when CJ stepped into the conference room at Prey.

Besides Opal who he assumed was thanking Raven or Olivia, Prey’s two genius tech gurus, for the new phone she was currently talking into, her sisters were up one end of the room, Ivory’s face concerned as her hand rested on her tiny baby bump. It looked like Pearl and Lacey were reassuring her about something, which he guessed was this case Artemis Team was working on, the kidnapped pregnant women killed, their bodies found, but never their babies.

Definitely a stressful mission to work while pregnant yourself.

The SEAL team who now ran Prey’s West Coast offices were there as well, pouring over what looked like files down the other end of the large table.

Everyone looked busy, and he wondered why he had been called in.

Guilt had him answering Opal's earlier call. When her name had popped up on the screen, he assumed she was calling to ask why he'd left without saying goodbye.

Instead, she'd just asked him to come down to the office.

Pressing her hadn't resulted in any more information. Since he was worried that she'd taken a turn for the worse after her injuries the day before—he certainly hadn't been gentle on her during their several rounds of lovemaking—he'd come straight over. His team was taking scheduled time off for the next two weeks, so it wasn't like he had anything to do, and their morning PT was done.

All he had planned for the day was another trip to a bar to try to go through with sex with another woman.

Anything to take his mind off Opal.

It could never work out between them, and their friends-with-benefits arrangement was starting to feel like stringing her along.

The last thing he wanted to do.

They'd agreed to keep this thing going for as long as they both felt comfortable and enjoying it. And while CJ was definitely still enjoying it, he was no longer comfortable with it. Opal had been through enough, and the last thing he wanted to become was just another person who had hurt her.

"Yes, of course I promise." Opal rolled her eyes at him when she caught sight of him in the doorway, but he could see the smile on her face. Even if it annoyed you, it was nice to have people in your life who cared. "Stop worrying. It'll be fine. Thanks again, Raven. Bye."

"What was that all about?" he asked as he headed for the seat beside Opal she had pulled out for him.

"Raven being a worrywart. I called to thank her for getting my new phone all set up with the data from my old one, and she was just giving me the be careful speech," Opal replied.

His brow furrowed, a feeling in his gut saying he wouldn't like what he was about to learn. "Why did you need the speech?"

Instead of answering right away, Opal's gaze shifted to Fox who gave her a single nod.

When she returned her gaze to him, there was a small amount of worry in those warm, rich brown orbs. Although it shouldn't be possible, eyes just didn't come in that color. Hers seemed to have deep red flecks to match the reddish hint of her mahogany hair. Besides the concern, there was a thread of something that looked like pleading even though she hadn't asked him for anything, and he hadn't denied her a single thing.

"We have a lead on the case we've been working and a possible way to get more intel," Opal said slowly.

Pieces of the puzzle clicked together.

"Ah, the reason for the be careful speech." They wanted his Opal to go undercover. Risk her life.

"Well," she said a little nervously. "Ivory is pregnant so it's best she doesn't get herself on the radar of an organization abducting pregnant women and stealing their babies. And while neither Pearl nor Lacey is pregnant, they are involved, and it would be a little awkward for them to pretend to be married to someone else. On the other hand, I have no one, so it's not an issue."

You have me.

The words echoed through his head with a strength he hadn't expected.

They had made each other no promises, and yet, somehow, he still felt like he'd broken one. Somewhere along the way, things had shifted between them, and he didn't even know when. All he knew was that he cared about this woman a whole lot more than he should.

Than was wise.

“This is a done deal?” he asked. It certainly felt like it was, and he wished he had been consulted before Opal felt so backed into a corner that she had agreed to this. She hated undercover work, he knew she did. She’d almost gotten herself killed the first time she’d allowed herself to be taken by a known trafficker because she’d realized too late she’d bitten off more than she could chew.

There was defensiveness in her tone when she answered. “I know I don’t have the best undercover track record, but I can do this. I won’t be abducted, and even if I was, I’m stronger now. All I’m doing is gathering intel, nothing more. I can do this,” Opal repeated like she was begging him to believe in her.

She should never have to beg him for anything.

It wasn’t that he doubted her or didn’t believe in her. It was just that the thought of her deliberately putting herself in danger left him feeling like he’d been thrown in a grave alive and was slowly dying a horrific death.

“I know you can,” he assured her and noted the relief that flitted across her face. “Who’s playing your husband?” The idea of Opal with a husband—even if it was only pretend—only added to the skin suddenly too tight for his body feeling. She wasn’t his, not in any real sense, so he had no say over what she did. But still, if he’d been told before she had agreed he might have been able to talk her out of it. Or at least have a say in who was going to be watching her back.

“Well ...” Opal looked down at her hands which were fisted on the table. “I was hoping *you* would.”

“Me?” That he hadn’t been expecting, although he guessed it should have been obvious. Why else would she have called him to come down here? “I don’t do undercover work like that.”

“Eagle already talked to your commander. If you want to do this you’re cleared,” Fox informed him.

If he said no, would it call the whole thing off? Keep Opal out of danger?

CJ was tempted. “What about your injury? Should you even be doing an op right now?”

“Actually, we discussed it and decided that it might actually help. Cover story is I’ve been trying for a baby for years and keep miscarrying. Even though we’ve been together all that time, we just got married to increase our odds of adopting a baby. We’re going to use this “mugging”,” she did air quotes with the word, “as the catalyst. The reason why. What pushed us into it. We have to make it clear we’re willing to do whatever it takes to get ourselves a child. There’s a possibility that whoever is involved in this ring is also working for an adoption agency, so we need to get ourselves on their radar.”

Every word she spoke made him like this plan less and less.

There were so many variables, and in his world, it was variables that got people killed.

Plus, there was the whole he had to pretend to want a baby angle. Was there any way he could convincingly make anyone believe he was so desperate for a child that he might be willing to buy one?

CJ doubted that he could.

But as he looked at Opal’s hopeful eyes, then around the table at each of her sisters and the six former SEALs who he knew loved these four women like sisters, he started to wonder if there was any way he could say no.

It was more than clear that Opal had already made up her mind. She was going through with this regardless of whether he liked it or not. If he said no to playing her husband, she would simply find someone else.

The thought of another man touching her, kissing her, holding her, the two of them holed up in some Prey safehouse playing at being married was enough.

Opal wasn’t his and never could be. They wanted different things for their futures, but there was no way he could stand by and allow another man to pretend to be her husband.

The decision was made.

He might not like it, but CJ felt backed into a corner.

He could only give one answer, and he would just have to pray that he wasn't about to make a huge mistake.

“I'm in.”

CHAPTER FIVE

December 9th

2:26 P.M.

OF ALL THE ways Opal pictured herself ever having a wedding this was never one of them.

Getting married wasn't really something that had been on her radar at all. She was too anxious around men she didn't know, which did not bode well for meeting someone and falling in love.

Then she'd gotten too comfortable in her friends-with-benefits arrangement with CJ. Having that to fall back on meant she didn't need to push herself, step out of the box, and face her fears. It was crazy because she had no problem putting her life on the line to save someone from a fate worse than death, but the idea of going on a date filled her with ice-cold dread.

Which was as silly as it was crazy because she went on the equivalent of a date with CJ all the time.

Movie, pizza, nicer restaurants, the two of them hung out in all different sorts of places, and she never thought twice about it.

But that was because CJ was ... well, CJ.

He wasn't a threat.

She trusted him.

Which was why when she'd needed a fake husband there was nobody else she could imagine playing that role.

And if there was a part of her—a tiny part—that thought it might be awesome if this was real, then it was just because she was caught up in the beauty of the moment.

Only she couldn't help but feel that was a little dishonest, not quite one hundred percent true.

Opal hadn't meant to develop feelings for CJ, it definitely hadn't started out that way. She'd just felt safe with him from the very beginning, and they'd become friends. The sexual attraction between them was two-sided, and she'd wanted to learn to enjoy sex like a normal person.

When she'd put her proposition to him, Opal had completely expected him to turn her down.

But he hadn't.

And now things had changed somewhere along the way, although she wasn't quite sure when.

They had though.

She might have been able to deny it before, but now, looking at him standing there all sexy in his tux, tall and strong, kind and brave. He had a good sense of humor and was as happy watching a chick flick with her as he was watching sports. Plus, he was amazing, attentive, and giving in bed.

Wasn't that what every woman was looking for in a man?

Why exactly had the two of them never discussed there being something more between them?

Doubts buffeted her as the ocean wind made her long hair whip around her head. What if CJ never wanted more? What if he only wanted her for sex and friendship, but didn't think she had what it took to be a life partner?

Did she?

Her upbringing was the absolute opposite of normal. She'd only ever known four people, her three sisters and The Master. Although they had learned a few months ago that The Master,

whose real name was Mervin Matthewson, had used his mother to look after her, Lacey, Pearl, and Ivory when they were very small, so she guessed that made five even if she didn't remember Mable.

That was it.

No school, no trips to the grocery store, no visiting neighbors.

Nothing.

While Mervin had made sure they were all well-educated, most of their days had been spent surviving his torturous endeavors to teach them how to kill and survive anything.

What did she know about how real relationships worked?

Even nature sucked for her because her biological parents hadn't wanted her, abandoning her when she was less than twenty-four hours old.

"You doing okay, Piccolina?" CJ asked, appearing before her.

There was such genuine care and concern in his deep, dark eyes that Opal knew he hadn't asked her out on a real date because he thought there was something wrong with her.

It was just because he didn't love her.

And she ... didn't love him either.

Or maybe she did.

She didn't seem to know anymore.

"You don't have to go through with this if you don't want to." His large hand reached out to capture a lock of her hair that continued to be blown about by the wind and smoothed it off her cheek, tucking it behind her ear. Instead of removing his hand right away, he let it linger, his palm cradling her cheek, his calloused fingertips caressing her temple.

Heaven.

His touch had to be what heaven felt like.

Lifting her hand, she covered his, applying gentle pressure. “You know I *do* have to do this. More than that, I *want* to do this.” Didn’t he understand how important this was? *She* had been sold as a newborn. She needed to do whatever it took to bring down this trafficking ring. “You said you knew I could do this.”

CJ’s eyes closed and his head dropped. He dragged in a loud breath, and when he looked up there was regret in his gaze. “That’s not what this is about. You can do anything, I know that. I just don’t like the idea of you in danger,” he said gruffly and shrugged his shoulders like he didn’t know what else to tell her.

Thing was, he *didn’t* need to tell her anything else.

It was sweet that he worried.

Standing on tiptoe, she touched a kiss to his lips. “Thank you for caring about me.”

An arm curled around her waist, and he hauled her in closer, lifting her feet off the ground. “Never have to thank me for that, Piccolina.”

Actually, she did.

While CJ didn’t talk about his family much, and she didn’t know much about them other than he wasn’t close with him and they weren’t really part of his life, she knew he had an extended family who loved him and had his back. The same way she had no biological family in her life, but she had her sisters, their partners, and all of Prey. It was why she really was grateful to have him care about her, and why she always went out of her way to make sure he knew she cared about him.

“You know there’s no one else I wanted to be my husband,” she whispered against his ear as she pressed her face to CJ’s neck. “No one else I’d trust to be my husband. Only you.”

Maybe that was admitting too much, getting too close to the truth.

CJ's arms tightened around her, and when he set her on her feet and took a step back, it was almost reluctant. "You know I won't let you down."

"Of course." If there was one thing Opal was sure of it was the man standing before her, who was about to become her fake husband, would never let her down. CJ would never do anything to hurt her. "You're going to be the best pretend husband ever," she teased.

A slow smile spread over CJ's face, transforming him once again into the man she knew and cared about so much. There were still shadows lurking deep in his eyes. It was natural to want to erase them, ease whatever suffering he felt, and fix whatever he was struggling with, but she couldn't do that.

Everyone had shadows that followed them around, all you could do for someone was offer them your love and support while they battled their demons.

Something CJ had done for her when they first began their arrangement and she'd been inexperienced and uncertain when it came to having sex, as pretty much all she'd ever known was what The Master had done to her. He had been so patient, so understanding, and helped her learn about her body and a man's body. What she liked and how to make her partner feel good. CJ always made sure she was well taken care of, and her confidence and self-esteem had grown accordingly.

Opal had done her best to be there for him, too, giving him everything she had to give the same way she did with all the people in her life that she loved.

"You ready to go get married, beautiful wife-to-be?" CJ asked as he held out his hand.

She took it without hesitation.

This wedding might not be real, but somehow CJ knew all the things that she would want if she really was planning her wedding.

It was his idea to have the ceremony on the beach. It was a gorgeous late fall day, the sky was clear, the air crisp, and the breeze coming off the water sent a pleasant chill through the

air. He'd even chosen rings, engagement and wedding rings, and they were exactly what she would have chosen. The engagement ring was a diamond in a heart shape with a rose gold band, and the wedding rings were also rose gold, hers had small diamonds circling it.

He had organized an arch covered in white roses and tulips, her two favorite flowers, for them to stand before while they said their vows. There was also a bouquet with the same flowers for her to hold.

That he knew her so well, remembered so many tiny details about her, it certainly made her feel like maybe he cared more about her than he let on.

But she wasn't going to allow herself to hope for more.

That was one lesson she had learned young.

Hope was a two-edged sword and one she wasn't going to allow CJ to pierce her with.

* * *

DECEMBER 9TH

7:51 P.M.

“WOW, THIS IS GORGEOUS,” Opal gushed as they stepped into the honeymoon suite of the fanciest and most exclusive five-star hotel in the city.

“Prey sure doesn't do things by halves,” CJ agreed. His family had been middle class. He'd had most of the material things he wanted, and before everything fell apart, they'd gone on some fun family vacations including to Disneyland, the Grand Canyon, and Niagara Falls. But he'd never been in a hotel this fancy before.

Life in the SEALs meant he had traveled across the globe, but it wasn't to go sightseeing, stay in nice hotels, enjoy nice meals, and be a typical tourist.

When he traveled it was with his team, and they were there for a mission.

More often than not that included killing, bloodshed, victims, and terrorists. Nothing you'd see on any tour blogs.

“Eagle believes in going all out,” Opal said. “I’ve stayed in nice hotels before when we’ve traveled for an op, but I’ve never stayed in a place as nice as this. Let’s explore.”

The delight on her face was infectious, and CJ found it was easy to follow her around the multiroom suite.

Opening into a large living room space, there were two settees facing each other along with a love seat, all grouped around an ornate fireplace with a marble mantle. There was a coffee table and a couple of end tables with lamps on them that looked like they cost more than he made in a year.

To the left of the sitting space was a huge picture window with stunning views across the city. With the thousands of lights, it was like looking down on a little magical kingdom. On the left side of the fireplace was a door that he assumed led through to the bedroom.

Before he could head toward it, Opal went to the coffee table. “Look,” she squealed. “Non-alcoholic champagne and chocolate truffles. *White* chocolate truffles,” she added, looking at him with a gratefulness he felt down to his soul because she knew he was the one to organize the gift and knew white chocolate was her favorite.

It was such a small thing, but Opal always got excited about the small gestures, it was one of the things he loved the most about her. Stopping by with pizza and her favorite soda, taking her to a chick flick, or remembering some small detail was enough to have her smiling, and that smile ... it did things to him.

“Didn’t think we should be drinking on the job,” he said because the emotion was suddenly clogging his throat and he didn’t want to dwell too long on her bright, shiny joy. Neither of them really drank anyway, and it was extremely unlikely that anybody would even know about them yet since they

weren't meeting with the adoption lawyer till the morning, but better safe than sorry.

"I can't wait to see the bedroom," Opal gushed as she headed through the door. "Whoa."

As he followed her through it, he echoed that sentiment.

The bed was huge, looked way bigger than a king, and there was another fireplace there with an even more ornate marble mantle. The bed was against the wall to their right facing another huge picture window. When you were lying in it, you'd see more sky than landscape below, it would be like sleeping up amongst the stars.

"I cannot *wait* to see the bathroom," Opal said, eyes still wide as she headed for the door on the other side of the room.

Of course, he followed her—couldn't seem to help following her wherever she went—and their mouths dropped open when they saw the room. The walls and floor were marble tiles, the walk-in shower rivaled his own, and he could already picture them in it. The jacuzzi tub looked big enough for at least five or six people. Just how many people did the hotel envision staying in the honeymoon suite at any one time?

"That bath is like a *pool*," Opal exclaimed.

"You do love your baths."

"I could go swimming in there. I might never leave. Actually, I think I might never leave this suite, it's got everything I need, fireplaces, a big bed, a huge tub, and room service. What more could a girl need in life?"

"I could think of one thing." As CJ took a step toward her the temperature in the room went up several notches.

"It *is* our honeymoon," she teased as she cupped him, her fingers gently stroking.

"Quite the sacrifice you're making." He gripped her hips and lifted her, grinding her center against his straining erection. "I'm sure I can make it worth your while."

"Oh, I know you can. Several times I'm sure."

“As many as you can take and then more.” Nothing brought him more pleasure than watching Opal fall apart. That look of freedom on her face reminded him every time of the hell she had endured as a child and the life she had fought so hard to claim.

“What are we christening first?”

“Bed.” As much as he’d enjoy taking her in the shower and the bath, he was doing this right, which meant a bed.

Carrying her to the bedroom, CJ set her on her feet and took a moment to admire her. With her mahogany hair hanging loose around her shoulders, the tiny diamonds she’d sprinkled throughout shimmered as they caught the light, giving her an almost ethereal glow. After the ceremony on the beach, he’d remained in his tuxedo as they went out for dinner, but Opal had changed into a deep green dress. Although it reached the floor and covered her arms, not revealing much of anything, the soft material clung to her slim frame and seemed even more alluring than if she’d worn something that showed off everything.

“Turn around, Piccolina,” he ordered, and when she did, he reached for the zipper.

Inch by delicious inch, he slid the zip down, exposing creamy white skin he couldn’t wait to touch and lick and kiss.

His knuckles brushed along her skin as he unzipped her, and Opal shivered, goosebumps breaking out across that endless porcelain skin.

“Cold, Piccolina?”

“You know I’m not.” She looked over her shoulder at him, desire dancing in her big brown eyes.

“Then what are you?” He’d reached the end of the zip, down by her backside—her bare backside since she’d gone without panties—and he let it pool around their feet, a sea of green, and cupped both cheeks, kneading until she moaned.

“I’m desperate for you,” she whispered breathily.

That desperation was echoed inside him, but he restrained himself and instead swept his fingertips up her sides until he reached her breasts. No sooner had he claimed them than Opal's chest was thrusting forward silently begging him for more.

Did she even realize her hand had slipped between his legs and was stroking him almost convulsively?

"You love that, don't you, Piccolina?" he asked as he tweaked one of her nipples between his thumb and forefinger.

"Almost as much as you do."

Her response made him chuckle, and he touched a kiss to the sensitive spot behind her ear, making her suck in a breath and tilt her head to the side to give him better access.

With her hand on him, he could feel pleasure begin to take hold inside him. He needed her to come first, so he grabbed the wrist of the hand that wasn't touching him and guided it between her legs.

"Touch yourself, Piccolina. Tell me when you're about to come."

Opal gave a small nod, her head falling back against his shoulder as he took his time playing with her breasts. They were so responsive, so sensitive, and she was right, she loved it almost as much as he did.

Each sharp breath she took, each time her body moved, shifting against his, each breathy moan, he felt the pleasure inside him grow.

She was close, he knew her well enough to read the signs of her body, and he wondered if she was so far gone she couldn't stop herself.

But his beautiful girl always deferred to him when it came to their lovemaking.

"CJ ... I'm ... almost there," she whispered, pulling her hand away from the part of her that was throbbing for release.

"Good girl." Capturing her wrist, he spun her to face him and brought her hand to his lips, sucking her fingers into his

mouth, tasting her sweetness.

At the praise, heat flared in her eyes until they appeared more red than brown even though he knew that was only in his imagination.

“You’re my good girl, aren’t you, Piccolina?” CJ released her only long enough to shed his clothes, before he backed her up until her legs hit the bed, then he cupped the back of her head as her knees bent and she sprawled onto the mattress.

“Yes,” she murmured, her gaze settling on his lips.

“You want me to kiss you?” With an arm around her waist, he lifted her, moved them both up the bed, and then gently placed her head on the feather pillow as he covered her body with his.

“Yes,” she murmured again.

His lips claimed hers as he lined up their bodies and plunged into her in one smooth move, not sure either could hold off much longer.

Their tongues clashed, they met each other thrust for thrust.

Sensations built.

The world around them ceased to exist.

Only them and the connection they shared that seemed to grow each time their bodies joined as one lived in this space.

Opal’s body quivered.

Her kisses grew desperate.

“Come now, my good girl,” he whispered the order against her lips before claiming her mouth all over again in a red-hot kiss.

His mouth caught her scream as her entire body went taut, her internal muscles clamping around him, insisting that he join her in this magical journey of ecstasy.

One last thrust had him exploding inside her as that wave caught him, tossing him over the edge of a blissful cliff,

leaving him in freefall as pleasure surrounded him on all sides.

The wedding might not have been real, but the honeymoon was.

CHAPTER SIX

December 10th

11:57 A.M.

“HOW MUCH LONGER?” Opal asked.

Although she asked as part of their cover, she really didn't have to work all that hard to fake anxiety.

It rolled around her anyway.

Since they'd woken up this morning, her stomach had been churning with nausea. Opal had always had a nervous stomach, and while she'd quickly learned as a child to control it or risk The Master's wrath if she vomited, some days it was still a battle.

Today was one of those days.

She wanted so badly to do this case well, proving that even though undercover work wasn't her forte, she could still succeed.

Having CJ here definitely helped.

Right now, him sitting beside her, a tower of strength and confidence, holding her hand like he knew he was her lifeline, that was all that kept her sane.

“Three minutes, Piccolina,” he answered, a thread of amusement in his tone. “You have your cell phone in your other hand, you know it does this magical thing like display

the time. Even does it on the lock screen so you don't even have to unlock it."

Tossing him a scowl, Opal bit back a giggle. CJ always knew how to put her at ease. Thankfully, since her cover character would be nervous in this situation, her anxiety wasn't hurting anything.

In fact, it was probably helping.

Ophelia Sampson likely would be anxious after trying for a baby for so long and wanting to do whatever it took to secure a child for herself.

"Smart Alec," she muttered, but a small smile snuck out anyway.

Releasing her hand to sling his arm around her shoulders, CJ tugged her as close as the arms of their chairs allowed. "Anything to help my girl relax."

When he called her his girl something inside her went all mushy.

It wasn't true of course. She was only his as long as it took for them to get an in with the trafficking ring, and gather intel Prey could then use to mount a takedown op. After that, they'd go back to just being friends.

Which wasn't really all that bad.

At least she'd always have him in her life.

That was important to her. Important enough that if he ever met someone and fell in love, got married and had a family, she would suck it up and deal so she didn't lose their friendship.

"Mr. and Mrs. Sampson," a voice called out their names.

Opal drew in a breath, willing her stomach to cooperate. There was not worrying her anxiety was going to ruin this before it even started, and then there was having to run out of the lawyer's office to go throw up. That might be taking things a bit too far.

“Time to go do this,” CJ whispered in her ear as he pulled her up with him and guided her over to where the receptionist was waiting for them.

“Ms. Drummer is ready for you,” the young woman informed them as she guided them down a hall away from the waiting room. They turned a corner, walked down another corridor, past half a dozen closed doors, and Opal wondered what lay behind them.

Finally, they stopped outside an oversized wooden door, and the receptionist gave one sharp knock.

“Come in,” a cultured voice called out, and after opening the door for them the receptionist disappeared.

Stepping into the office, the first thing that struck Opal was the expensive furnishings. The desk looked to be solid oak, the two chairs on their side were leather, and the one Beatrice Drummer was sitting in was, too. There was expensive artwork on the walls, and on the bookshelves, she noted a few sculptures that looked like the kind of thing you would see in a gallery.

Sure, lawyers often made a reasonable living, depending on what kind of law they practiced even a good living, but this looked above and beyond what she would expect of an adoption lawyer. From the background check they’d run, she knew that Ms. Drummer drove a Jag, lived in a six-bedroom home in an upscale neighborhood, and had a penchant for shopping. Art and expensive clothes were her thing, and her house was full of both.

Giving them what looked like a fake smile, Beatrice set her phone down and stood, rounding her desk to greet them. “Mr. Sampson.” She shook CJ’s hand and then turned to Opal. “Mrs. Sampson.” When she held out her hand, Opal shook it even though she didn’t really want to. “I don’t usually have someone call me up and demand an appointment immediately. But since you were willing to pay for the privilege, I must say I’m intrigued. Have a seat.”

They all took their seats, and CJ immediately held out his hand. Opal didn’t hesitate to take it. His touch, unlike Beatrice

Drummer's, comforted her rather than adding to her already strung-out nerves.

"Well, who's going to talk?" Beatrice demanded when neither of them spoke.

"I will," Opal said softly. Picturing how she'd felt when Prey's intel had revealed she had been abandoned shortly after birth, Opal let that emotion bleed into her now. Tears filled her eyes, and she didn't try to hold them back. "I want a baby."

The lawyer's calculated gaze moved back and forth between them, sizing them up. "That's to be assumed given my job. Why are you *here*?"

Lifting a hand, Opal brushed a fingertip across the bandage at her neck. "Two days ago, I was mugged. They threatened me, cut me, and took my purse. I realized in that moment as I lay on the ground bleeding, how little I cared about things. I've always wanted children. At first, you just assume it'll happen, you know?"

Beatrice nodded, and from her expression, Opal knew they had the woman hooked. Now they just needed to reel her in.

"We've been together three, almost four years," she said, squeezing CJ's hand. That was true even if it wasn't the whole truth. "In that time, we've endured fourteen miscarriages. We've tried IVF and failed every time. Either none of the embryos take, or I miscarry within a few weeks. I'm getting ... desperate."

"So, you've decided to look into adoption?" Beatrice asked, but Opal could see the wheels spinning in her head. Of all the adoption lawyers in the area, they had pegged her as the most likely to have links to the trafficking ring given her spending habits. There was, of course, no guarantee they were right, but Opal was praying they were.

"It might be our only hope. We'll keep trying, but the reality is, I'll likely never carry a pregnancy to term." Opal pressed her free hand to her stomach, then met Beatrice's gaze squarely. "We will do whatever it takes to make this happen. Yesterday we were married because we believe that will make

us more appealing to mothers looking to put their babies up for adoption. My husband has a good job, we have a nice car, a big house. I don't work so I would be with the baby all day. Money is not an issue for us, Ms. Drummer. We just want a baby."

Desperation had bled into her tone, making her sound more believable. Beatrice didn't need to know that desperation wasn't because she wanted a baby so badly, it was because she wanted the woman to be involved in this ring so they could bring it down.

Ms. Drummer nodded thoughtfully. "You understand this is a slow process. It might take months, or even years for an adoption to go through."

Opal gasped. "Years? I can't wait years for a baby! Carter!" She turned teary eyes to CJ who didn't miss a beat, just reached over, scooped her up, and deposited her on his lap.

"Unacceptable," he snapped. "My wife wants a baby."

There was so much venom in his tone, along with a heavy dose of protective anger, that Beatrice flinched. Not the reaction she had been expecting.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sampson, but you understand this is outside my control. There are a number of steps to go through. Background checks and home visits, we need to make sure you are suitable to add to our list. Even once all of that is done, it doesn't mean you will be chosen for someone to give their baby to."

"Surely there's a way to speed the process up," CJ said in a tone that said the lawyer better find a way to speed it up in their case. "Money talks, make a way for this to happen and I'm sure we can make it more than worth your while."

There was a chance that they would push too hard, and if she was innocent could even report them to the cops if she thought they were implying they'd be willing to purchase a baby. Nothing would come of it once the cops learned they

were with Prey, but it would destroy this cover and they'd have to start again from scratch.

Not giving anything away, Beatrice merely nodded. "I'll bear that in mind. I'm going to have my assistant forward along several forms that will need to be completed. I suggest if you're serious about getting things moving quickly, you have them returned to me as soon as possible. I'll be in touch, but I'll have to see you out now since I fitted this in on such short notice. I do have a prior appointment."

As they said their goodbyes and were ushered out of the office, Opal prayed they'd done enough. This woman was involved, she was sure of it. The only question was had they convinced her that Carter and Ophelia Sampson were prepared to do anything to get themselves a baby?

* * *

DECEMBER 10TH

3:31 P.M.

"YOU SURE WE should be out shopping for baby things?" CJ asked, shoving his hands in his pockets so Opal didn't notice how he was clenching them into fists so tight he wouldn't be surprised if the joints popped out of place.

"It was part of the plan my sisters and I came up with," Opal replied. Since he was walking so slowly, she also slowed down to stay beside him.

"It's not likely they're watching us." If he'd known part of this plan included going into a baby store he likely would have backed out.

Watching Opal's back, pretending to get married, that was no hardship. Even going to the adoption lawyer was bearable. He hadn't liked it, but there were no babies there and he could pretend it was just any old lawyer's office.

But this.

Going to a baby store was something else.

There could be *babies* there.

Even if there weren't there would be pregnant women, people with small children, and baby things everywhere. Cribs, car seats, highchairs, toys, diapers, tiny little onesies.

It was too much.

More than he was capable of handling.

Problem was, the only way to explain why he didn't want to go into the store was to tell Opal everything.

That he couldn't do.

It was one thing to know that nothing long-term could happen with him and Opal, that sooner or later it had to end. It was quite another to actively push her out of his life.

Once she found out what he'd done she'd leave.

Same way his own parents had all but shut him out of their lives and definitely shoved him out of their hearts.

"Probably not, but you never know. We want them to know how desperate we are," Opal said like it was no big deal.

To her it wasn't.

To any normal person walking into a baby store wasn't.

Sure, it might be a little overwhelming, scary even because you were about to become responsible for another life, but he was sure no one else was filled with the same abject terror he was currently struggling to control.

"If we'd supposedly already had multiple miscarriages, wouldn't we already have baby stuff that we bought when you got pregnant?" CJ knew he was clutching at straws, but he was desperate enough to do anything to keep himself out of that store.

Anything but tell her the truth.

Opal shrugged. "Maybe we weren't far enough along in the pregnancies to go shopping. We don't have to actually buy anything, just need to look around a bit. If we are being

watched, we want them to know how desperate we are. Desperate people—especially desperate *rich* people—do stupid things. Stupid things like buy a baby.”

There was no logical argument he could come up with that wouldn't tip her off that this was about more than him not thinking this was necessary.

His pretend wife was smart. In fact, he was surprised she hadn't already picked up on the fact that he avoided babies like the plague. Probably because they didn't have cause to be around babies, she never came to any of the functions he had with his team and their families. His team knew, they just hadn't pushed hard enough to get the answer as to why babies all but brought him out in hives.

No matter how many times they asked he'd never tell.

CJ had already lost one family, he couldn't lose another.

His team might not be his biological family, but they cared about him, would do anything for him, and supported him no matter what. Wasn't that what a family really was?

Despite his slow speed, they'd reached the store. There was no more delaying, no way to prevent them from going inside unless he told her the truth.

When Opal reached for the door, his manners kicked in, and he leaned around her to grab the knob and push it open before she could. Closing it behind them, he grabbed her hand. Opal probably thought he was holding it because they were keeping up their cover, or maybe just because they did sometimes hold hands when they were out, but she'd be wrong.

Holding her hand had nothing to do with her, or their cover, or anything but the fact that he needed to.

Opal was the only thing forcing him to keep it together.

The store was busier than he'd thought, there had to be two dozen customers plus the staff. There were no babies he could see, although he did spot a couple of toddlers and a preschooler accompanying their parents.

That at least allowed him to take a breath and follow Opal over to more onesies than he'd ever seen before in his life. There were plain colored ones, ones with animals, trucks and trains, unicorns and princesses. If he didn't abhor anything baby-related, he was sure he would think they were cute. Instead, looking at them just brought up a whole bunch of horrible memories.

It was obvious from the dreamy look on her face as she picked up a pink one with a ballerina and a little ruffled tulle skirt around it that Opal was having a great time fake baby stuff shopping. "Isn't this the most adorable thing you ever saw? Can you imagine how cute a tiny little baby would look in this? Oh, and look." She tugged free of his grip to go over to the next set of shelves where she retrieved a matching blanket. "It goes with this. And then over here, this ballerina doll matches, too."

CJ couldn't even begin to fake interest in the ballerina toys.

His heart was beating too hard in his chest, making it feel more like a hammer. His skin felt like it was crawling with a million fire ants, and the air in the room seemed to be draining out.

"Do you ever think about having kids?" Opal asked. She'd set the ballerina things back on their respective shelves and placed a hand on her flat stomach.

Just the thought of that stomach rounded with a baby growing inside had his stomach churning.

"I never really had. I mean, living with The Master was a battle just to survive, and then after that, it was all about adjusting to real life. Then we've been busy with Prey, and I couldn't even look at a man and think of them touching me let alone me having a baby with any of them. But now ... I don't know, everything is changing. Ivory and Pearl are married, and Lacey will be soon, too. Ivory and Roman are having a baby. I'm sure Pearl and Lacey will have kids soon, too, and I don't know. Maybe ... one day ... it would be nice. I mean, with the right ... person ... guy. A baby would give you unconditional

love, and you'd never feel lonely again. I'm not ready right now, but one day ... I think maybe I'd like to be a mom."

She turned expectant eyes to him, but there was no way he could force out words past the lump of emotion choking him.

No.

Having babies wasn't something he'd ever wanted.

Not ever in his life.

"CJ? You don't want to have kids?" There was no judgment in her tone, more just curiosity. While she knew he wasn't close with his family, he'd never told her why, and had no intention of doing it now either. She likely suspected that since he'd grown up in a "normal" home—more normal than hers anyway—that of course he'd want kids.

Maybe he would have, too, if tragedy hadn't changed the course of his life.

Did he tell Opal the truth?

If he did, it would put an end to their friends-with-benefits arrangement. If she'd decided that she wanted kids at some point in the future and knew that it would never happen with him, then she'd end things.

As much as it would hurt, and as much as he'd miss her, that could be for the best.

Dragging it out would only wind up hurting them both more in the end.

Better to just rip off the Band-Aid and let them both move on with their lives. Holding onto something that was never going to work out wasn't the way to move forward with your life, and it was well past time that he set Opal free.

She deserved everything he could never give her. A beautiful home filled with love, laughter, and a couple of kids running about. It wasn't fair to keep this thing going because even though they had agreed that it was a no-strings-attached arrangement for fun, he was pretty sure they both saw it as more.

But it wasn't more.

And what it was had run its course.

Hearing Opal come right out and say that she wanted to have a baby one day was the clincher.

The only way to make Opal understand this was for the best was to give her the truth. Some of it anyway.

"No. I don't want to have kids," he told her before turning and walking out of the store.

CHAPTER SEVEN

December 10th

9:08 P.M.

“I HOPE THIS WORKS OUT,” CJ muttered.

Opal did, too.

But not entirely for the reasons she'd taken on this mission.

Of course, it was still important to her to find the people who were abducting pregnant women and selling their babies, but now she also wanted it for CJ.

She was right, something was going on with him, and she would bet everything she owned it had something to do with babies. What exactly, she had no idea, but from the way CJ had looked like he was about to explode when she'd asked him if he wanted to have kids, it was something awful.

Never in the few years they'd known each other had he ever mentioned having an ex or a baby, but that didn't mean he didn't. It could explain why a man who looked like CJ and had a great, friendly, outgoing temperament, was funny, sexy, and protective, had been so willing to settle for a friends-with-benefits arrangement with a shy, kind of odd woman with a horrific past and a whole lot of scars.

Wasn't even like she'd been any good at first, yet he'd stuck around. Was *still* around years later even if something

felt different after his revelation at the baby store.

There was always the possibility that he was seeing other people. It wasn't cheating since they were only friends, but maybe that was how he put up with her.

No.

That didn't make sense.

They spent so much time together when neither was on a mission that she didn't think he had time to fit anyone else into his life.

If he didn't want kids though, she could present the best of both worlds. They could have sex and hang out together, but she would never push for more because they were only friends and they'd already agreed on no-strings. There would be no worries that one day she would bring up having kids or ask for more than they had.

Except ... maybe she wanted more.

Maybe she wanted a husband and children.

Maybe she wanted something normal in her far-from-normal life.

Those fears of not being good enough would always be there, given what she knew of her biological parents and how she had been raised. But did that mean she didn't want to try?

Opal wanted that future with CJ and was sure he felt more for her than friendship the same as she did for him. Was it his fears holding him back?

She was worried about him, but until this case was wrapped up there wasn't a whole lot she could do about it. They had to keep working this and pretend they were a desperate couple looking for a baby. If they didn't keep that as their focus then not only would they miss gathering important intel but one of them might wind up hurt.

"You know what informants are like," she soothed, scanning the restaurant in search of the couple Prey had arranged for them to meet. "They can be hit or miss, but they'll show."

“No way to know that,” he grumbled.

His mood had been foul since he stalked out of the baby store, and she was sure he was trying to push her away. In fact, all he was doing was drawing her closer. The mothering side of her that wanted to care for and tend to others wanted to find out what was wrong and fix it for him.

“We *do* know it,” she corrected. “This couple is desperate for a baby, but when they were presented with an opportunity to circumvent the law and buy one they didn’t. They went to the cops instead.”

The couple hadn’t given the cops anything actionable, other than after a visit to an adoption lawyer they had been approached by a woman who had spoken in vague terms about how far they were willing to go to make their dreams a reality. The lawyer wasn’t the same one she and CJ had visited today, but that didn’t mean they were wrong about Beatrice Drummer. They’d just have to wait and see what the couple had to tell them.

“Ah, told you,” she teased as she spotted a couple walk into the upscale restaurant matching the images they’d been sent by Prey. Even if she didn’t know what the couple looked like, she would have picked these two as their informants because they had that edgy, uncertain look to them like they would spook and run at the first hint of trouble.

Kind of like the man sitting beside her who hadn’t smiled or shot back a witty comeback at her teasing.

As soon as this mission was over, she was going to do whatever it took to get CJ to talk to her. He had never given up on her, and she had no intention of giving up on him. Whatever happened or didn’t happen between them, it didn’t change the fact that they were friends and she cared a great deal about him.

When the couple glanced their way, Opal lifted a hand and flittered her fingers at them in greeting, and they spoke with the maître d who gestured that they should come over to join her and CJ at the table.

“Good evening,” she greeted them when they arrived.

“Umm, hi,” the woman said as her husband pulled out a seat for her. Kavin and Wendy Bourke were an older couple, pushing fifty. They both had high-paying, high-responsibility executive jobs, and according to the background information Prey had sent they had been trying for a child since they were first married in their mid-twenties.

Right now, neither looked like the kind of people who could handle any sort of pressure.

Offering them her most calm and reassuring smile, Opal tried to set them at ease. “We’re so grateful you went to the police with what you know.”

“We don’t *know* anything. Not exactly,” Kavin said quickly.

His wife shot him a look. “We *do*. We know exactly what they were implying. Just because they didn’t spell it out it doesn’t mean it wasn’t crystal clear.” Wendy’s serious gray eyes turned to her. “We both knew as soon as we walked into that meeting that something wasn’t right. I can’t put my finger on exactly what was wrong, it was more just a vibe. A feeling. You know?”

Opal knew. Your gut sometimes figured things out before your brain had all the information for you to draw any sort of rational conclusion.

“We’re going to have you go through everything from the beginning, but first, I have a couple of pictures to show you if that’s okay?” Opal asked. Prey needed to start gathering a picture of the key players so they could move this investigation forward before any more women lost their lives.

“Sure,” Wendy agreed, reaching out to take her husband’s hand. She could see the pain etched in their faces. It must be so hard to want something so badly you’re willing to do anything, or at least you think you are. The Bourkes could have gone ahead, ignored their bad feelings, and focused only on what they wanted, but they hadn’t. They’d done the right thing even though it had been hard.

“You said it was a woman you met with. Was this her?” Opal passed over a picture of Beatrice Drummer.

Recognition flared in both sets of eyes, but Wendy shook her head. “It wasn’t her, the woman was older, but we have seen her before.”

“Where?” she asked, even CJ seemed to perk up at the news.

“She was there the day we met with our lawyer,” Kevin explained. “We saw her leaving the office shortly before we were called to go in.”

Further proof that Beatrice was involved.

“Sorry, the picture quality isn’t great, but what about her?” This time Opal passed the couple a picture of the woman who had shot her that day when she’d stopped the abduction.

Two sets of eyes looked at the image and then immediately back up.

“That’s her,” Wendy confirmed. “The woman we met with. The one who showed us the pictures.”

“What pictures?” CJ asked, speaking up for the first time since the couple arrived.

“The ones that creeped us out,” Wendy replied. “That woman, she called herself Ms. X, had a folder of women she said were looking for adoptive parents for their children. That’s when the bad feeling I got as soon as we met her got worse. Much worse. The women in the pictures weren’t young teens or, you know, too young to raise a baby. They looked healthy, too, not addicts or homeless people or anything. I didn’t understand why any of them would want to give up their babies. I mean, not that there has to be what someone else thinks as a “good” reason, it just felt wrong.”

“Their eyes,” Kevin added. “They looked ... afraid.”

“We worried that they were somehow being coerced and these were black market babies. We want a child so desperately, but not enough to buy one. That’s what was happening, right? Those babies were going to be taken from

their mothers and sold?” Wendy asked, tears shimmering in her eyes.

Reaching across the table, she covered the woman’s hand with her own. “Thanks to you we’re going to find the people involved in this. You might not have gotten a baby of your own, but you’re going to save dozens, likely hundreds of babies.”

Opal hoped that was enough to console the couple.

* * *

DECEMBER 11TH

12:02 A.M.

“ARE you sure my wife and I are safe?” Kavin Bourke asked for what had to be the twentieth time.

“There is no reason to believe that Ms. X has any idea that you went to the cops,” Opal replied with more patience than CJ could have mustered right now.

He wanted out of this restaurant and back to the hotel where he could make an excuse to spend some time alone.

Three hours they’d been going at this. Asking the same questions over and over again only phrased slightly differently in the hopes of garnering more information that Kavin and Wendy Bourke weren’t aware they possessed. Searching for details, everything the couple remembered from their meetings with their lawyer and Ms. X. The questions had continued through the appetizers, entrée, and then dessert. Now the last remnants of their chocolate mousse were gone, and it was finally time to call it a night.

Well, it would be if Mr. Bourke would stop worrying.

They were the ones who had decided to push, try to use their money to their advantage, and skip ahead in the adoption

lines. If it backfired the couple had no one to blame but themselves.

“But she could be watching us,” Kavin persisted. They had already gone over the couple’s safety issues toward the beginning of the evening. It was tedious to have to bring it back up and repeat it all.

CJ wasn’t usually so impatient or lacking in understanding, and it wasn’t even really the Bourkes who had him all tied up in knots.

Nope, it was the stunningly gorgeous, ever-patient, calm, and reassuring woman sitting beside him. Opal hadn’t lost her temper once. She had gone through each question with the confidence that inspired that same confidence in others. She’d gotten the couple relaxed and open, getting more intel out of them because she never made them feel pressured.

She was a wonder to watch work, and he realized that while some elements of undercover work weren’t her forte, she was really good at this. She’d been nervous but not let it get in the way when they were in Beatrice Drummer’s office, and she was a good interviewer because she never made anyone feel judged.

Would she judge him if she knew what he’d done?

“There is always that possibility, Kavin,” Opal said gently. She hadn’t once lied to the couple, and he respected that, too. “But we have people from Prey watching your house and your offices. If anything happens, they’ll be there to protect you.”

“Isn’t Ms. X going to find it suspicious when we don’t get back to her with an answer on whether or not we want to go through with the sale?” Wendy asked.

Again, they’d gone through all of this, but Opal just gave a soft smile. “Likely she will just assume you got cold feet. I’m sure you weren’t the first couple that didn’t take the bait. If you’re worried about it, we can always set up a ruse of some sort. A sick parent, an injured sibling, a financial issue that means you no longer have funds.”

“Can we discuss it ourselves tonight and get back to you tomorrow—uh, later today?” Kavin asked with a glance at his watch.

“Absolutely. You have the number for Prey so you can call any time. You also have the emergency number if something happens,” Opal reminded them.

Wendy Bourke rubbed at her temple. “I’m exhausted. Do you have any more questions or can we go?”

“You can go,” Opal replied. “Someone from Prey will check in with you later in the morning to see if you want to go with a ruse. Thank you for not turning a blind eye to this situation and bringing it to the attention of law enforcement.”

“We wanted to do the right thing,” Kavin said as he stood and took his wife’s hand, helping her stand.

“Well, we appreciate it. Try to get some sleep and know that we are doing everything we can to end this and bring everyone to justice,” Opal assured them.

Gathering their coats and Wendy’s purse, the couple headed toward the exit. Even though it was after midnight the restaurant was still buzzing. The bar was full as were most of the tables.

All the other couples looked happy and in love and then there was him and Opal.

A disaster waiting to happen.

A mess that might not be able to be cleaned up.

What was he going to do about her?

Instead of running away from him when he told her he categorically did not want to have kids, she’d doubled down on her attempts to stay close to him. She had babbled away the entire car ride back to their hotel, then all afternoon, the only time he’d gotten any peace was when she went into the bathroom to get ready for dinner and then when he took his turn.

As much as he wanted to get away from her, avoid the disappointment that was coming if she learned the truth and

the revulsion that would be in her eyes, maybe he also wanted her not to leave him.

Maybe he needed someone who would stay by his side.

Who would care enough about him to consider his feelings, that he was hurting, too?

No one else had ever done that for him, but he was scared to believe Opal might be the exception to the rule.

If she wasn't, he was only setting himself up for more heartbreak.

"I think that went as well as we could have hoped for, don't you?" Opal asked, turning to face him.

"Hmm," he gave a non-committal grunt and hated the hurt in Opal's eyes.

She hadn't done anything wrong, yet he was punishing her pre-emptively for sins he believed she would commit.

CJ hated that made him a jerk, but more than that, he hated that it made him someone unworthy of Opal's kindness, just another man she couldn't trust.

"Sorry, I'm just tired," he apologized. It wasn't untrue, he *was* tired, but it was more a weariness born of being shunned by the very people who were supposed to give him unconditional love.

"It's okay," Opal said, moving to stand.

Grabbing her hand, he halted her. "No, it's not. Don't let me get away with being a jerk when you know you deserve better."

The grin she shot him was the embodiment of the goodness that lived inside her. "Okay, I'll get to work on ways to punish you," she teased before growing serious. "I don't think you're just tired, in fact, I know you're not. Something is going on with you, and while I hope you know you can trust me and tell me what it is, I know I can't make you."

His perceptive girl was right.

There was no way she would think this was just exhaustion after he'd acted out of character several times in the last few days. From leaving her apartment without saying goodbye, to his admission he never wanted kids, to being rude. Of course, she knew something was up.

"Come on, let's go back to our honeymoon suite and I'll let you make love to me before we go to bed," Opal said as she took his hand.

Little did she know that he'd happily forgo sex just to be able to hold her in his arms all night long. Pretend just for a little while that she was his to keep.

The street was quiet as they headed for their car, and once CJ had helped Opal in, closed her door for her, and driven off, there wasn't a lot of traffic to contend with.

They were about halfway there, just turned down a secluded street when all of a sudden, a black van pulled out in front of them, blocking their path.

An engine revved, and CJ turned to see another black van come in behind them.

"We're trapped," Opal said, no panic in her tone, more observational.

"You armed?"

"Is the pope catholic?" she quipped. "You know the first time someone said that to me I honestly had no idea what they were talking about. The Master didn't have religion in his curriculum. We should wait," she added when he went to reach for his weapon. "See what they want. What if they're with Ms. X?"

"Then they could know that we just met with a couple who turned down an opportunity to buy a baby and know we're not who we said we were." It was one thing to allow himself to be taken if it was just him.

But putting Opal in danger ...?

That he wasn't sure he could do, even knowing how well-trained she was and what she did for a living.

“Don’t think we have much of a choice. There are over a dozen of them and only two of us.”

“I’ll take those odds,” he said, more confident in them than he was in whoever this Ms. X had hired.

“CJ, trust me,” Opal said, placing her hand over his on the steering wheel.

Normally, he had no problem trusting her, but this time if she was wrong it meant signing the death warrant of the woman it was becoming harder and harder not to admit he loved.

CHAPTER EIGHT

December 11th

12:36 A.M.

OPAL COULD TELL it went against everything CJ stood for not to pick up his weapon.

But he did it.

For her.

Whatever reason he had for trying to push her away—and she was positive that was what he had been doing—it wasn't that he didn't care about her.

Perhaps it was even that he cared *too* much.

So much that it scared him.

Maybe she wasn't the only one who had felt things between them changing these last couple of months. Growing into something more.

“Thank you,” she whispered as their eyes met. Even in the car's mostly dark interior, she could see the stark fear in his dark eyes. There was no guarantee this was going to work out in their favor, but then again that was life.

There were no guarantees ever.

They could be about to be tortured for information and then murdered, or they could be interrogated to prove they

weren't going to go to the cops. There was no way to tell, but she trusted in herself and CJ and their abilities.

Their gazes held as their car doors were opened, and hands reached in to grab them. They were roughly dragged out, both of them fighting as though they were just a regular couple and not the highly trained operatives they truly were.

“Get your hands off my wife,” CJ bellowed as he pretended to struggle against the two men restraining him. He could likely take both of them in his sleep.

“If you cooperate, she won't be hurt,” one of the men dressed all in black told him.

“You hurt one hair on her head, and I'll kill you,” CJ returned. The guard laughed like he thought the threat was ridiculous. They really had no idea who they were dealing with, and she prayed that was because their cover was still intact and nobody knew they were really an undercover Prey operative and a SEAL.

Their hands were bound in front of them with plastic zip ties, blindfolds were placed over their eyes, and strips of cloth were used as fairly ineffective gags. Then they were hauled over to what she assumed was one of the black vans that had boxed them in, and shoved into the back.

She was pushed onto what felt like a bench and could feel a presence hovering beside her. One of the guards, not CJ. Although he was here, too. A moment later she felt something brush against her boot and knew it was CJ's shoe. The space in the back of the van was tight, and his knees touched hers as she heard the door slam closed.

A moment later they were off.

No one spoke, and as they drove she counted out lots of one hundred, then memorized each turn they took. If this was just them being checked out to make sure they weren't the kind of couple who would run to the cops, then they would likely be returned to their vehicle later tonight. But it never hurt to be prepared and know how to find her way back in case they needed to.

With her best estimate about fifteen minutes later they pulled to a stop.

The same man who had sat beside her, close enough that their thighs rested against one another, grabbed her arm and guided her out of the van. Since she had no idea where they were or where they were going, couldn't even see where they were going, she had no choice but to let him lead her along.

They entered a building and walked through several corridors. Again, she counted out lots of tens this time, and noted each turn they made. When they stopped, she could hear a key in a lock and then a door opening. She was walked into the room and shoved, reasonably gently, into a chair.

Her still bound hands were pulled out in front of her and hooked onto something, and then the blindfold was removed but the gag left on. The light in the room was dim enough that it didn't bother her eyes too much.

Opal found herself in an interview room. More like the kind you would find in a police station than the kind Prey mostly used in the underground rooms at their offices. Those were more for torturing information out of people, this was more a regular question-and-answer kind of room.

Minutes ticked by and she was left alone. CJ wasn't here, and she assumed they had been separated so their answers could be checked and confirmed they were the same.

Too bad for their abductors that both she and CJ had studied their cover story in great detail, memorizing all of it.

Their answers would be the same.

About twenty minutes later a woman walked in. Opal immediately pegged her as the one who had shot her a few days ago.

Was that what had tipped them off?

Did the woman think it was odd that she shot someone in the neck and then a couple of days later a couple shows up talking about being desperate for a baby and the woman has a neck injury?

Or did her shooter not even know where or even if she'd shot her victim?

For a long moment the woman—Ms. X—just stood there and watched her. While Opal herself would have had no problem remaining calm and not fidgeting under the stare, she wasn't Opal right now, she was Ophelia Sampson.

Ophelia Sampson would be terrified out of her mind.

Allowing a few tears to trickle down her cheeks, she allowed a sob to choke past the gag. Thankfully, she had always been able to cry on cue, so she knew she looked believably distressed.

Ms. X rolled her eyes, then reached out and pulled down the gag. "No need to make a fuss, nobody hurt you. Right?" she prodded when Opal just sat there.

Giving a shaky nod, Opal hiccupped and shrunk in on herself as though trying to make herself as small a target as possible.

"Do you know why you're here?" Ms. X asked as she took a seat on the opposite side of the table.

Opal shook her head.

"I think you do. I think you know exactly why you're here."

While she believed it was because Ms. X didn't want to waste her time on another couple who were going to pull out, she wasn't going to say that. If the woman wanted to check out her and CJ to see if they were trustworthy, then Opal certainly wasn't going to admit she thought there was a possibility that Ms. X thought they were traitors.

"I believe you met with an acquaintance of mine, and expressed interest in something," Ms. X said.

Letting her eyes widen as though she only just now understood what was going on, Opal gave a tentative nod.

"I was led to believe you were quite desperate for something. Is that true?"

Another nod.

“Speak,” Ms. X snapped, and she let out a startled squeak.

“Y-yes. A baby. I want a baby,” she murmured.

“Your husband said you were willing to pay to make it happen. Is that true?”

“H-he wants me to be h-happy. A b-baby is everything I’ve a-always wanted,” she stammered.

“Good. Very good. I’m sure you understand that in my line of work I can’t be too careful. Once you answer a few questions, you and your husband will be free to go. Assuming everything checks out, I’ll then be in touch with more information.”

Perfect.

Their cover wasn’t blown, and Ms. X had made a major mistake bringing them to her place of business. Opal knew the way back here. This meant this place could be raided as soon as she and CJ got back and alerted Prey to what had happened.

Knowing that this woman was soon to be taken down had her fighting back a smile.

“You’ll give us a baby?” she asked, making her tone innocent and hopeful.

“Not give, darling. Nothing in life is free.”

Confirmation that this woman ran the baby trafficking ring. Just what she’d wanted to hear.

Still, she wanted Ms. X to spell it out so there could be no back-peddling.

“You’re going to s-sell us a baby?”

“Anything can be bought for the right price, and you indicated money was no issue. Sometimes in life you have to pay for what you want. Since you made it clear that wasn’t a problem, I am confident I can provide what you’re after.”

“What questions do you need to ask?” This time she infused more hopefulness and a little less desperation into her

voice, wanting to convey she was still willing to move ahead with this.

For the next several minutes she answered questions about herself and CJ. How long they'd known each other, what he did for a living, their pasts, and family backgrounds. Opal answered each question with ease, grateful that she and CJ had managed to pull off this undercover operation.

Soon this ring would be dismantled, and then it was time for her and CJ to talk because she needed to know if he felt the same thing she did about them and their relationship.

If he did, then maybe there would be no more single Smith sisters.

If he didn't, then she wasn't sure she could continue with their friends-with-benefits relationship.

* * *

DECEMBER 11TH

1:43 A.M.

"COME ON," CJ muttered into the silent car.

He'd been back here for ten minutes, and there had been no sign of Opal so far.

When he'd been blindfolded once again—no gag this time—and walked back out to the van, he'd assumed that Opal would be there as well. But the van had been empty. He hadn't sensed her presence, and when he'd been returned to the vehicle it had been likewise empty.

Where was she?

CJ had spent the first couple of minutes staring out the window assuming she would be dropped off shortly after him, but so far that hadn't happened.

It couldn't be that she had failed the interrogation because if that had happened, he wouldn't have been let go. If they'd

failed likely Ms. X would have had both of them killed, probably in a way that made it look like a tragic accident.

So why hadn't she been let go along with him?

Scenarios began to run through his mind, along with possible plans on how he could get back to wherever they'd been taken and break her out by force. CJ let another minute tick by, then another, but by the time it hit fifteen he was ready to make a move.

If something *was* wrong, then the longer he sat around doing nothing, the worse the situation could get.

Just as he was about to pull out his cell phone and put in a call to Prey, he saw the flash of headlights. A moment later a black van pulled up beside his vehicle.

CJ didn't hesitate.

Throwing open his door, he ran to the back of the van, arriving there just as it was thrown open and a blindfolded Opal was guided out. Shoving the guard's hands off her, he growled at the man, then pulled off the blindfold and yanked Opal into his arms.

Her wrists were still bound so she couldn't hug him back, but she buried her face against his neck and inhaled. From the small tremors rippling through her slim body, he knew she had been worried enough that her relief to be back in his arms was equivalent to his.

Almost.

Because it was hard to imagine her being more afraid than he had been when he'd gotten back here, and she wasn't waiting for him.

When one of the guards put a hand on Opal's shoulder, CJ threw a glare his way.

"Sorry, Mister, was just going to cut her bonds." The man held up a pair of scissors.

No way was anyone else putting their hands on Opal again. Snatching the scissors from the man's hand, he eased Opal

back and cut the zip ties, careful not to nick her skin in the process. Then he all but tossed the scissors back at the guard.

“Tell your boss if she tries anything like that again, she won’t like the consequences,” he snarled. Then he tucked Opal against his side and led her to the car, helping her inside and buckling her seatbelt for her.

By the time he’d rounded the car and buckled his own belt, the van had taken off.

Reaching out, he palmed Opal’s cheek. She turned her face into it, and her lips touched a featherlight kiss to the inside of his wrist.

CJ closed his eyes and willed his heart to slow its frantic race. Opal was here, she was unharmed, and they had achieved exactly what they set out to. They had made contact with the head of the baby buying ring, and now they could send in a team, dismantle it, and hopefully rescue any pregnant women currently being kept prisoner, and send home any infants that hadn’t been sold. Even if those babies had lost their mothers, they likely still had fathers, grandparents, or siblings who would be thrilled to get them back.

When he opened his eyes again, Opal was smiling at him, her gaze soft.

“I’m okay, CJ.”

Okay was relative as far as he was concerned. She wasn’t bleeding and she didn’t have any broken bones, but she’d still been snatched and bound, taken and interrogated, so he didn’t think okay actually applied.

Red marks on her wrists might be the only outward sign that anything had happened tonight, but still he was desperate to wipe them away. Picking up her hands, he smoothed the pad of his thumb across the marks then brought her hands to his lips and trailed a line of kisses around her wrists.

“Let’s go back to the hotel,” she said softly.

Releasing her was harder than he’d thought it would be. Coming so close to losing her tonight, just one wrong word and they would have been killed, had made him confront his

feelings for this gorgeous woman. Beautiful inside and out, Opal was everything anyone could ever want in a life partner.

She was everything *he* wanted.

Why hadn't he made a move on her before now?

Fear maybe, he wondered as he turned the engine on and started driving them back towards the hotel. One of his hands held tightly to one of hers, their fingers laced together, he was unwilling to completely break contact with her. He'd gotten comfortable in their arrangement, and while lately he'd been wondering if maybe it was time to end things because he knew he couldn't give her what she wanted, maybe there was a way to work around it.

How, he had no idea, but if you wanted something badly enough then you found a way—any way—to make it happen.

He wanted Opal.

Not just for sex. Not just for friendship.

He wanted her for everything.

Would she even give him a chance now that she knew he was never going to give her the children she wanted?

It could already be too late ... CJ couldn't even think about it. Not now when his emotions felt raw, his heart battered from too much emotion crammed into too short a time.

In the last few hours, he'd gone from confessing to Opal he didn't want kids to watching her being manhandled and thrown into a van. Add in the overwhelming relief of having her back, and he couldn't think of anything but how lucky he was to have this woman in his life, and how desperate he wanted to keep her there.

They didn't speak during the drive or when he parked in the hotel's underground lot. CJ opened Opal's car door for her and again took her hand, entwining their fingers, wanting to find a way to tie Opal to him so she couldn't leave even if he couldn't ever give her what she wanted.

Selfish.

He was being selfish, but looking at his future and not seeing Opal as part of it wasn't an option.

Desperation to claim her, make it so she could never leave him, overwhelmed him and the second they stepped into their suite, his mouth descended on hers.

Seemed he wasn't the only one who was desperate to connect because Opal's hands went immediately to his zipper.

Right now, he didn't have it in him to give her sweet and gentle.

Yanking up her dark red skirt, his hands spanned her waist, and he lifted her and pressed her against the wall. Opal's legs hooked around his hips, bringing the tip of his hard length right against her soft heat.

"Need this hard and fast, Piccolina," he warned as he lined her hips up.

"I don't care how you take me, CJ, just hurry up and do it," she begged.

"I got you, baby." With a single thrust he entered her, the pressure inside him mounting as her tight muscles quivered around him.

Opal moaned as he filled her, her head tipping back, the hands she'd braced on his shoulders going lax. Trailing kisses along her neck, he nipped at her lips then swept the tip of his tongue across their plump softness.

"Touch yourself," he ordered. "I want my good girl to get what she deserves."

"Why is it such a turn-on when you call me a good girl?" Opal asked on a breathy sigh as she slipped a hand between her legs to where their bodies joined and began to stroke her bud.

A laugh rumbled through him, making the tension bleed away. "The same reason it's such a turn-on for me every time I see heat flare in your eyes when I call you a good girl."

His hips rocked, and Opal's body began to squirm as her orgasm grew closer. He held back his pleasure, unwilling to

succumb to it until his gorgeous girl came first.

“CJ, I need ...” Frustration lined her voice as her eyes begged him for whatever she needed to find her release.

“You need this.” He kissed her hard as one of his hands covered hers and pressed against her bundle of nerves.

Nothing was more beautiful than Opal when she came.

A cry tumbled from her lips, her internal muscles clamped around his, her hips undulating against him as he thrust into her, and he finally allowed himself his own release.

Every time with her seemed to get better than the one before.

He'd be a fool to let her and what they shared slip through his fingers.

But his secrets meant losing her was already a foregone conclusion, even as he was desperate to find a way to make her his forever.

CHAPTER NINE

December 11th

9:15 A.M.

SHE WAS GOING to be sick.

Opal shoved back the covers and scrambled off the mattress. She and CJ had made love several times after that frantic round as soon as they entered the suite, and by the time they were finally ready to collapse under the covers and go to sleep, she was too tired to bother about clothes.

Now she was glad because her skin felt overheated, and she didn't have to worry about anything getting in the way as she ran into the bathroom and dropped to her knees in front of the toilet.

She had just emptied the contents of her stomach when the door banged open—had she closed it? She didn't remember doing so but must have—and CJ came running in.

“Piccolina, you okay?”

Water turned on, but she closed her eyes in a desperate attempt to still the room from spinning and sank down against the tiles.

A moment later, she felt him settle in behind her and something pleasantly cool was placed across her forehead.

“What's the matter, honey?”

“Sick,” she croaked.

The last couple of weeks her stomach had been feeling a little off, kind of queasy every now and then, but she just thought she'd eaten something that had disagreed with her, maybe even picked up a food allergy of some sort.

But today she felt awful.

Her stomach had hopped on a carousel without her consent, and for some reason, her brain wanted to join in.

CJ moved the washcloth and touched the back of his hand to her forehead. "You're burning up," he muttered, replacing the cloth.

"I could have told—" Opal broke off her half-hearted retort as bile churned in her stomach again.

If it wasn't for CJ and his help, she wouldn't have made it to the toilet in time even though she was slumped against the tiles right beside it.

As she vomited, CJ gathered back her hair and held it away from her face, his other hand smoothing slow circles on her back. The motion did its intended job and soothed her, and Opal found she was way too exhausted and ill to even care that he was witnessing her throwing up like she was blind drunk.

Not that she'd ever been drunk.

To be honest, the idea of it had just never appealed to her. She knew what it was like to hand control of yourself over to someone else. In her mind, allowing alcohol to take over was the same thing.

Opal threw up until there was nothing left in her system to actually bring up except bile, and even then, her stomach muscles kept contracting, convinced there was something there when there wasn't.

CJ never left her side, his hand alternating between circles and stroking the length of her spine. His presence was every bit as comforting as the gentle touches.

Exhausted, Opal leaned back against him, allowing him to take her weight for a moment.

She was safe here.

With him.

Content in that knowledge, Opal let him wrap an arm around her waist and shift her until she was propped up against the side of the bath. Then he straightened and moved beside her to turn on the faucet.

“Bubbles?”

“Mmm, yes, please.”

“You pack those essential oils you’re obsessed with?”

She managed a small smile at his teasing. CJ hated the smell of her oils, and yet he had never once told her she couldn’t use them when she was at his place. “Course.”

“Which one for when you’re feeling sick?” he asked as he headed for her toiletry bag on the vanity.

“Lavender or peppermint.” Ginger also worked well for nausea, but she wasn’t a fan of the fragrance.

“If I use peppermint you’ll smell like a candy cane,” he teased. “We’ll go with lavender.” He added it and the bubbles to the water, and as steam began to fill the bathroom, Opal felt herself relax a little. Being sick sucked, but it was so nice to have someone there to take care of her.

“You think you need to throw up again?” he asked, turning off the faucet and crouching before her. There was so much tenderness, so much concern, and even a huge dollop of love in the dark eyes that watched her with unveiled worry that her eyes began to tear.

Being sick always turned her into an emotional mess.

“Think I’m done for now,” she managed.

“All right, then in you go.” Carefully, he gathered her into his arms, then lowered her into the sweet-smelling, bubble-filled tub. Once he had her settled, he touched the back of his hand to her forehead again. “Still warm, you want to keep this on?” He held up the cool washcloth.

The contrast of the warmth cocooning her and the cool cloth on her head sounded lovely, so she nodded and he draped

it over her forehead again.

Opal let her eyes drift closed.

Even though she'd slept well, she felt a bone-deep kind of tired.

"I was waiting till you woke up to order room service. You think you can eat anything?"

Her face immediately scrunched in distaste at the thought of eating, and she placed a hand on her stomach, praying it didn't revolt.

Obviously reading her body language, CJ said, "You need to keep your strength up. Maybe some crackers and ginger ale."

"I hate ginger ale, and I doubt a hotel like this will have crackers."

"If you pay for it, they'll get it for you. I'll tell them whatever it takes, you need crackers. Besides, Eagle's footing the bill and it's not like he's hurting for money."

She snorted. "I'm sure he'd love to know his hard-earned dollars are being spent on buying off a hotel to go find crackers."

"For you, he won't mind."

Actually, that was true.

Eagle had always been protective of her and her sisters. He had gone above and beyond to make sure they were taken care of after they were rescued.

"Don't feel like crackers anyway," she said, shifting so she was covered up to the neck with the soft, fluffy bubbles.

"Maybe fresh fruit then," CJ suggested.

Since she knew he was going to keep firing suggestions at her until she accepted one of them she gave a tired nod. Actually, fruit didn't sound all that bad now that she thought about it. Especially fresh and crisp, cool and sweet.

"Kay," she agreed.

“Perfect. I’ll order sparkling water, too. Don’t want you to get dehydrated. As soon as you finish your bath you can get back into bed. You need sleep to get better.”

“I can’t go back to bed. I never sleep past seven,” she protested.

“It’s nearly nine-thirty, sweetheart,” CJ informed her gently.

Her eyes popped open. “No way.”

CJ laughed. “Way.”

“I never sleep that late.”

“Well, you did today. Your body knew what you needed even if your brain would have disagreed. And you go for a nap. No disagreements. If you want to get well then you need to rest, take care of yourself.”

“Trust me, I don’t want to feel like this again any time soon.” Nausea, dizziness, extreme tiredness, not her idea of a good time. At all.

“Maybe I should take you to the doctor,” CJ said. He looked so worried that all she wanted to do was wipe it away.

“Don’t need a doctor,” she assured him.

“We could probably get one to make a house call. Well, hotel call.”

“Don’t need a doctor, CJ.”

“Did they drug you last night?”

“No. Blindfold, gag, zip ties.”

“Could they have put something on the gag?”

“Doubt it. I didn’t feel off last night, not until I woke up this morning.”

“Did they give you anything to eat? To drink?”

Amusement had her smiling despite feeling awful. CJ was adorable when he worried like this. “No, they didn’t. Even if they had offered, I would have said no in case the food or drink had been spiked.”

Opal didn't take offense at CJ acting like she was some novice at this when she had years more experience than he did. She understood he was just worrying, and it was as sweet as it was heartwarming.

"It's probably just the stomach flu," she assured him.

"Or that couple last night were a plant to see if we were who we said we were," he muttered under his breath, making her laugh.

"You're clutching at straws now," she told him. As cute as he was being, she was tired and knew there was nothing wrong with her that some rest wouldn't cure.

He'd been pacing around the bathroom, but now he came to stand beside the bath, stooping down to touch a kiss to the tip of her nose. "Just hate seeing you sick, Piccolina."

Opal reached out and caught his hand, giving it a squeeze. "And I love that about you. But, seriously, stop worrying. I'll be fine."

"If you're not feeling better this afternoon, I'm taking you to a doctor."

She laughed. "Fine. You have a deal. Until then I promise to do nothing but relax in here and get lots of sleep."

"And eat fruit and drink water."

"And eat fruit and drink water," she agreed with a grin.

"You keep that promise, and I promise to take care of my very best girl."

His words probably shouldn't make her go all soft and gooey inside because he'd made it clear yesterday that he didn't want kids and saw that as a barrier between them.

Was it?

Possibly.

But not one that was insurmountable.

If he trusted her enough to tell her why he didn't want kids and was willing to work with her so they could find a way to

be together for real.

* * *

DECEMBER 11TH

2:22 P.M.

“STAY THERE. I’ll come round and get you.”

Instead of getting annoyed with him for being so bossy, Opal merely appeared amused as she smiled at him. “I have an upset stomach, not a broken leg, I’m perfectly capable of walking the thirty yards or so to the doctor’s office.”

“Wait there,” CJ grumbled the order as he climbed out of the car. Although he’d called a couple of doctors to see if one could make a house call to the hotel, none could make it there until tonight, and he didn’t want to wait that long.

Even though Opal had told him she hadn’t eaten or drunk anything when they’d been ambushed last night, and that no one had drugged her, he wasn’t quite so sure. It wasn’t that he thought Opal was lying to him, he knew she wasn’t. If she’d been drugged it would have been the first thing she told him when they brought her back to the vehicle. It also wasn’t that he thought she didn’t have the training he did. He might be a SEAL, but Opal had been trained in how to kill and withstand torture since she was a toddler.

But even the best of training didn’t make you infallible.

There was the possibility that she had come into contact with a drug and was just unaware of it.

Something was going on with her. That he knew for certain. She was lethargic, nauseous, and dizzy. Even though she’d tried a little of the fruit room service had brought up, she hadn’t been able to keep it down.

That was when he knew he was taking her to the doctor whether she liked it or not.

He and Opal had updated Prey on what had happened with Ms. X as soon as they finished that first round of lovemaking. This morning when he realized Opal was sick, he'd called back in again, letting Fox and the others know there was a chance that she'd been drugged or poisoned last night.

When he'd told them that Opal was positive that nothing had happened, none of them had appeared particularly concerned, but agreed he should take her to get checked out. Better to be safe now than sorry later.

By the time he'd rounded the car, Opal had thrown open her door and was swinging her legs out.

"Told you to wait, Piccolina," he rebuked as he scooped her up before she could protest again.

While he was sure he caught an eye roll, she didn't say anything and allowed him to carry her the thirty feet to the doctor's surgery front door and inside. A nurse shot them a startled look and jumped out of her chair.

"Is everything okay? What happened to her?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Opal said, pushing at his shoulders, but he refused to release his hold.

"We have an appointment with Dr. Kimmi at fourteen-thirty hours," he said briskly.

"Two thirty," Opal added as though the woman would be unable to figure out simple military time.

"Opal Smith?" the nurse said.

"That's me. He's just being dramatic. I really can walk just fine," Opal said, shooting him a frown that was quite dramatic itself.

The nurse grinned widely. "Men, huh, dear? They can't help you with the laundry or take out the trash without a dozen reminders, but they like to go all macho when their woman is sick."

CJ expected Opal to comment about how they weren't a couple, but instead, her frown turned into an indulgent smile.

“He’s pretty good at remembering to take out the trash, and he actually enjoys laundry,” she teased.

“Better hold on tight to him then, dear.” The nurse winked then returned to her desk and began tapping away at her computer.

“You know you don’t have to tell everyone we meet that I enjoy doing laundry,” he muttered as he carried her toward the seating area.

Opal laughed and ruffled his hair. “But *no one* likes laundry.”

“Not no one because *I* like it,” he shot back, making her laugh again. There was a little color back in her cheeks, making her look not quite so washed out, and if she was teasing him then she must be feeling a little better. If mocking him about his enjoyment of doing laundry made her feel better, then he was more than happy to take it.

Anything to put that smile on her face.

“Opal Smith?” Dr. Kimmi called out, scanning the waiting area.

“Here she is,” he replied, diverting from toward the seats to the room the doctor had come out of.

“Good afternoon,” the pretty young woman greeted them as she guided them into her office. “Why don’t you pop her down over there.” The doctor pointed to the exam table, where he gently placed Opal. “Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“She’s been throwing up all morning. Can’t keep anything down, and is tired and lethargic,” CJ replied before Opal could, earning him a small scowl. “There’s also a chance she might have come into contact with something that made her sick, so she’ll need bloodwork done.”

The doctor’s eyes widened. “What kind of something?”

“Nothing,” Opal hurried to reassure the other woman. “He’s just being overly cautious. We had a little ... situation.” The doctor’s eyes moved to the bandage taped to Opal’s neck,

and they let her assume it had something to do with that. “It’s extremely unlikely I was exposed to anything.”

“Better safe than sorry,” he said firmly. Bloodwork was getting done even if it took him pushing the issue to make it happen.

Dr. Kimmi looked between the two of them, then said gently, “How about we have your gentleman friend step out and I’ll do a quick exam and take some blood.”

As much as he didn’t want to leave Opal alone when she was sick, so long as blood was going to be drawn that was what was important.

“You good with that?” he checked with Opal. When she nodded, he dropped a kiss to her forehead, pleased to see she was cooler than she’d been when he’d found her on her knees in front of the toilet, then headed out to the waiting room.

Seconds ticked by, turning into minutes.

Edgy with her out of his sight, and anxious to find out what was wrong with her, whether it was a simple stomach bug like Opal claimed or something more sinister, CJ paced as he waited.

If Ms. X was responsible for Opal being sick he would make sure the woman paid. They still didn’t have the woman’s real identity, but thanks to Opal’s memory they had been able to hand Prey an exact location for where they’d been taken, Prey was now running a thorough check into the building

Someone from Prey had stopped by the hotel this morning to check the vehicle, and they’d discovered a tracker. Likely it had been placed on their vehicle when they’d had their initial meeting with Beatrice Drummer. It explained how Ms. X’s men had known where to find them last night.

According to the intel Prey had given him this morning while Opal had been napping, the building they had been taken to was a large warehouse with a converted loft apartment. Probably where Ms. X lived and ran her trafficking ring as well.

They'd know soon enough because the place was going to be raided by Prey tomorrow.

As a SEAL, he couldn't operate on US soil. Gathering intel was one thing, but participating in the raid was out. With Opal sick, he was happy enough to leave the raid to Prey anyway and take care of his girl.

Because, yeah, he was done thinking of her as anything else.

There had to be a way to convince her they didn't need to have kids to be happy.

The door to Dr. Kimmi's room opened, and he immediately hurried toward Opal when she stepped out.

"Everything okay?" he asked, glancing at the doctor behind her.

"Yes, she took a urine sample and a blood sample," Opal said, holding up her arm with the sleeve of her sweater shoved up, to show him the tape across the inside of her elbow where the doctor had drawn blood.

"We'll be in touch with the results," Dr. Kimmi told them.

After taking care of the bill, CJ guided Opal out and back into the car. The visit had obviously worn her out because her head immediately listed to the side, resting against the window, her eyes drooping closed.

Quiet as he tried to be, when he picked her up out of the car when they reached the hotel, she immediately woke up.

"We back here already?"

"Time flies when you're napping, Sleeping Beauty."

"That would make you my prince," she said a little sleepily as she nuzzled her head onto his shoulder.

"And as your prince, it's my job to get my princess up to our room, tucked up in bed, and take care of anything she needs."

"You make a good prince," Opal murmured, from the sounds of things already half asleep. "The Prince and Sleeping

Beauty got a happy ever after. Think we'll ever get one?"

There was no point in answering because she had already drifted off to sleep and probably had no idea she'd even asked that, but the question stayed with him for a long time. An hour later, after he'd tucked her into bed, given her water and the pills the doctor had prescribed, and was watching her sleep, he was still wondering.

Was it possible for them to have a happy ever after?

Or was it a disaster waiting to happen to even consider it?

CHAPTER TEN

December 12th

10:37 A.M.

“SORRY, this isn’t much of a honeymoon, even if it isn’t a real one,” Opal said with a groan as her stupid stomach spun in another slow revolution.

“Don’t worry about it, Piccolina. I’m not upset about the honeymoon, I’m worried about you.”

CJ fussed about, tucking the blanket tighter around her, and then handed her a steaming mug of tea. Usually, she preferred hot chocolate but right now the tea, with a little lemon and sugar, was the only thing her stomach seemed to be able to tolerate.

“I felt so much better last night,” she moaned, well and truly ready for this to be over. Maybe it was a good thing CJ had insisted she go to the doctor. While Opal didn’t think she had been drugged or poisoned when they were taken by Ms. X, it was starting to feel like *something* was wrong with her.

After a nap when they got back from the doctor, she’d woken up feeling a whole lot better. She’d taken a nice hot shower, eaten a little dinner, and she and CJ had watched a movie before making it a reasonably early night. She’d slept well until around six when she woke up needing to throw up again.

“See, taking you to the doctor was a good thing,” CJ said as he perched on the edge of the couch where she was sitting, curled in on herself.

Opal wasn't so sick she couldn't manage an eye roll. “You're not going to let that one go, are you?”

“Not anytime soon.” He shot her one of those winning grins she knew could melt the panties off any woman within a ten-mile radius. It had certainly melted her panties the first time he'd aimed that smile her way, and she hadn't even liked sex back then and had been afraid of men.

It was weird that she had never once been scared of CJ.

The universe trying to tell her something?

“Get some more sleep.” His hand stroked her hair, and he leaned in to touch a kiss to her forehead.

Things were changing between them. Opal could feel it happening, she just wasn't sure if she should try to put a stop to it. There was no use pretending anymore that she wasn't madly in love with this man and had been for probably at least the last year. But she wanted kids, more so now that Ivory and Roman were expecting their first, and CJ didn't.

Was it fair to try to talk him into changing his mind?

Could she change her mind for him?

She honestly wasn't sure, and right now, didn't have the energy to try to figure it out.

Time.

They had plenty of time.

No use worrying about it now.

Her eyes drifted closed, and she was just sliding toward sleep when she heard a phone ring.

“Fox, what do we know?”

Although he tried to be quiet, she heard him, and assuming this was about Ms. X and the planned raid on her warehouse,

she sat up and turned to watch him. He threw her a frown and gestured that she lie back down, but Opal just shook her head.

This was her mission. Well, theirs, and she wasn't letting being sick bump her off it.

Even though he clearly wasn't pleased, CJ walked back toward the couch. "Hold on, Fox. Opal is awake, and I know she wants to hear this, too, so I'll put you on speaker."

"How you feeling, sweetheart?" Fox asked a moment later.

"Eh, been better. What did you guys find out?"

"As you know we found a tracker on your car, likely placed there while you guys were meeting with the lawyer and expressing an interest in doing whatever it took to get a baby," Fox said.

CJ had filled her in on that yesterday evening when she'd been feeling better. It turned out to be a good thing they'd gone to the baby store, it was likely why Ms. X had made a move so quickly. She could tell they were desperate—well Ophelia and Carter Sampson were—and wanted to make her move right away.

"Because you remembered the way back there it was easy enough to find the warehouse. Good work on that one, Opal."

She poked CJ in the ribs where she knew he was ticklish, and he swatted her hand away. "See, I told you letting them take us was the right move."

Snagging a hold of her hand, he lifted it to his mouth and feathered kisses on the sensitive skin on the inside of her wrist making her squirm as heat pooled between her legs. Not even her queasy stomach was enough to stop her body from responding to CJ's touch. His smile was smug as he said, "Yeah, you're a regular old genius."

"Once we had a location, our tech guys started digging into it. It's owned by what appears to be a shell corporation. According to the company's website, they import and export baby goods," Fox told them.

“Means no one would blink an eye when they order things to look after the pregnant women and their babies,” CJ said.

“Exactly,” Fox said. “But the company doesn’t actually have contacts with any stores in the country or anywhere else.”

“Who’s the owner of the company?” she asked. Opal assumed it was this Ms. X woman, but it could be a fictitious person if the woman wanted to completely keep herself off the radar.

“A man called Joe Riviera,” Fox replied.

“So not Ms. X,” she said, disappointed.

“No and yes.”

“What does that mean?” she asked Fox.

“It means that Joe Riviera died almost fifty years ago. He and his wife were killed in a light plane crash. The couple’s two-year-old daughter survived the crash. Elsbeth Riviera was taken in by an aunt and uncle who had three kids of their own and were also foster parents.”

“Abuse?” CJ asked.

“None ever reported. Looks more like they used the system as a payday. Mostly took in babies on a short-term basis for the money. Although they both had jobs, they liked an extravagant lifestyle. Babies in their care were fed and clothed but done on a budget, most of the money they kept from themselves,” Fox explained.

“So Elsbeth lost her parents at a young age and was taken in by a couple who used infants as a money maker. Makes sense that she could be Ms. X,” Opal said.

While Fox started talking more about Elsbeth Riviera, her cell phone started to ring. Opal would have ignored it, but it was on the coffee table in front of the couch where she and CJ were sitting, and he reached over and picked it up.

His brow was furrowed when he held it out to her. “Doctor,” he mouthed.

Dr. Kimmi?

She hadn't been expecting to get the blood test results for a couple of days at least, probably more like a week.

Doctors only called you back this quickly with bad news.

Opal's hand shook as she reached out and took the phone, accepting the call. "Dr. Kimmi?" she asked as she stood on equally shaky legs and headed into the bedroom so CJ could continue his call with Fox.

Besides, if this was bad news, she needed a moment alone to process before she told him.

"Ms. Smith?"

They'd used their real names at the clinic because there was no reason not to. With the tracker on the car none of Ms. X's people would be following them, and since they already knew she'd been injured—mugged they believed—then no one would question a trip to the doctor.

"Yes. What's wrong?" she asked without preamble. Opal did not like surprises, nor did she like things to be sugar-coated. If something was wrong, she just wanted to know about it so she could begin processing it.

"Nothing is wrong," Dr. Kimmi assured her.

Only she wasn't reassured.

"Then why are you calling me this quickly?"

The doctor chuckled, and Opal relaxed a smidgen. If the doctor was laughing then the news couldn't be that bad.

Could it?

"I promise you, Ms. Smith, I am not calling with bad news. At least, I hope I'm not."

"What does that mean?" Wasn't the news either good or bad? It couldn't be a question. If the blood tests had shown that she had more than a stomach bug, then it was bad news. No way that could be good.

"It means, Ms. Smith, that I know why you've been feeling sick, and you don't have some horrible illness."

“I don’t?”

“No. You don’t. You’ve been sick because you’re experiencing morning sickness.”

Her stomach did a slow free fall.

Diving down into a hole that had no bottom.

Pregnant?

That was impossible.

She was on birth control.

Had been ever since she and CJ started up their friends-with-benefits arrangement.

CJ.

The man she was in love with even if he didn’t know it.

The man who never wanted to have kids.

The father of her baby.

“Congratulations, Ms. Smith, you’re pregnant,” Dr. Kimmi said, only the woman had no idea what a bombshell she’d just dropped.

Opal didn’t need congratulations, she needed help.

* * *

DECEMBER 12TH

11:01 A.M.

CJ WATCHED as Opal hurried into the other room.

Why was the doctor calling?

Didn’t a doctor only call this quickly after having tests done if there was bad news?

“CJ? CJ? You still there, man? Is it Opal? Did something happen?” Fox’s voice had grown increasingly concerned, and

he realized he must have been standing there in silence for longer than he realized.

“She just got a phone call from the doctor,” he replied. While he wouldn’t go blabbing all of Opal’s personal information, she knew Prey weren’t just her employers, they weren’t even just her friends, they were her family, and if something was wrong then she would need all their support.

From the pause, he knew that Fox was thinking the same thing he was.

Bad news.

It had to be bad news that had the doctor ringing less than twenty-four hours after blood had been taken.

A million different scenarios ran through his head, each worse than the one before. Just how sick was she? Was he going to lose her before he even told her he was in love with her.

In love.

He hadn’t even allowed himself to admit it because they’d agreed to friends-with-benefits, no-strings, no expectations. How could he admit that he’d broken every one of their rules and fallen in love with her when he didn’t even know if she felt the same way?

CJ thought she did. These last few days when they’d pretended to get married, he felt things changing. Maybe the fake wedding had forced them to admit there was more between them than they’d agreed upon.

“I’ll call back later,” Fox offered.

It was on the tip of his tongue to say no, that he wanted all the intel on the raid of Ms. X—now confirmed to be Elsbeth Riviera as Fox had sent him an image of the woman and it matched the one who had interrogated them the other night—that was planned for tonight. But Opal was more important than any raid.

Whatever was wrong he’d be there for her.

Anything she needed she'd have. If he had to find a way to take more time away from his team, he'd do it. He'd move in with her, or she could move in with him so he could take care of her and drive her to appointments, treatments, or surgeries.

And he'd tell her the truth, that he was in love with her and wanted to change their relationship. If he had to prove to her they could be even better as a couple than they were as friends, he'd do it.

“Yeah, thanks, man. That would be great.”

As soon as he ended the call he hurried toward the bedroom, pausing with his hand on the doorknob. Opal had gone in there for privacy, but just so he could continue talking to Fox or because she also wanted to be alone for her call?

Even though he wanted more, he was simply Opal's friend. He could hardly go barging in there and demand she tell him what the doctor had said.

Then again, they *were* friends, and she had to know he would be by her side through anything.

Just as he was about to go for it and head into the room, the door opened, and a shell-shocked Opal stood there staring back at him. She seemed to startle when she saw him, draw in on herself, and his entire body went ice cold.

How bad was the news?

From the look of things, his worst-case scenario wasn't bad enough.

“Opal?” he asked, almost afraid to reach for her.

“CJ.” His name came out on a whispered breath as though it pained her to speak it aloud, and she wrapped her arms around her middle in a gesture of self-comfort that broke his heart.

He was here.

Didn't she know she should be coming to him for comfort?

Couple or not, they were friends, best friends, and he was here for her.

Instinct had him reaching for her when she began to shake, and he folded her into an embrace. Instead of calming, Opal shook harder, her body so brittle he was surprised she didn't shake herself apart.

“Tell me. How bad is it?”

Her face was pressed against his chest, and he felt tears soak his shirt. Damn. It must be really bad.

“Opal, sweetheart. Piccolina, tell me what the doctor said.”

A sob tore through her and she began to cry in earnest. She was breaking his heart here.

“You're killing me, honey. I have a million thoughts right now about what the doctor told you, and not a single one of them is good.” If she didn't tell him soon, he'd call the doctor back and demand to know what was going on. The doctor likely wouldn't tell him anything, doctor-patient privilege and all that, but he at least needed to know if Opal was dying.

There was no way in hell he could survive losing her.

“P-p-pregnant,” she hiccupped through her tears.

The bottom dropped out of his world.

Did she really just say what he thought she did?

No.

No way.

Not possible.

She was on birth control. There was no way Opal could be pregnant.

“I'm pregnant, CJ,” she said again, pulling back so she could look up at him.

His arms dropped to his sides.

What kind of monster did it make him that this was actually the worst news she could have been given as far as he was concerned?

Guess the same kind his parents had always accused him of being.

“Am I the father?” he asked, his voice dull, dead, empty of emotion. Because all that emotion was trapped inside him, spinning, picking up speed, forming into a tornado he wouldn’t be able to control.

At the speed of light, Opal’s hand snapped out and connected with his cheek in a slap that seemed to echo through the suite.

“How dare you,” she seethed. “You know damn well I haven’t been with another man. Can’t even stomach the thought of one touching me. The only other men who have ever had sex with me are The Master, and he hasn’t been near me in seven years, and the one guy I dated right after we were rescued which was again almost seven years ago. So, yeah, you’re the father. I can’t believe you.” Putting distance between them, she stormed around the room, one hand pressed to her stomach, the other rubbing at her temple. “You would really ask me that? That’s such a low blow, especially when you already know the answer. I know you said you didn’t want kids, CJ. But it’s too late, we already have one. Whether you like it or not, you *are* going to be a father.”

No.

No, no, no, no, no.

No.

He couldn’t be a father.

It was out of the question.

Memories tugged at his mind.

Ones he had shoved down twenty-one years ago and refused to let come back up.

Only now he couldn’t seem to stop them.

The squealing cries of a baby, his own anger at having been left in charge of the baby brother he didn’t want while his parents popped next door to drop off a welcome basket to the new neighbors.

He didn’t want to watch the baby. Why were his parents taking so long?

They were only supposed to be gone ten minutes, and it had already been twenty according to the Pokémon watch he'd gotten for his seventh birthday.

Annoyed by the crying, he'd gone into his room, closed the door, and started playing video games.

It wasn't until he realized the house had gone quiet that he went to check on the baby.

His baby brother was *never* quiet. He kept them all up during the night and screamed all day. Colic, his mom told him. CJ hadn't cared, he just wanted to send the baby back to wherever it had come from.

Cold.

The baby was so cold when he reached into the crib to touch him.

Dead.

SIDs.

His fault.

That's what his parents had told him.

They'd made the cops investigate and interrogate him, convinced he had killed his baby brother. When the medical examiner determined sudden infant death syndrome, and the cops told them he hadn't hurt the baby, they had effectively shut him out of their lives even as he still lived in the house with them.

They were right.

While he might not have killed his baby brother, he had wanted the baby gone. At seven he was used to being an only child, the center of attention. He'd hated that the baby had come along and ruined everything.

Little Damian Jack "DJ"'s death was his punishment for his hatred for the baby and resentment toward his parents for bringing another child into their family.

His fault.

That was why he couldn't stand to be around babies. All he saw when he looked at them was his still, silent, cold baby brother lying in his crib.

Now Opal wanted him to play daddy to another baby.

Was she crazy?

Did she want the curse that had taken DJ to take their baby as well?

"I'll pay child support, but I am not now and never will be a father to that baby," he said, then turned and walked away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

December 12th

11:28 A.M.

HIS WORDS MAY AS WELL HAVE BEEN physical blows.

They couldn't hurt more if they were.

CJ didn't want to be a father to their baby? He really hated babies that much that he could turn his back on his own child?

His own flesh and blood.

"You can't say that and then just walk away," Opal shouted, running after him.

"I can, and I did," he said coldly as he located his shoes and shoved his feet into them.

This couldn't be happening.

She was shocked to learn she was having a baby, especially knowing CJ didn't want one, but she was processing, and there was excitement there. She'd always wanted kids, always known she wanted to be a mom one day. Okay, so she hadn't expected it to happen like this, but it didn't mean it was a bad thing.

At least not to her.

Obviously, to CJ it was.

"So that's it? You're just going to walk away from me, from us, from this? Pretend like I'm not carrying your baby.

That you're not going to be a father. Just throw some money at us and cut us out of your life."

"Yep."

Who was this man?

One thing she knew for certain was that he was not the man she had fallen in love with. The man who had been so patient with her when she wanted to try real sex for the first time but was battling her fears. He wasn't the man who had been funny and charming, hung out with her, and made her feel special and important.

He wasn't her friend.

He wasn't her CJ.

The man she knew would have stepped up in a heartbeat. Even if he didn't feel more for her than friendship and return her feelings, he would have been there for her. Doctor's appointments and labor, sleepless nights and teething, first steps and first words. When their baby went to its first day of school and when it graduated college, he would have been there. Walked it down the aisle at its wedding if it was a girl, be best man if it was a boy, celebrate when their baby had babies of its own.

Her CJ would have been by her side through all of it.

This man was a stranger.

"I don't feel like I even know you," she whispered softly, not bothering to hide the tears that continued to stream down her cheeks in a steady tide. Why should she hide that he was breaking her heart when he seemed so cold and distant?

Like he didn't care.

Like the last three years had been a lie.

"You don't," CJ answered calmly.

Didn't he even care that he was shredding her to pieces?

Was whatever made him dislike babies and not want to have kids really so bad he could turn his back on his own flesh and blood?

What was she supposed to tell their child when it grew up and asked about its father?

Was she supposed to lie and say she didn't know who he was, or maybe that he had sadly passed away?

How could she tell her son or daughter their father just hadn't wanted them?

This couldn't be happening.

Sure, it had been a shock to find out she was pregnant, but not a bad one. Opal already wanted this baby, loved it even. There wasn't anything she wouldn't do to make sure it was safe, protected, and loved. Everything she hadn't had as a child she would shower on her baby. Never once would it fear for its life or suffer pain, not if she had anything to say about it.

But there was one thing she couldn't protect it from.

One thing she had no control over.

CJ.

"Please don't do this," she begged. She absolutely wasn't above begging right now. When CJ had time to process, he'd come around. Not wanting kids was fine, but now that they had one, surely he could work through his issue and be happy. Share this journey with her. "I want you to be part of this baby's life. I want you to keep being part of *my* life."

How was she supposed to do this on her own?

Being a mom was the toughest job in the world, but being a single mom? That was so much harder.

She didn't want to walk this path alone. She wanted to walk it with her best friend by her side. The only man she would ever love.

"I love you, CJ," she admitted softly. Not the time or the place she would have chosen to make that admission, but he'd kind of backed her into a corner. What else was she supposed to do but tell him the whole truth?

At her words he froze, keys and cell phone in his hands.

His face was still a blank mask, but at least he'd stopped trying to leave.

"I don't want to be just friends anymore. I want more. I want all of you. I want to give you all of me. I want us to try a real relationship. I want to be a couple, one day a family with our baby."

At the word baby, he started moving again. "I'll leave you the car. I'll call an Uber. I don't think we're being watched and even if we are with you still here they'll likely just think I went to work or something. I'll call Prey and explain it was my choice to leave, but I won't tell them anything else, that's your business."

"Ours," she corrected. "*Our* business."

"I'll contact a lawyer and make sure I sign something to confirm I'm terminating my parental rights, pending a DNA test to confirm I'm the father."

Opal winced at his cruel words.

He knew how she felt about sex, knew she had been sexually abused from the time she was ten until she was nineteen, and knew that she had major anxiety about a man touching her.

Anyone but him.

At least it used to be anyone but him.

Right now, the thought of his touch made her already churning stomach revolt.

"I'll have the lawyer help set up a child support payment system. I'll start paying as soon as the DNA test results come in and not wait until the birth so that it helps cover pregnancy costs."

"I don't want your money," she raged. Financially, she knew she would be able to provide for this child, that wasn't what scared her. Prey was one big family, she knew they would all be there to support her any way they could, but she wanted CJ.

Needed him even.

“Just the same you’ll get it. I take care of my responsibilities.”

Opal threw her hands up in the air in frustration. “I want this baby to be more than just a *responsibility* to you.”

“Well, it’s not.”

It was so unfair that *he* was the one ruining what should have been an amazing moment in their lives, and yet he didn’t even have the good grace to be angry. He was so calm, almost robotic like her CJ had just ... vanished.

“I want to be more than a responsibility. I want to do this together. Please, CJ, don’t walk away and make me do this on my own. I know you’re scared, I am, too. Terrified. But together we can do this. I know we can. Talk to me, please. Tell me what’s going on, why you don’t want kids. What’s making the man I know cares about me walk away like it’s the easiest thing in the world.”

For a second, naked pain flashed across his face, but then he covered it. “It’s not the easiest thing in the world.”

That admission should help.

It didn’t.

Not even a little.

“But you’re going to do it anyway,” she said, knowing it was true, that there was nothing she could do to stop this from happening. Still, she had to try. For her sake, for her baby’s. “I love you.”

He said nothing at her words and was yet to return her sentiment.

She had been so sure that he loved her back, but now ...

Now she knew that she had never known the real Cameron John Ulrich.

“It doesn’t change anything, does it?” she asked, feeling so broken and defeated. Worse than she had with The Master. Then she had always known the man was a monster and expected nothing but pain and suffering from him. With CJ she

had felt free and safe, comfortable, cared about, loved. His betrayal had come out of nowhere, and because she'd trusted him it hurt so much worse.

Instead of answering her, CJ merely walked to the hotel suite door and left.

Guess that was his answer.

It meant nothing.

Her love didn't change anything, it didn't make him love her back. It didn't make him care about the baby they had created, and it didn't stop him from walking away from them like they were nothing to him.

One hand pressed to her stomach, Opal dropped to her knees, curled herself into a ball, and sobbed like her heart was broken beyond repair.

Because it was.

* * *

DECEMBER 12TH

10:27 P.M.

HE DIDN'T WANT to be here.

In fact, CJ would rather be literally any other place in the world.

But he couldn't be.

Because she was here.

Opal would never know it because he could never tell her, but walking away from her was the hardest thing he had ever done in his life. Harder than being seven years old and told by your parents you murdered your baby brother and facing down an interview with the cops. Harder than living in that house knowing how much his parents despised him. Harder than

anything he had done in his training to become a SEAL or after he'd joined a team.

Hardest thing ever.

If he'd had another choice, if there had been another way, he would have taken it in a heartbeat.

Bottom line was, he couldn't be around an infant. He didn't trust himself to be around one, especially his own.

At seven he hadn't loved his baby brother, but it had only been two months since DJ was born, given time he would have come to love his brother. That baby growing inside Opal, *his* baby, that he would love for the simple fact that it was half her. Losing it—somehow causing its death—would destroy him.

Better to make the break now before he caused more damage. This way Opal's heart was still broken but at least she had their child.

She loved him.

Loved him.

Loved *him*.

She loved *him*.

Her revelation still hadn't sunk in. Falling in love with Opal had happened so slowly over time he couldn't even pinpoint where things had changed and she'd gone from his friend, to his best friend, to the woman he loved.

But it had happened.

He loved her, but he had hardly dared to hope that she might return his feelings. To know that she did, that if she hadn't gotten pregnant he would have had a real shot with her, was the most devastating blow.

Because now he didn't have a shot with her.

The way she'd looked at him when she realized he wasn't going to tell her that he loved her, too, and that he was willing to give them a chance, even with a baby on the way, had almost had him confessing everything. Anything to remove that pain from her eyes.

Pain he had caused.

There might be nothing he could do to salvage their relationship. If he wanted her to move on and be happy then she had to understand that he was never going to be okay with a baby, but he could at the bare minimum make sure she was safe.

So, he was here.

Surrounded by Fox and the guys, and Opal and her team. Ready to watch over her as she participated in the raid of Ms. X, Elsbeth Riviera's warehouse.

Everyone was giving him weird looks.

They all knew something was going on between him and Opal, but he'd been true to his word and not mentioned the pregnancy. It was up to her to decide when she told people about it, and since her reveal to him had gone pretty damn disastrously, he wanted her to be able to tell her family in her own time so that it went well.

He wanted that for her.

Wanted her to get over him quickly so she could enjoy her pregnancy and raising her baby. So she could be happy. Even if that meant finding love with a man who deserved her, who could be the father his baby deserved.

CJ wasn't so selfish that he wanted his girl and his baby to be miserable for the rest of their lives just because he wasn't man enough to face his childhood trauma and find peace.

Peace was something he would never believe he deserved.

Ever.

Which meant he had no choice but to let Opal, their child, and what might have been go.

"You know no one believes that you and Opal just had a fight," Fox told him.

When he'd called earlier, while he'd been waiting for his Uber to show up, he'd merely said that he and Opal had fought and that he was leaving the hotel. He had assumed that would

be the end of it. That Opal would remain at the hotel until the raid was completed and Elsbeth Riviera was in custody along with everyone who worked for her.

Only she hadn't done that.

She'd turned up at Prey and decided she was going to be part of that raid.

What choice had he had but to come and join in, too?

Since there was no good answer to what was clearly a question even if Fox hadn't framed it as one, all he did was shrug.

"Opal doesn't fight, she's too sweet," Fox persisted.

"Didn't say it was her fault." And it wasn't. This was all on him. CJ was fully prepared to shoulder the blame for the pain he had caused.

"It's not like you to fight either. You're a good guy, and you've been good to Opal since you met her. We all knew the friends-with-benefits thing was never going to last. You love her."

The words hit him square in the chest.

They were true.

Completely and utterly true.

Problem was, they just didn't change anything.

Love wasn't enough to fix every problem, he knew that. He'd watched as the parents who had adored each other since before he was born descended into marriage hell after DJ's death. Loud, long screaming matches became the norm in his house. Grief turned into loathing, and his parents' love had disintegrated into nothing.

It wasn't just him they stopped loving but each other, and they were divorced by the time he was nine.

Neither parent wanted him, but since they had been awarded joint custody they had no choice but to tolerate his presence in their lives. At least until he turned eighteen and

graduated high school, then he was unceremoniously kicked out of both their homes and their lives.

Since his parents had spent more than a decade perpetuating the lie that he had smothered his baby brother, no one in his family wanted to take him in.

He'd been on his own and turned to the military.

There he'd found a family and eventually been led to the woman he loved.

The woman he'd lost.

"She shouldn't be here, she's been sick," he said, choosing to completely ignore Fox's statement.

"She wants in. Said she's feeling better," Fox replied.

Anger burned inside him, mostly at himself, but there was a little directed toward the man standing beside him. It wasn't fair of course, Fox had no idea that Opal was pregnant. He knew that because there was no way she'd be in on this mission if he did. Ivory was pregnant, and she wasn't participating in the raid, just providing eyes from outside the warehouse same as he'd be doing since he couldn't participate in a raid on US soil.

"Unless you know something," Fox said sharply.

Stuck between lying or breaking his promise to Opal, neither of which he wanted to do, CJ merely said, "I didn't want to hurt her."

"I believe you. Sometimes you don't want to but you do anyway." Fox's eyes grew distant, and CJ assumed he was thinking of how he'd hurt his wife Evie by not telling her he'd been married before. When Evie found out he was a widower she'd divorced him and left, it wasn't until she was targeted by a cartel years later that the two reconnected.

CJ was happy for Fox and Evie, but there was no happy ending in his and Opal's story.

"Don't do or say anything you'll regret." Fox clapped him on the shoulder before going to gather his teams and move in

on the warehouse occupying almost all of the block beside where they had been waiting inside an empty auto body shop.

Too late.

What he'd done and said had already broken the bond joining him and Opal together.

A bond that could never be repaired.

With nothing else to do, he headed for one of the cars parked in front of the shop. It gave him a good view of the west side of the warehouse, and he could hide in there and relay any pertinent information to the teams inside.

It didn't feel like enough.

Certainly nowhere close to what he needed to do to have his girl's back.

Only she wasn't his girl anymore and never really had been.

Listening to the others get into position and then enter the building was hell. He wanted to be there, watching over Opal, killing anything that presented itself as a threat, and he absolutely loathed the knowledge that he was in fact the greatest threat to her and that little life growing inside her.

Trapped in his own personal hell, the explosion came without warning.

One second, he was sitting in the vehicle wishing he was in there with the others and hating how he'd hurt Opal, the next the car he was sitting in was thrown sideways.

His head connected with something.

Pain slammed through him.

Then nothing.

CHAPTER TWELVE

December 12th

11:00 P.M.

THE EXPLOSIONS CAME out of nowhere.

Shaking the entire building.

For one horrible moment, Opal was sure she must have done something to set them off, positive that she was indeed a liability on this mission.

It was impossible to think straight with CJ here.

Opal didn't understand why he'd come.

After the way he'd walked away from her at the hotel this morning, she hadn't expected to ever see him again. It had felt so final.

Crying her eyes out hadn't helped, all it had done was give her itchy, puffy eyes for the rest of the day and a stuffed-up nose. It hadn't helped the nausea—morning sickness she now knew was the cause—from churning relentlessly in her stomach, and it hadn't helped the sharp pain in her heart.

CJ didn't want the baby, and he didn't want her.

What more was there to say?

Leaving the car at the hotel so that if it was being monitored Ms. X would assume that Ophelia and Carter Sampson were still there, she'd taken a cab to Prey's office.

By the time she'd gotten there Fox, the guys, and her sisters all knew that she and CJ had had a "fight" and that he had removed himself from the mission.

Focusing on work seemed like the only logical option.

Of course, there had been some resistance to the idea of her participating in the raid since everyone believed she was sick. Opal hadn't been able to bring herself to tell them the reason she'd been sick. It hadn't gone over well with CJ, and she couldn't handle another bad reaction.

Besides, if they knew then they would know CJ was the father.

That meant they would also know what the "fight" was about.

The logical conclusion would be that CJ hadn't wanted any part in the baby's life and that was why he had left.

For some reason, her stupid, traitorous heart hadn't wanted them to think badly of him.

Didn't matter that she was hurt and angry as well as totally confused, she still loved the man.

Distracted was never a good frame of mind to be stuck in when you were in the field. Opal knew she should have removed herself, but she also knew if she had all she would do was lie around and think of the fact she would be a single mom because her best friend, the man she loved, had abandoned her. Abandoned *them*.

Selfish.

She'd been selfish.

She hadn't excused herself when they sat through the briefings. Hadn't excused herself when CJ showed up insisting he was going to be part of the raid. Hadn't excused herself on the drive to the warehouse or when they'd been preparing to enter.

Now, possibly because of that, explosions had gone off as they'd breached the building.

Explosions meant people could have been hurt.

Killed.

“Opal. Opal!”

Her name in her ear finally drew her out of her stupor, and she shook herself, surprised to find that not only was she still standing but Pearl and Lacey were as well.

“I’m okay,” she said into her comms, realizing from the frantic tone of Fox’s voice that he had called her name several times and she hadn’t responded.

“Report,” Fox demanded.

“No damage to this part of the building,” Lacey responded.

“This part is clear, too,” Spider announced.

They had split up into three groups of three. She and two of her sisters—since Ivory was pregnant, she was no longer going out into the field—Fox, Shark, King, and Spider, Night, Chaos.

“Clear here, too,” Fox muttered.

So far, they had barely made it inside the building, but something had triggered those explosions, giving Elsbeth Riviera and anyone else inside the warehouse ample time to make their escape.

“Distraction,” Chaos muttered.

If the explosions weren’t set to destroy the warehouse itself then that meant that ...

Opal could barely breathe.

She’d zoned out when the explosion had gone off, positive that she had somehow allowed her distraction over CJ and the baby to mess with her head. Impair her judgment. Make her sloppy.

It had taken her a while to check-in.

Missed everyone else’s check-ins.

Ivory.

CJ.

Had they ...?

Were they ...?

As if reading her mind, Fox's voice echoed through their comms. "Ivory? CJ?"

Seconds ticked by.

Silence.

Dread grew inside her.

Their three teams had the three exits of the warehouse covered, at least the three *known* exits, but there could be more. At this very second, Ms. X, her men, and any victims or babies she had kept on site here—assuming she did keep them here—could already be escaping.

An hour ago that would have devastated her.

Now she couldn't think past the horrible knot of fear tangling her body, drawing in every nerve, every cell, so she would never be free of it.

"My vehicle is toast," Ivory's strained voice came through the comms, and she felt a collective sigh of relief even if no one made a sound.

"Are you hurt?" Fox demanded.

Ivory coughed. "No. Vehicle was protected by a dumpster. It got tossed into the car, and the car is a wreck, but I'm okay."

Any relief she might have felt at knowing her sister was okay was smothered by the fear she still felt for CJ.

He hadn't checked in.

He was a SEAL. The only reason he wouldn't check in was if he *couldn't* check in.

Opal might be both furious with him for not at least giving her the courtesy of explaining why he hated the idea of having a kid so much, and heartbroken that he could toss her aside with such apparent ease, but she didn't want him dead. Didn't even want him hurt. While she wasn't sure she could forgive

him for what he'd done this morning when he'd learned she was pregnant, she wanted him to be okay.

Needed him to be okay.

Whether he liked the idea or not, he was her baby's father, and she really didn't want to have to tell her child that its father was dead.

"We need eyes on CJ," Fox said.

"I'll go," Opal said without hesitation. As much as she hated leaving Pearl and Lacey another man down when they were already down Ivory, the simple truth was that if she didn't confirm that CJ was alive, she was going to lose her mind.

If she went with them, she would be a liability all over again.

And if CJ was dead ... then part of her would always blame herself.

Even if the explosions weren't her fault—and logically she knew they were not—he was only here because she was. She had no idea what to make of that or why he cared, but she still knew that to be the truth.

"Go."

As soon as Fox gave the order, she was off. Cautiously backtracking out the door and across the vast open expanse of what had been a parking lot when the warehouse was operational.

She was halfway there when a bullet went whizzing by.

They were under attack.

Guilt ate at her as she knew she was leaving her team behind. Her money would always be on Prey, but they had no idea how many people were in the warehouse, and outnumbered was outnumbered even when you were skilled. At least they had confirmation that something bad was going on in that place.

Another bullet flew past, and she took cover behind a pile of discarded boxes. They offered little protection, but they were all she had.

Around the warehouse, several businesses were burning. It was a great distraction idea. It meant Ms. X didn't risk herself and her people getting hurt, but still gave them time to escape because Opal knew with absolute certainty that there was no way the woman wasn't running at this moment.

With the boxes as minimal cover, Opal fired a volley of shots in the shooter's direction.

She knew she didn't hit anyone because more shots kept coming.

So close.

The autobody shop was just at the other end of the lot. She could see fires burning brightly, and see the car CJ had been in lying on its side.

No signs of him though.

She had to get to him, but leaving her vaguely protected spot gave the shooter more than enough opportunities to hit her.

Opal was about to risk it anyway when suddenly bullets began flying from in front of her as well as behind her.

When she looked up, she saw Ivory around the side of the building firing at the man who had been shooting at her.

While her sister lay down covering fire, Opal made a run for the vehicle CJ had been in praying as she went. Whether she was able to forgive CJ or not, or whether he ever wanted a second chance or not, she didn't want him to die. She needed to understand how he could throw her away and not even give what they could have had a chance.

It seemed to take forever, but finally, she reached the autobody shop and the vehicle CJ had been in sitting out front of it.

This close, she could see that he was still inside it, lying slumped against the driver's door which was on the ground.

She didn't hesitate. Climbing up to reach the passenger door, Opal yanked on it.

It opened, and she dropped down inside the car.

"You better not be dead, Cameron John Ulrich," she muttered as she moved carefully so she didn't land on him, not wanting to aggravate any injuries he might have sustained.

Her hand was shaking when it reached out toward him.

Fingertips touched his neck, and when she felt his pulse, she burst into tears of relief.

* * *

DECEMBER 13TH

4:54 A.M.

HIS HEAD WAS KILLING HIM.

That was literally what it felt like.

As if his brain was trying to eat its way right out of his skull.

CJ knew he was lucky to have survived the explosion with little more than a concussion and some scrapes and bruises. It could easily have been so much worse: serious injuries, broken bones, internal bleeding, even death. Comparatively, he had walked away with as close to nothing as it was possible to get.

His memories of the explosion and its aftermath were gone, likely never to be recovered. The last thing he remembered was watching Opal and her team walk toward the warehouse and the titanic sense of failure he felt knowing not only couldn't he watch his girl's back, but he was the reason she was there.

Everything after that was a blank until he'd woken up in the hospital about an hour ago with a killer headache. A doctor to tell him he had a concussion hadn't been necessary. This wasn't his first, and he doubted it would be his last. The

combination of headache, nausea, and dizziness were all the cues he needed.

Of course, his first words—croaked and weak though they had been—were to ask the nurse if anyone else had been brought in with him.

When the older woman replied that a pregnant woman had also come to get checked out, CJ almost had a heart attack.

Had Opal been hurt?

How bad?

Was this baby dead because of him as well?

It wasn't until it clicked that if Prey knew Opal was carrying his baby, someone would have been in here waiting for him to wake up so they could yell at him for letting her put her life in danger, that he knew the nurse was talking about Ivory and not Opal.

Relief had hit him so hard and with such strength that he had actually passed out again.

Now he was awake and ready to get out of here.

Someone from his team would probably be okay with him staying with them for the next couple of days while he slept off the worst of the concussion, and then he might head out of town for a while. There were still a couple of weeks left of his leave so there was no need to hang around. Maybe clearing his head would help him and Opal.

To move on she needed distance between them so she could let go of her hurt and anger and focus on the baby.

Not that he expected her to be letting go of that hurt and anger any time soon. Not only had he been a complete jerk to her, but she didn't even understand why. They both needed closure and time to heal, and distance seemed like the quickest way to make that happen.

“Sir, a woman is asking if she can come in and see you. Opal Smith she said her name was. Said you two are friends and she wants to make sure you're all right before she goes

home,” the nurse told him as she checked his vitals and fiddled with his IV.

See Opal?

Now?

When he was vulnerable and she was vulnerable?

If he did that, he was pretty sure he would confess what had happened with DJ and beg her to understand he’d walked away to protect her and their baby not to hurt them. Of course, his logical mind knew he hadn’t killed his baby brother, but his jealousy had contributed to the baby’s death. Who knows if instead of ignoring the baby’s cries he’d gone to check on him then maybe DJ wouldn’t have died.

There was no way to know, but at the very least, if he hadn’t hated his brother then DJ wouldn’t have died alone. He would have gone into the room and been there when he passed.

“No visitors,” he croaked. CJ hated how weak he was. He wanted to just pack up and get out of there, hide away in his house, then disappear for a while. But he couldn’t. Chances were his only way out today, and probably even tomorrow, was to sign himself out against medical advice.

Which he could do.

Especially if he had someone to keep an eye on him, but suddenly the idea of staying with one of his teammates wasn’t appealing.

They’d ask questions.

Questions he didn’t want to answer.

Maybe staying holed up in the hospital was the best option. At least here he could make sure that no one got in to see him that he didn’t approve.

“Are you sure? She looks pretty worried.”

His gut seized at hearing that Opal was worried.

If his head wasn’t all messed up he would have known that already.

The last thing he wanted was to cause her more pain, but he was trying to do the best thing for both of them—all three of them—and that was no more contact.

“No visitors,” he repeated. It broke his heart to say it. His entire body craved Opal’s calm, sweet, comforting presence. She’d never believe that if he told her, she’d think he was lying or playing her, but it couldn’t be more true. It might have taken him a while to realize it, but Opal was everything to him. His heart, his soul, his peace, salvation, and redemption.

Only he’d given up that chance to have the redemption he craved in walking away.

It was still the right thing to do, he truly believed that, he would sacrifice his own salvation if it meant keeping her and their baby safe.

Wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for them.

“What do you mean I can’t go in?” Opal’s somewhat shrill voice demanded from the other side of the door to his room.

CJ hadn’t even noticed that the nurse had left. He’d been too busy convincing himself that keeping Opal and the baby safe was his number one priority and that he was going about it the right way.

Hearing her voice was like a million tiny shards of glass piercing his skin. She was so close and yet so far away. It would be so easy to change his mind, call out to her, tell her everything, and beg for her forgiveness.

Stay strong.

He clung to those words.

This was the hardest thing he’d ever done, but it was something he had to do. There was no going back, the cards had already been dealt. Opal was never going to be his, but he could set her free to have the life she deserved.

“Are you lying? Is he not really okay?” Opal demanded.

She was killing him here.

Why couldn't she just believe the nurse was telling her the truth and leave? Besides, after everything that had happened last night, she should be home resting, she was growing a baby, stress like this couldn't be good for either of them.

"You try and have a security guard escort me out of here before I see him, and you'll regret it. You know who I work for so you know I'm no threat, I just need to see him," Opal said.

Despite everything, CJ found a small smile curl up his lips.

His normally quiet, get-along-with-everyone girl was fighting for what she wanted, and as proud as he was of her, it also shamed him.

The smile faded.

She was fighting just to see him for a moment after everything he'd just put her through, yet he hadn't fought for her.

For them.

Since Opal was the only one speaking with a raised voice, he didn't hear the nurse's answer, but a moment later the door to his room was flung open.

Opal stood there.

She was still wearing what she had been for the raid, only her clothes were rumbled, her ponytail a mess, she was pale, and there were dark circles under her red-rimmed eyes. She looked like she'd been through the wringer.

For a moment their gazes connected.

Then the next second she spun on her heel and disappeared.

Her name was already tumbling from his lips before he thought, but she didn't stop. Didn't come back.

She was gone.

Forever.

CJ knew that with absolute certainty. He'd seen it in her eyes. Yes, she had needed to see him, needed to verify that he was alive and going to be okay, but he had no illusions that it went any further beyond that.

Closure.

She'd come for closure.

It was what he thought he wanted. What he had *known* he wanted just a couple of minutes ago.

But now he'd seen her and knew walking away wasn't going to be anywhere near as easy as he thought it would be.

Not that it mattered.

The bridge between them, the bond that had joined them together from that very first moment they had met, that had grown and strengthened over time, was now broken forever.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

December 13th

5:39 A.M.

IT WAS OVER.

Really and truly over.

Of course, Opal had known that it was over. CJ had been more than clear on the fact that he wanted nothing to do with them. Just because he'd been hurt, she hadn't expected that to change, but she'd needed closure to move on.

As badly as it hurt knowing he actually hated the idea of a kid so much that he hadn't even wanted to lay eyes on her, it also helped.

Almost as much as it hurt.

She had expected him to want to see her when he regained consciousness. Actually thought he might have been worried about her and the baby and wanted to make sure they hadn't been injured in the explosion.

Stupid.

He didn't care.

Even though she didn't want the idea in her head, maybe he had even hoped she'd been hurt and lost the baby.

Could CJ be that cruel and callous?

A day ago she would have given an emphatic no, but now

...

Now she realized she had never known the real CJ.

That hurt more than anything else because it made the last almost four years feel like a lie. Her best friend, the man she loved, he didn't exist. Not really.

It sucked, but it was time to focus on the future. She had a baby growing inside her, one she already loved and wanted, and she had to start focusing on that. Opal didn't want or need CJ's money. She could financially take care of this baby just like she could give it everything else it needed.

If it killed her, she would be the best mom in the world.

No way was she letting her doubts and insecurities, her childhood and the abuse she suffered, or the fact that the father wanted no part of it, ruin this. She was going to be a mom this baby could be proud of.

That was what was important. It was her focus, her priority, it was best to just shove all thoughts of CJ out of her mind.

With a heavy sigh, she pushed open the door to her apartment more than ready to shower and fall into bed. While she had gone in the ambulance with CJ to the hospital, the rest of Prey had remained behind at the warehouse. While they'd been right and the explosions had provided a distraction for Elsbeth Riviera to slip away, Prey had taken nearly two dozen men into custody, and rescued three infants and four pregnant women.

All in all, a fairly successful mission. The only injuries on their part were CJ's concussion, and Ivory had a few bumps and bruises, but thankfully she and the baby were okay.

No sooner had she stepped through the door than she was all but ambushed by six people.

Opal didn't even have time to panic and worry that she was under attack because half a dozen 'are you okays' were thrown her way.

Despite her exhaustion and the deep pain in her heart, Opal smiled. CJ might not want any part of her and their baby's lives, but she would hardly be raising this child alone. She had three sisters, and three brothers-in-law to help out, plus everyone at Prey. This baby was never going to lack love and attention, plus it would be close in age to Ivory's baby so the cousins would grow up together.

"I'm all good," she said as she dropped her bag on the coffee table and dropped down into her favorite armchair. It was soft and fluffy, deep red leather, and she kept a patchwork quilt she'd sewn herself over it. Now she grabbed the quilt and snuggled it around her. Shower and bed would have to wait, but this was so much better anyway.

Six identical skeptical frowns looked back at her.

Seemed nobody believed her.

Probably because she hadn't told them the truth about her and CJ. When she'd shown up at Prey, she'd just gone along with CJ's story that they'd had an argument and he'd decided to step away from the mission since it was basically over anyway. It had been irresponsible of her to put her baby in jeopardy by participating in the raid, she wouldn't make that mistake again. Plus, as emotional as she was right now, she was a risk to anyone else on the mission because she couldn't make calm, rational decisions.

The truth was going to come out sooner rather than later. She just prayed that this time she got a better reaction to her news.

"You didn't stay with CJ?" Lacey asked somewhat gently.

"No. He didn't even want to see me," she admitted. It was a hard admission to make because she was still in shock. Believing that CJ could so ruthlessly cut her out of his life even after she'd told him she wanted more was near impossible.

But she didn't have a choice.

Changing CJ's mind would be impossible, and even if she could, Opal didn't want to raise her baby in a home with a

parent who didn't want it. Her upbringing had been nothing short of horrific, and she wanted this baby to have everything she hadn't.

She wanted its life to be perfect.

"Didn't want you there?" Pearl looked both shocked and angry to hear it.

"I don't understand," Ivory looked bewildered by the whole thing.

Her youngest sister was sitting on the couch curled up against her husband's side. Opal wasn't sure if it was a conscious decision or not on Roman's part, but he had one arm wrapped around his wife's shoulders, his other hand rested protectively on her little baby bump.

That's what she wanted.

Opal wanted CJ to care so much about her and their child that he couldn't help but touch her stomach, caressing the baby cradled inside her womb.

"You don't have arguments with people," Pearl said.

"Unlike you," Jesse teased his wife who rolled her eyes at him and punched him in the shoulder hard enough he winced and rubbed it. "Hey!"

"You deserved it," Pearl retorted but leaned over to kiss his cheek.

There was a time when she and CJ had playfully bickered and teased one another like Pearl and Jesse. Looking back, maybe she had been in love with him all along from that very first moment. Love at first sight didn't happen, and yet ... maybe it did.

Ivory and Roman had fallen hard and fast. Pearl and Jesse had, too. Lacey and Ben had moved more slowly in their relationship, but they had still fallen for each other quickly.

It might have taken her a long time to realize she was in love with CJ, but it didn't change the fact that she had been for a long time now.

“What could possibly have happened between you two that CJ doesn’t even want to see you?” Lacey asked.

“Might not be any of our business, sunflower,” Ben told her.

Lacey brushed off her boyfriend’s words with a small huff. “Of *course* it’s our business. We’re sisters. Family. If one of us hurts all of us do. If CJ hurt my girl here, then he has to answer to me. To us. All of us.”

Her sister was right. She had a whole team at her back, and while she didn’t want them to go after CJ, she did need their love and support right now.

May as well just do it and get it over with.

“It wasn’t so much a fight as CJ reacted badly when I told him something, and he walked away.”

“What did you tell him?” Ivory asked.

“That you have feelings for him?” Lacey added.

“You guys knew?” How had they figured it out when it had taken her so long to get to that conclusion?

“I realized it when I fell for Roman, recognized the look in your eyes every time you talked about him,” Ivory said.

“Same,” Pearl said. “When I knew what love was, I could pick it out in others.”

“I *always* knew,” Lacey boasted, making them all laugh.

“Well, it took me a whole lot longer to figure it out than it did all of you. It kind of happened gradually until all of a sudden it clicked that I was in love with him. I hadn’t gotten a chance to tell him, and then I got a call from the doctor.” Opal drew in a breath and readied herself. Somehow saying this out loud to other people made it so much more real. “I’m pregnant.”

Her entire body was tense as she waited for their response.

Would they question the baby’s paternity like CJ had?

Maybe they'd think that's why he'd bailed because she was carrying another man's child.

Turned out she needn't have worried.

"You and CJ are having a baby?" Lacey squealed.

"And he abandoned you?" Pearl growled.

"He doesn't want kids," she said in way of explanation because that was all she had to offer, all she knew.

"So that's just it?" Ivory asked. "It's over between you."

"Yeah. It is."

"Need us to go beat him up for you?" Roman asked, making her grin even as she shook her head.

"Nah, if he needs beating up, I think we can handle it," she said, gesturing to her sisters. "Besides, I don't want a man raising my baby who could walk away from it like it was so easy. I don't need him. I have all of you, all of Prey, and I know I got this."

As Opal said the words, she realized they were true.

She had this.

* * *

DECEMBER 16TH

2:21 P.M.

MEMORIES OF OPAL CLUNG to every place, person, and thing he saw even if their connection to her had been minimal or virtually non-existent.

Every nurse at the hospital just reminded CJ of the nurse telling him a woman wanted to come and check on him. Every doctor just reminded him that Opal was pregnant and would surely be looking for, or had already found an ob-gyn and he wouldn't be going to any of those appointments with her.

The taxi he took from the hospital to his condo reminded him of the two of them being snatched from their vehicle. The beach reminded him of the many times they'd played in the waves or laid in the sun, and the strolls by the shore under the moon that hadn't felt romantic at the time but now did.

They'd driven past the cinema they usually went to if they wanted to catch a movie, restaurants where they'd had dinner, or all-night diners where they'd grabbed breakfast at two in the morning when one of them returned from a mission and didn't want to be alone. There was Opal's favorite mall and the park they sometimes went to when they wanted to do an outside workout and wanted a partner.

Now he was home.

The number of memories stored in this building was astronomical.

Too many to be counted.

Each one so precious to him he'd cherish them for the rest of his life because they were all he had left.

All he had to cling to when loneliness felt like it was going to crush him.

CJ had never felt this empty before. He thought he knew what it was like to be alone, abandoned by the people who were supposed to love and care for you. Frozen out of the family when he was just a child and in desperate need of attention and guidance.

But that was different.

Then he'd had no control over the situation.

What had been done had been done *to* him not *by* him.

This time he had no one to blame but himself.

He didn't have to feel like this, he could have Opal with him right now. She was a caretaker, a mother at heart. She'd be fussing around like he was going to break when they both knew concussions sucked but weren't the end of the world. His hadn't even been a particularly bad one. He'd only stayed

in the hospital because he was too much of a coward to face anybody.

Everyone knew.

Someone must have sent his cell phone with him in the ambulance because it had been in the locked drawer beside his bed. Over the last couple of days, it had blown up with about a thousand missed calls and unanswered texts.

His team had all contacted him several times, along with a lot of the guys from Prey. Even Opal's sisters had left voicemails he assumed was them tearing him to shreds for abandoning their sister when she needed him the most.

Didn't they understand he was doing this *for* Opal and the baby?

Being around him was only going to wind up with them hurt, or worse dead.

Images of DJ's tiny body, so cold, so still, lying in his crib had him shuddering.

No way was he going to be responsible for another infant's death. Especially his own.

Despite his best efforts not to, CJ found himself already caring for and about that little baby growing inside Opal. It was half her after all. How could he not love it?

But loving it was dangerous.

Already he'd endangered both Opal and the baby's lives by upsetting her and sending her running straight to Prey to participate in the raid. How would he have survived if she'd been killed? Or if she'd lost the baby?

She'd blame him.

Fair enough, too.

It would be his fault.

Losing the baby would hurt him, too. There was no point lying to himself about it. He might not have wanted kids, but this baby was all too real, and while he knew he could never be part of its life he wanted it to grow up happy and healthy.

Wanted his son or daughter to have the life he'd never been able to have.

It just wouldn't be a life he'd be part of.

Even after what had happened with the explosion, a reminder that life could be over in a second, that tomorrow wasn't guaranteed, he hadn't changed his mind. He knew he was doing the right thing even if it hurt all of them.

So why did it feel wrong?

Worrying over it aggravated the headache he'd had since waking up in the hospital, and he was starting to feel like it would never go.

To be honest, he'd gladly take a constant headache for the rest of his life if it meant the pain in his chest dissipated. Concussions healed but there was no cure for a broken heart.

With no real appetite, no wish to take a shower, and no desire to go to bed since he'd spent the last couple of days in one, CJ found he didn't have the will to do anything. Hitting his home gym held no interest and wasn't the wisest idea anyway while recovering from a head injury.

The beach, TV, video games, none of it held any appeal.

The one thing he wanted he couldn't have.

Regrets were a part of life, he knew that. He'd been living with regrets for twenty-one very long years, yet he regretted nothing more than letting Opal and the future they could have had slip through his fingers.

If there was any way to change it, any way he could have done things differently he would have. This wasn't how he'd wanted things to work out between them. He'd only just realized that he was in love with her and then he had to end things, walk away from her and what could have been.

There was an ache in his chest that had nothing to do with the bruises he'd sustained from the explosion.

An ache he was going to have to learn to live with because it wouldn't be going anywhere.

How could it when his heart was firmly in Opal's grasp?

His heart was no longer his own, it belonged to that brave, compassionate woman who would have loved him with everything she had to give.

To turn that down he had to be crazy.

No, not crazy, he was just cursed.

Cursed to hurt those he loved. His brother, his parents, the rest of his family, now Opal and his own child. At least this way he hadn't caused a death. And since Opal had told Prey she was pregnant she wouldn't be going on anymore missions.

That was a relief, but it hardly meant they would be safe.

Someone from a previous mission could hold a grudge, track her down, and kill Opal and the baby. Then there were random crimes that could happen, rapists, murderers, home invaders. Add to that any number of accidents that could occur; they could be hit by a car, have a car accident, fall down the stairs, the lift in their building could malfunction with them inside, fires, storms, floods, the list went on and on.

Damn.

How was he ever going to get a moment's peace again?

Was he doomed to spend the rest of his life worrying over Opal and the baby? Thinking up all the horrible things that might happen to them?

Realizing he was still standing just inside the door to his condo, CJ dragged himself over to the couch and dropped onto it, exhausted just from the act of living. As he stared at the couch, he could almost trick himself into seeing Opal curled up beside him. Long mahogany hair tossed over her shoulder, eyes twinkling with the joy that seemed to live inside her. If he concentrated hard enough, he could hear her melodic voice and her sweet laughter.

It wasn't enough.

Imagining her here was never going to be enough.

Yanking his cell phone from his pocket, he scrolled through the list of texts, missed calls, and voicemails.

None of them were from Opal.

Not that he'd expected to hear from her.

Well, not really anyway.

Although maybe at the back of his mind CJ had hoped she would check in on him, make sure there had been no complications with his head injury and that he was recovering well.

But why would she do that?

He'd pushed her away on purpose. There was no point in moping over the fact that he'd been successful.

It was what he wanted, what he had ensured would happen. Now they all had to live with the consequences.

And if CJ wasn't sure he could do that, then he had no one to blame but himself.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

December 18th

12:13 P.M.

EVEN THOUGH SHE tried not to let it, Opal's gaze kept returning to Ivory and Roman.

The couple looked so happy and in love, so excited to be welcoming a baby into the world in a few months. It was hard not to be a little jealous.

It wasn't that she wished that her sister didn't have the love and support of a man who would do whatever it took not just to keep her safe but also to make her happy, it was just that she wished she had that, too.

She didn't want to be doing this alone.

It was scary enough to know she would soon be responsible for another human life, but to know that caring for that human life would be her sole responsibility added a whole new level of fear.

What if she failed?

What if she didn't provide the stable, loving home she wanted to for her child?

What if her baby resented her when it grew up?

To walk this road alone meant it was all on her. She would sink or swim, and there would be nobody to shoulder any of the burden.

“Relax, big sis, shopping is supposed to be fun,” Lacey said as she slung an arm around Opal’s shoulders.

“Never said it wasn’t.” Usually, Opal would enjoy a day at the mall, she liked shopping. She wasn’t obsessed with it like Lacey, but she usually had fun searching for some bargains.

Today was weird though.

Today they weren’t looking for clothes, new sheets, fluffy soft towels, or cute knickknacks to join her ever-growing collection.

Today they were shopping for baby things.

That made the baby feel very real.

Like, she knew it was real, knew that a baby was growing inside her, and had already booked an appointment with an ob-gyn for later in the week where she would hear the baby’s heartbeat for the first time and find out how far along she was.

But knowing all those things still kept the baby stuck in a realm where it was almost some mythical being. It existed and yet it kind of didn’t.

Soon it would become very real.

Frighteningly real.

“You look like you’re about to face the executioner,” Pearl noted as she linked her arm through one of Opal’s.

That made her laugh.

Maybe she was mired in a pit of self-pity right now. She didn’t want to be. She wanted to enjoy these moments of excitement mixed with trepidation as the anticipation of the arrival of her baby grew stronger.

She wanted to feel like Ivory and Roman did even if she was doing this alone.

Well, not really alone, she thought as she looked from Lacey on one side of her to Pearl on the other.

Just because this wasn’t how she had expected to have kids, it didn’t mean it couldn’t be just as wonderful. The last

thing she wanted was to look back in a year, in ten years , in eighteen, or in fifty, and be filled with regrets.

If CJ didn't want to share this journey with her then that was his loss.

Not hers.

"You know we got your back, right?" Lacey asked.

Opal huffed a chuckle. "With the amount of texts and calls you guys sent CJ yelling at him for abandoning me, yeah, I kind of figured."

"Damn right we yelled at him," Pearl said. "No one messes with us and gets away with it."

"You know, Eagle holds enough sway to get him booted from the SEALs," Lacey said.

"No," she said quickly, vehemently. "That's not what I want. And it's not me to be petty and try to get revenge. I don't *want* revenge, I just want to move on, you know? I'm having a baby ... a *baby*. That's huge. And I'm scared and excited, and I want that to be my focus."

"You're going to be an *amazing* mom," Pearl said.

"You think?" Doubts were, she assumed, normal for all first-time prospective parents. Maybe you never quite lost that doubt even with baby two, three, or ten. But given how she grew up, she guessed she had more than the usual would I be a good mom kind of worries.

"Are you kidding me?" Pearl demanded.

"You mothered us, didn't you?" Lacey asked. "I don't care what The Master said, his mom wasn't ever a mother to us. She helped him kidnap us, helped him keep us prisoner, that's no real mom. And our own moms either couldn't or wouldn't raise us, but you? You stepped up. You were always there for us when we needed you. When we were sick or hurt, you took care of us. When we were scared you comforted us. And I know you used to give us extra food and water, clothes and blankets, going without yourself. Sweetie, you already *are* a

mom. It's just that now you get a little mini you running around."

Lacey's sweet and heartfelt words made her tear up.

Doubts might be normal, but that didn't make them any easier to deal with.

Hearing that her sisters believed in her gave her a much-needed confidence boost.

Because she was so overcome with emotion Opal gave a watery smile. "I'm kind of hoping for a girl."

"Perfect, because Roman wants a boy," Ivory announced as the couple caught up to them.

"I said I'd be happy with either," Roman protested.

"Then about had a heart attack when the guys were teasing you about all the times I've teased them about their little girls growing up and dating." Ivory grinned cheerfully at her husband.

"I'm fine with a girl. She just won't date until she's thirty. That seems totally fair," Roman said.

He looked so dead serious that all four of them laughed.

"You do know I'm only twenty-four, right?" Ivory teased her husband.

Again, Opal felt that jolt of jealousy as she watched Ivory and Roman together, their comradery, their closeness, the way they looked at one another, touched one another, but determinedly she pushed it away.

Today was a day for fun, not for obsessing over the fact she'd fallen for a man who didn't love her in return.

This baby would love her, and she had the love of so many other people.

She was one lucky lady. It was time she started acting like it.

"How would you feel if I had a dad who wouldn't let you marry me and start a family because I'm still *years* away from

thirty?” Ivory continued, clearly enjoying every second of annoying her husband.

“I wouldn’t let anyone tell me I couldn’t be with you,” Roman growled, making Ivory laugh.

“See, you want a boy because you know a daughter would have you wrapped around her little finger, and you’ll never be able to say no to her. So, when some guy *does* fall for her you’re going to lose your mind wanting to protect your baby girl but also make her happy,” Ivory said.

Roman’s face fell as he realized what his wife had just said was true. “We need to find out what we’re having at our next appointment so I can start coming to terms with it,” he groaned.

Was she going to find out the sex or wait until the baby was born? Opal hadn’t given it much thought. Everything had gone crazy after learning she was pregnant, but she kind of liked the idea of waiting to be surprised.

“Come on, let’s go look for cribs,” Roman said, tugging Ivory in the direction of the store, a different one than the one she and CJ had gone to the other day thankfully.

“Oh, honey, it’s cute you think that’s all we’re here for.” Ivory gave her husband a half pitying, half affectionate look. “I am in full-on nesting mode. We’re here for a crib, a change table, highchair, car seat, clothes, toys, blankets, bottles, everything.”

Nesting.

Again, it wasn’t something she’d even thought about yet because she was still coming to terms with the fact she was having a baby, but warmth spread through Opal.

Images of sitting in a rocking chair in the middle of the night, a tiny infant cradled in her arms, suckling on her breast, filled her mind and that warmth grew. Her baby sitting in a highchair trying solids for the first time, pouring warm water over a wet little head as her baby giggled in the bath, sitting on the floor building with blocks, tucking them into a crib at the end of the day with soft songs and sweet kisses.

Something inside her settled. Everything was going to be okay. She could do this, somehow, she and her child would find a way to make it work.

No.

Not just make it work.

They were going to be happy.

Seemed like she was joining her sister in nesting land because she was more than ready to create a safe, nurturing, and loving home for her little one.

“Let the nesting begin.”

* * *

DECEMBER 19TH

5:35 P.M.

HE WAS OBSESSED.

All CJ had done in the three days since he'd come home from the hospital was work on the piece of wood he held in his hands.

Not that it mattered, but he no longer remembered how or why he'd even started. All he knew was that his condo had an open fireplace and he'd gone to light it, not so much because he was cold or particularly loved having a fire going, but because Opal liked it. She thought it was cute, cozy, and romantic, and he seemed to want to torture himself by doing things that reminded him of her.

After striking a match and lighting the fire, he'd picked up another piece of wood, intending to add it to the fire, but for some reason, he hadn't been able to do it.

It was stupid, but the shape of the piece of wood reminded him of a bunny.

As a kid, he'd always wanted a pet rabbit, one of those cute little dwarf ones with floppy ears. He had almost talked his parents, neither of whom particularly wanted a pet, into letting him get a rabbit for his birthday, but then his mom had gotten pregnant, and he'd been told pets would have to wait. They couldn't have a pet and new baby in the house.

That was where his resentment for his baby brother had begun.

To rub salt in his wound, when DJ was born his parents gave him a gorgeous stuffed bunny as a gift. That toy sat inside the baby's crib every single day, a constant reminder to seven-year-old CJ of what he'd missed out on.

At seven, he'd decided when he grew up and got his own house, he'd fill it with hundreds of bunnies. Of course, that childish dream had never been actualized, and he didn't even have one pet rabbit. With the unpredictable and all-consuming nature of his job there just wasn't time for a pet.

The sight of the bunny image on the wood had done something to him.

Possessed him somehow.

He'd taken out a pocketknife and begun to work.

CJ didn't really have any idea what he was doing. He grew up in the suburbs not on a farm and he'd never carved anything in his life. He was pretty sure what he was carving wasn't very cute and certainly not any good, but he couldn't make himself stop.

The bunny had become a symbol for everything his jealous little self had resented and he'd held onto the guilt over his brother's tragic death for over twenty years.

Carving this bunny seemed to be the only way he even stood a chance at moving on.

It made zero sense, CJ was well aware of that, yet the pile of wood shavings on his kitchen table, and the dozens of tiny cuts on his fingers told the story of how important it seemed to have become to him.

Carving the bunny wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't bring DJ back to life, and it wouldn't give him a second chance with Opal and their baby but ...

He didn't even know.

He just had to do this.

When his doorbell rang, he didn't bother stopping. There was nobody he wanted to see. Nobody he wanted to talk to.

Well, that was a lie.

There was one person he would give anything to see, to talk to, to touch.

But that was the one person he dared not lay eyes on.

One glimpse and his resolve would shatter, and if he allowed himself back into Opal and the baby's lives, how could he protect them from himself?

"Just so you know we have the key," a voice called out. A voice he recognized. Seemed Prey was done waiting for him to return calls or texts and had decided to show up in person.

CJ had no idea how Chaos and whoever was with him had wrangled a key from the super, nor did he care. He had made it more than obvious that he wasn't interested in talking so what they hoped to achieve by showing up here and trying to force his hand he had no idea.

"Warned you," Chaos called out, and then he heard the door open.

When Chaos and Night walked into his kitchen, he ignored them. If they couldn't take a hint and wanted to show up here and waste their time that was their prerogative.

Minutes ticked by and nobody spoke.

The Prey guys didn't do anything, merely pulled up chairs at the table and watched him carve.

The longer the silence lasted the harder it was to keep quiet.

It was what they wanted, an old trick that said people didn't like long stretches of silence and would fill that void with things they might not say if you just peppered them with questions.

He wasn't falling for the trick.

And yet he grew more uncomfortable by the second.

Why were they here?

Had something happened to Opal?

The baby?

Finally, the suspense, the fear, got too strong to ignore. "Are they okay?"

"Who?" Chaos asked even though they all knew who CJ was asking about.

"You know," he gritted out.

"Can't even say her name now?" Chaos demanded, anger in the man's usually jovial green eyes.

Truth was he was afraid to.

Like if he said her name aloud, she would somehow appear before him and he would cave, drag her into his arms, and perform whatever acts of contrition she required to get her to forgive him.

Thankfully, Night took pity on him. "Opal and the baby are both fine. She has her first appointment tomorrow morning at ten."

That was a hint if ever there was one.

Was this Opal's way of reaching out?

Did she want him there but wasn't going to come right out and ask him?

Had she sent Chaos and Night on her behalf?

He hated this uncertain, strung-out, constantly second-guessing everything version of himself. He wished he could blame it on the concussion, but he wasn't so sure he could. It

was the injury to his heart not his head dictating his current anxiety-laden condition.

“Why are you here?” he demanded, setting down the partially carved rabbit and the knife. “Did she send you?”

Night winced. “No, man, sorry, she doesn’t know we’re here. Would likely have our heads if she knew we came and told you about the appointment.”

Pain lanced through him.

The worst part was knowing this was all his fault.

Of *course*, she didn’t want to see him. Why would she?

Not only had he broken her heart, he’d also rejected the child they had created. A child conceived in love even if neither of them had accepted their feelings at the time.

Rejected.

The word resonated inside his head, jumpstarting the headache that had begun to fade once he started carving the bunny.

CJ knew all too well what it felt like to be rejected.

Not just rejected but rejected by the people who were supposed to offer you unconditional love.

He was doing the same thing to his child that his parents had done to him.

Blaming it for something outside of its control.

It wasn’t his baby’s fault that his parents had accused him of murdering his baby brother. His baby was an innocent. Yet it would grow up knowing its father had chosen not to be part of its life.

Rejection.

That was what his child would feel.

Could he do that to his own flesh and blood?

Was he no better than his parents?

They'd pushed him away because of grief. He was pushing this baby away out of guilt. Neither were good reasons for hurting someone you loved.

And yeah, he loved this baby.

"We get that you're dealing with something big and it's making you act like a selfish jerk, but Opal deserves better," Chaos said, clear accusation in his tone and expression.

"We can't all be perfect like you, dude. Rescuing damsels in distress and not messing up," Night told Chaos. "I messed up with Lavender. Said something stupid I didn't mean, and it nearly cost me her and my kid. Spider messed up with Abby. Twice. He's lucky she even lets him breathe the same air she does. Fox messed up by keeping things from Evie. Shark walked away from Claire because he thought it was best for her. King thought he wasn't good enough for Faith. Why do I get the feeling you're trying hard to make all our mistakes all at once?"

Because he was.

He'd said something stupid to Opal that he didn't mean, the last thing he wanted was her out of his life. He'd messed up twice, once by not acknowledging he felt more for her than friendship and asking her out, then by pushing her away. He was keeping the secrets of his past from her, secrets that would help her understand. He did think he was doing what was best for her by keeping her away from him. And he didn't—never would—feel like he was good enough for Opal.

Rejection.

The word wouldn't get out of his head. It sat in there taunting him, mocking him.

CJ glanced down at the bunny on the table and he knew. He hadn't been carving it for himself, it was for the baby.

His baby.

A baby he might already have lost any chance at being part of its life.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

December 20th

10:19 A.M.

THIS WAS the most amazing thing she had ever seen.

Ever heard.

Opal stared in wonder at the screen where there was a grainy image of her baby. The soft thumping of its heartbeat filled the room, and she had never felt more love for another human being than she felt for this tiny one growing inside her.

Since her period had always been kind of irregular, Opal hadn't really even noticed that she'd missed it. It wasn't until the doctor called to tell her she was pregnant that she realized she hadn't gotten it in a while. Still, it had been a surprise to learn that she was almost four months along already. Her baby would be due right around the same time as Ivory and Roman's.

It was exciting to know the cousins would get to grow up more like siblings, and she was sure it wouldn't be long before there were more babies joining their growing family.

Not only did she know her baby would be due around mid to late May, but she'd also learned the sex of the baby. Ivory and Roman might be able to wait to find out, and she was sure she wanted to as well, but as soon as she saw the picture of her child on the screen, she knew she had to know.

At fifteen weeks the doctor had been able to determine the gender, thanks to a perfect shot of her little one, and it had been confirmed via the blood sample Dr. Kimmi had taken that had shown she was pregnant.

She was having a girl.

A girl.

Given the number of utterly adorable baby girl outfits she'd oohed and ahed over at the baby store a couple of days ago, she couldn't be more excited to be having a daughter.

"That is just ... I can't even ... I'm so ..." Lacey stammered, starting and not finishing several sentences.

Opal laughed but it turned into a sob. "I know."

"Are you thrilled?" Lacey asked.

"Definitely," she said, grinning through the tears that poured down her cheeks.

"You love her so much already, don't you?" Lacey asked as tears began to tumble down her cheeks as well.

"So much it hurts. I can't wait to hold her and kiss her and teach her all the things. I can't wait to tell her how much I love her, how she's the best thing that ever happened to me." It was going to be a long five months waiting for this little girl to make her big entrance into the world. Opal was determined to cherish every single second of it.

"You know in another couple of weeks your baby will begin to hear things like your heartbeat, then around twenty-seven weeks they start to hear sounds outside the womb. So, in a couple of months, your baby will be able to hear your voice and you can tell her you love her and she'll hear you, you don't even have to wait till she's born." The ob-gyn winked. "But I'd start telling her now even if she doesn't hear you, she'll know. Can never tell your little ones too often how much you love them."

Opal couldn't agree more.

She was going to tell this baby every day—probably dozens of times a day—how loved she was.

“I’ll definitely be telling her all the time,” she said.

“Word or warning, she’ll probably get sick of hearing it right around the time she hits those teenage years,” the doctor said with a rueful laugh. “Gotta love those teenage years.”

“I thought it was the terrible twos I had to watch out for,” Opal said.

“Honey, every age has its ups and downs, but at two you are still the sun in your baby’s universe, by the time they’re a teen you embarrass them just by existing,” the friendly ob-gyn told them.

“How many kids do you have?” Lacey asked.

“Four. One’s twenty and I’m just beginning to become a person to him, not just the mom that ruins his good times. The others are seventeen, fourteen, and four. Last one was a change of life surprise. One we would never regret even if he wasn’t planned. And let me tell you, the way his face lights up when he sees me, how I’m the first thing he wants to see in the morning and the last thing he sees before he goes to bed, it makes knowing the teenage years will be coming quicker than they seem totally worth it.”

Terrible twos or terrible teens, Opal would love this child and give her daughter everything she had.

Never would her sweet little girl know the horrors of the world the way she herself had known them at far too young an age. Opal would shelter her, protect her, and keep the darkness away from her baby for as long as she could. Forever if it was possible, but sooner rather than later, her baby would grow up and she’d have to let her go, spread her wings and fly.

Not for a long time though, and even when her daughter’s wings faltered, she would be there to catch her.

“Don’t worry, it’s worth it,” the doctor said, patting her hand as she removed the ultrasound. “All the pain, the worry, the sleepless nights, the doubts, the sense of failure, it’s all worth it because you love them so much.”

“More than worth it,” Opal agreed.

“Why don’t you get cleaned up and dressed, and I’ll make sure the pictures and video are ready for you to take with you. Don’t forget to make your next appointment, and you have my number, call if there are any issues. Not that I’m expecting any. You have one healthy baby growing in there.”

The doctor left, and as Opal was swinging her legs over the edge of the exam table Lacey’s phone rang.

“It’s Ben,” Lacey told her before answering.

Doing her best not to eavesdrop, Opal cleaned off her stomach and put her clothing back on. Just as she was slipping her feet into her favorite boots, Lacey finished up her call.

“Ben’s team is getting called out. He has to be on base in an hour.”

“Go,” she said, knowing what her sister wanted to do.

“But I drove you.”

“I don’t care. I can take an Uber or a cab. Besides, I want to go back to the store and buy some of those cute outfits we looked at the other day. Go home and kiss your man goodbye before he leaves.” Ben’s job as a SEAL was the same as hers and Lacey’s at Prey. When you left on a mission you never really knew when you’d be back.

Or if.

Of course, her sister wanted to go and see Ben before he left, and she had no intention of standing in the way of that.

“You sure?” Lacey asked.

“Course I am.”

“Thanks.” Lacey yanked her in for a hug. “You’re the best big sister in the whole world. When Ben gets back, we’re going to have a talk about not taking things slow any longer, you’ve got me all broody and baby-hungry.”

Opal laughed. “Well, you’re not eating my baby.”

“I’m so happy for you.” Lacey gave her another hug then the two of them gathered up their purses and headed out to the reception area.

At the desk they parted ways, Lacey going home to see Ben before he left, while she booked her next appointment, collected the ultrasound picture, and confirmed the video and more images had been sent to her email.

It was hard to tear her eyes from the very first photo of her child as she headed down in the lift, and first thing she had done when the email hit her inbox was save the video. She already loved this baby so much, she wanted to keep a record of everything that happened from here on out. Not just a typical baby book with milestones, but a journal of the ups and downs of this bumpy road the two of them would be traveling together.

Cool air filled her lungs as she walked out of the building and into the cold morning. There were so many people bustling about, going about their lives, and even with CJ not wanting any part of taking this journey with her, Opal couldn't help but feel like she was the luckiest of them all.

To come from where she had and be standing here now, free, with a job she adored, a family she loved, and a daughter on the way. How could she feel anything else but lucky?

With the plans The Master had had for her and her sisters, it was lucky she was still alive let alone thriving and living her best life.

Well almost best.

Having CJ by her side might have added to her happiness and contentment, but she was determined it wasn't going to detract from it.

Opal was too lost in thought to notice the approaching woman until a gun pressed against her stomach.

“Come with me quietly or I'll kill your baby.”

* * *

DECEMBER 20TH

10:38 A.M.

OKAY, so he was late, but he was here.

CJ stared at the building where Opal's ob-gyn's offices were located much as he might look at an approaching army or armed and angry militants.

In his hands, he clutched the wooden rabbit so tightly his knuckles ached.

He'd stayed up all night to finish it, painted it, added wheels, and attached a string so once the baby was walking it could pull it along. It certainly didn't look like something you would buy in a store or pay money for, but he'd put his heart and soul into carving it and he hoped that whatever happened, his baby loved it and knew that its daddy had made a lot of mistakes but loved it with everything he had to give.

Bringing it with him had seemed natural, necessary even, although he wasn't quite sure why. A peace offering perhaps? Or maybe an explanation of sorts to why he'd pushed Opal away?

While he might not know, he knew that having it with him was the only way he could approach Opal.

Coming late was a cowardly move, and honestly not one he'd intended.

All night he'd debated what to do with the information Night and Chaos had given him. Should he leave well enough alone, and stick with what he knew was the best thing for Opal and their child? Or should he at least talk to her, explain himself, and leave what happened next in her hands?

Both options were terrifying.

CJ didn't want to do the wrong thing, and didn't want to hurt the people he loved, but he was no longer sure what the right thing to do was. Everything wasn't as clear as it had been when Opal had first told him she was pregnant. Then, he'd known getting as far away from them as possible was the only way to keep them safe.

Now he had no idea what he was doing or what he should be doing.

Maybe that was why he'd found himself paralyzed when he climbed into his car. Unable to drive, unable to get back out and slink away inside. If he did approach Opal, and he did tell her everything, there were no guarantees that she would forgive him. Even if she did there was a difference between forgiving him and giving him a second chance.

It had taken him a good thirty minutes to convince himself it was worth the risk.

At the very least he had to see her. Even if she wouldn't talk to him at least he could see her again.

He missed her like he'd never missed another person.

Now he'd parked, walked to the building, and stood watching it. Opal could already be gone, he had no idea how long these kinds of appointments lasted. If she was gone, he'd have to call it fate.

CJ didn't think he believed in fate but maybe he did. Maybe if Opal had left already, it was the universe telling it was never going to be. That he'd already missed his chance.

That it was too late.

Taking a deep breath, he expelled it slowly, trying to gain control of himself. If anyone were to see him right now, they would never believe he was a SEAL, highly trained, and able to walk into any situation confident in his abilities.

Right now, he felt so tense he could barely function.

He'd come this far, he wasn't going to back out now.

With more determination than anything else, he walked through the building, located the ob-gyn's floor, and took the lift up. There were several women sitting around the waiting room, all were in various stages of pregnancy. A couple looked about ready to pop, one or two he couldn't even see visible signs they were pregnant.

How far along was Opal?

When they'd been together a few days ago he hadn't noticed any baby bump but he hadn't really been paying attention.

They were together often, so long as one of them wasn't away then they spent most nights together at his place or hers, any one of those she could have conceived their baby.

Most of the women here weren't alone. Some were with what looked like their mothers, but the majority had a man sitting beside them.

The fathers.

Here with their partners.

Like he should have been earlier.

If he wasn't such a coward, he would have been here. It wasn't fate that he had been waiting on, it was his fear that Opal wouldn't want anything to do with him even after she knew the truth that had kept him trapped in his car.

A coward.

That's what he'd been, and he was ashamed of himself. But he'd make it up to Opal if she would just give him a chance.

Approaching the desk, he tried to look like he belonged and not the nervous mess he knew he really looked like.

"May I help you?" the receptionist asked, flicking him a quick glance as she continued tapping away at her keyboard.

"Uh, yeah, I hope so. Has Opal Smith already finished her appointment or is she still here?" CJ asked.

"I can't give out patient information," the woman said crisply.

"Please. I ... I was supposed to be here at ten for her appointment, but I got ... waylaid."

The woman finally stopped typing and gave him a scrutinizing once over. CJ got the feeling she saw far more than he wanted her to see.

“Supposed to be here at ten, huh?” she asked.

“For Opal’s appointment,” he confirmed. “I don’t know if the doctor was running late and she was still here or if she left already.”

“And you are?”

“CJ. Cameron John Ulrich,” he added, although he wasn’t sure why, wasn’t like the woman needed his passport and driver’s license.

Another once over, her gaze lingering on the crudely carved rabbit in his hands. “The father?”

Father.

He was a father.

Whether he was part of this child’s life or not, it didn’t change the fact that he was going to be a father. There would be another person walking around that carried his DNA.

“Yeah, I’m the father.” It was the first time he’d actually said it out loud and he was surprised to find it didn’t fill him with the fear he’d been expecting.

“Ms. Smith left already, actually you just missed her.”

Disappointment hit him harder than he would have thought.

Seemed he just kept getting surprised today.

“Oh,” he said.

“If you hurry you might catch up with her,” the woman said, obviously taking pity on him.

“Thanks, I’ll do that.”

Anxious now to see Opal, talk to her, tell her the truth, and hope for the best, he hurried back to the lift, bypassing it to take the stairs instead. This wouldn’t be an easy road, but Opal was carrying his baby, she deserved to know the truth about the father of her child. If she couldn’t forgive him then he would still financially contribute to the raising of his son or daughter. If she could, then he was prepared to take things as

slowly as she needed, earn back her trust, take whatever role she let him in their child's life, and prove to her that he would be there for her.

For both of them.

As soon as he stepped outside, he glanced around, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. If she'd really just left, then she should be around here somewhere. He hoped she hadn't come to her appointment alone. He had been stupid and not come with her, but she needed someone else with her, sharing her joy and excitement.

There was no sign of her, but he did catch a glimpse of something on the ground.

A picture.

For some reason, he stooped and picked it up, surprised to see Opal's name on the top of it. It was a sonogram picture of their child. What was it doing lying discarded on the pavement?

No way would Opal just drop it and walk off.

Unease settled in his gut.

Suddenly something felt ... off.

He wasn't sure what, but his gut was telling him that something was wrong.

Again, he looked around, hoping to catch sight of her. The photo wasn't dirty like it had been lying on the ground for long, and there were no shoeprints indicating it had been stepped on. She must have just dropped it within a minute or so of him finding it. The receptionist had said she'd just left so she had to be somewhere close by.

"Where are you, Piccolina?" he whispered.

What could have happened to her leaving her ob-gyn appointment?

Ice settled in his gut.

The case Artemis Team had been working. Someone abducting pregnant women to sell the babies. Although they'd

found and raided her warehouse, Elsbeth Riviera had gotten away. Was it possible Opal had become the next victim?

No.

That was crazy talk.

All the other victims had been taken in the later stages of their pregnancies, and Opal wasn't even showing yet.

Opal had to be around here somewhere, she couldn't be gone because if she was it would be his fault because he hadn't been there.

He would have failed her the same way he'd failed his brother.

This time it wouldn't be jealousy that cost the life of someone he loved, it would be his own stubborn guilt.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

December 20th

11:04 A.M.

THIS COULDN'T BE HAPPENING.

Opal could scarcely breathe past the lump of terror lodged in her throat.

Sure, she had been training her whole life to kill, to defend herself, to survive. Going undercover as a victim had never been her thing, she was too emotional, and it was too hard for her to hide those emotions, but she could have survived a kidnapping, and done what it took to escape.

But not like this.

Not pregnant.

Not with her daughter's life hanging in the balance.

One wrong move would be all it took, and her baby's life would be over. Hers, too, because without a baby to provide for her kidnappers, she had no value.

They might not have come right out and said it, but the woman driving the van—the very same Ms. X who had her and CJ taken to the warehouse to be interrogated—and the man who had been waiting there for them had to know who she was.

There was no way they wouldn't recognize her.

Sure, she wasn't wearing much makeup today like she had been that night, and she was dressed in jeans, a sweater, and a coat not the fancy clothes she'd worn then, but she still looked like her.

If they hadn't pointed a gun at her belly and threatened her baby she would have thought they had just figured out that she and CJ weren't who they said they were and were behind the raid.

But they knew.

Somehow, they knew that she was pregnant.

Which meant sitting in the back of the van, bound at the wrists and ankles, a weapon trained without a single tremble at her stomach, she had little to no viable moves to make.

At least not here, not yet.

There had been too many people around on the street when she'd been taken for her to make an effective move. Plus, the fear for her child had rendered her all but useless. Now she'd had time to think, to get herself under control, to plan, and she knew she had to make a move when they got wherever it was they were going.

If she waited any longer to act it might be too late.

Once she was secured wherever Elsbeth had moved the base of her operations to then she might never get an opportunity to try to make her escape.

No escape meant she would be held until she delivered and then she'd be killed, her baby sold. There was no way to know who her baby would be sold to. Her daughter could luck out and wind up with a family who would love and cherish her, or she could wind up in the same kind of hell Opal herself had grown up in.

The risk was too high.

Even if the only crime the people who bought her daughter had ever committed was buying a baby because they couldn't have one of their own, she didn't want that for her child. This

little girl belonged with her. Opal was her mother, and no one could ever love her as much as she did.

Eventually, they pulled to a stop. It felt like forever when every single second counted. How long before someone realized she was missing?

Would Prey find her?

They'd never stop looking, that she knew with absolute certainty, just like she knew there were no guarantees they would ever find her.

For now, she was on her own.

That was how she had to approach this. Waiting for help was only going to get her killed.

Opal just wished she hadn't dropped the sonogram photo when she'd first been snatched.

She wanted to cling to that picture like it was a talisman, reminding her of what she was fighting for. Instead, she pressed her cuffed hands to her stomach and promised her daughter she would do everything she could.

There were no windows in the back of the van so she had no idea where they were or what she would find once she was taken out. Were they at another warehouse somewhere in the city? Had they traveled out into the country somewhere?

When the door of the van was opened, Opal prayed she had the acting skills it might take to play this out.

Throwing a glare at Elsbeth she hissed angrily, "How dare you. My husband will kill you."

Elsbeth cocked her head. "You wish me to believe you really were who you said you were."

"I am Ophelia Sampson. That is the truth. You know it, you looked into us, I know you would have, you're not stupid."

"And I found a lot. An entire history in fact. Everything needed to make a person look real."

"I *am* real," Opal snapped.

“Yet just a couple of days after you and your husband started sniffing around, my home and place of business were raided. Coincidence? I think not.” There was anger in Elsbeth’s eyes but not the kind of fury Opal would have expected. It was like it was a mere bump in the road rather than something that could have had her locked up for the rest of her life.

“If you were raided that was nothing to do with us, you must have been sloppy.” Opal huffed to cover the nervous intake of air it would otherwise have been. Baiting this woman was dangerous, but continuing to pretend she was really Ophelia Sampson seemed like her only chance.

“You forget one very important detail.” Elsbeth’s gaze dropped to Opal’s stomach. “You are pregnant. Therefore, you are not looking to buy a baby. You already have one.”

Allowing tears to tumble down her cheeks—not a difficult thing to do given she was scared out of her mind for her baby—Opal dropped her head and gave a small snuffle. “Okay, we lied about that. We never wanted to buy a baby from you we wanted to *sell* you our baby.”

From the silence, she knew she had stunned the woman with her comment.

This was the only hand she had to play, and Opal was hoping it was a winning one.

“You want to sell your baby?” Elsbeth asked.

Keeping her head down Opal made her tone low and sad. “Carter lost some money in a bad deal. We never wanted kids, and this baby is going to be a drain on resources we don’t have. We heard some rumors from a couple we know who couldn’t have kids and then suddenly turned up with one. We were hoping to catch your eye, lure you in, then broker a deal that worked in both our favors.”

When Elsbeth began to laugh Opal lifted her head and watched the woman warily.

Was Elsbeth laughing because she wasn’t buying what Opal was selling?

Or because she felt like she was about to win big?

“Well, I don’t think you’re going to like the deal I have for you,” Elsbeth mocked. “I get to keep the baby, don’t pay you a dime, then sell it for a ridiculous profit because you and your husband are gorgeous, no way this baby won’t be beautiful.”

“Y-you can’t do that,” she stammered, glad that at least for the moment Elsbeth still believed that she was Ophelia Sampson.

“I can and I will.”

With that, Elsbeth nodded to the guard who stood, hooked a metal chain to the cuffs at her wrists and one to her ankles, and guided her out of the van.

As they stepped outside Opal sucked in a horrified breath.

They were at a port.

A large boat sat waiting for them.

They were going to be taken out of the country.

How was Prey going to know where to look for her?

Opal swallowed down the panic that threatened to overwhelm her. There was no way she was going to be able to do anything effective, not bound as she was and pregnant.

She had no choice.

She was going to have to let this play out and pray Prey would find her in time.

A sense of claustrophobia filled her at the awful realization that all her choices had been taken away from her just as they had as a child. She had no control over what happened to her next, and no way to change it either.

She was powerless.

At least a dozen other women were here, too, all cuffed as she was, joined together with chains like the ones that had been fixed to her cuffs. It was like some sick, twisted version of a chain gang. Only they weren’t criminals being led out to

work, they were innocent women stolen because of what was growing inside them.

Once these people had what they wanted every last one of them would be killed.

More girls would be taken.

An endless cycle that both she and her child would be trapped in.

Her life had started in the human trafficking trade, and it would end in it as well. That wouldn't hurt as much if the same wasn't now true for her daughter.

* * *

DECEMBER 20TH

1:47 P.M.

“SHOULD BE RIGHT THERE.”

Following the instructions given by Raven Hathaway, formerly Oswald, the second oldest of the six Oswald siblings who owned and ran Prey Security, CJ looked inside the dumpster and found what he was looking for.

After finding the discarded ultrasound photo, he hadn't ignored the feeling in his gut. Instead, he'd immediately called Prey and asked if someone could try to get in touch with Opal. Afraid that if he tried calling her, she'd only ignore the calls anyway, he thought it was better if one of her sisters tried, or even one of her bosses.

Minutes later he got the confirmation he had been dreading.

Opal hadn't answered any calls.

No one could get in contact with her.

Nor did anyone know where she might have gone.

Apparently, Lacey had been the last one to see her. They'd gone to the ob-gyn appointment together and had been going to have lunch after only Lacey's boyfriend Ben's SEAL team had been called out and she'd left to say goodbye.

According to Lacey, Opal had been going to go back to the store to buy some cute clothes she'd seen a few days ago and then was going to take a cab or an Uber home.

She'd never returned to her apartment.

Prey immediately sprang into action, and while CJ had expected to be iced out, no one had offered a single complaint about him joining the search for her. Sure, none of her sisters or the Prey guys had been overly friendly, but he didn't care about that, it was Opal he owed an apology to, and if he got her back he'd spend the rest of his life making sure she knew how sorry he was for pushing her away.

For being a coward.

He would forever regret that he hadn't had the courage to tell Opal about DJ and his fears of being near an infant.

But in life you didn't get to go back and do things the right way even after you'd learned from your mistakes.

She and their baby might be gone for good.

Leaning into the dumpster behind a fast-food restaurant, CJ scooped up the discarded purse and was thankful at least that Opal's dead body hadn't been thrown away with it.

That was good.

That meant whoever had taken her had done so for a reason.

That gave them a chance at getting her back alive.

"Was it there?" Raven asked.

"Yeah," he replied. "The purse was there." Opening it up he added, "Cell phone sitting inside. Wallet in there, too. They dumped it so we couldn't trace her."

"Cell phone look damaged?" Raven asked.

Pulling it out he looked it over, the screen lit up and he almost choked when he saw that the wallpaper Opal used was a picture of the two of them together. It had been taken at a BBQ last Easter. She was sitting on his lap because they'd run out of chairs, and it had seemed like the most natural thing in the world to just pull her down onto his lap. Opal had been wearing a new dress and she'd wanted a selfie. He'd told her he'd move so she could, but she'd insisted he stay and snapped several pictures.

It didn't surprise him that she'd chosen this one for her phone's wallpaper, she looked stunning in it. The deep green of the dress looked gorgeous against her pale skin, the sun picked out the red highlights in her hair, and her eyes were shining brightly. What did surprise him was that she hadn't changed it the second he'd broken her heart.

Had she just forgotten to, or had she kept in on purpose, hoping something would change?

"CJ?" Raven's patient tone reminded him he hadn't answered her question.

"Phone looks fine, but it's locked, I can't get into it."

"All Prey phones have an override."

She read him out a code and a moment later he had the phone unlocked. It felt weird to be in Opal's phone, like an invasion of her privacy. CJ had to keep reminding himself that they would all do whatever it took to get her back, even if that meant going through her personal belongings like her phone.

"Prey phones are set to automatically start recording if a certain phrase is uttered, kind of like a way better upgraded Siri. Open up photos and see if there's a recent video, if she said the words, "I'm coming quietly," then there should be a video," Raven explained.

This was assuming she'd had a chance to even think of doing anything.

It could have been a blitz attack. She could have been subdued and bound or unconscious before she could fight back.

Especially if they threatened the baby.

CJ knew that Opal would have done whatever her kidnappers demanded if it meant protecting that baby.

When he opened up photos, he was immediately struck by two things. One was that there was indeed what looked like a video from the inside of her bag, the other was what was clearly a video of the sonogram.

“CJ?” Raven prodded gently.

“There’s a video of the sonogram,” he said softly. He should have been there. There was no question about it. These were moments he shouldn’t have missed out on, moments he couldn’t get back. Seeing your child for the first time was something a parent was supposed to look forward to, and he hated he hadn’t been there, holding Opal’s hand as they saw their little one on the screen, and heard the sound of its tiny heart beating.

“Watch it.” Raven more than anyone else he knew was intimately aware of what it was like to lose a child. Her oldest, a now fifteen-year-old girl, had been snatched when she was three, missing for ten years before Raven and her husband Max were able to find her.

“We need to listen to the recording,” he said even as he ached to open the video and see the footage of his child.

“More than that we need you focused. Watch the video. Trust me, CJ.”

His finger was shaking as he touched the video and it sprung to life before his eyes making his child suddenly extremely vividly real.

The thumping of its heart, the tiny little body about the size of an apple. He knew that because the video was labelled fifteen-week scan and last night while he’d finished carving the rabbit he’d listened to several podcasts on pregnancy. Around fifteen weeks the baby was supposed to be about the size of an apple, weighing seventy grams, and be starting to develop a soft layer of hair.

This was his baby. Made with the woman he loved. Conceived in love.

He had made a mistake, messed up bigtime, the question was, was there still time to make things right?

Could he win back Opal's love? Earn her forgiveness?

Could he be someone his child could be proud of?

Could he set aside his fears and guilt and step up to be who Opal and the baby needed him to be?

That wasn't an option.

He *had* to be who they needed otherwise he wouldn't get them back alive. CJ knew he was going to have to find a way to work through what had happened with his brother, accept that he had just been a jealous, spoiled kid who didn't want a sibling, nothing evil, nothing sinister, nothing out of the ordinary.

"Do you know?" he asked.

"What you're having?"

"Yes."

"A girl. It's a baby girl."

"I-I'm having a d-daughter?" he stammered. It didn't matter, boy or girl he already loved this baby, but a little mini Opal running around? That was the stuff dreams were made of.

"Congratulations," Raven said. There was no anger in her tone, no rebuke, and he relaxed a little.

Maybe everyone wasn't judging him as much as he thought they were.

Maybe he was just projecting how badly he was judging himself onto everyone else.

He absolutely loved that Opal had so many people in her corner, people who he knew were angry with him for hurting her. But they understood. He prayed Opal understood when he told her everything.

Keeping his past a secret wasn't an option, and as he listened to his daughter's heartbeat he found he didn't want it to be. For the first time in twenty-one years, CJ wanted to tell someone what had happened, needed to hear someone he loved tell him it wasn't his fault, that he hadn't done anything wrong.

Closing down the video, he shoved aside all his insecurities and doubts and focused his mind like he had been trained to do.

"I'm ready to watch that video and go find my girls and bring them home."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

December 21st

7:33 A.M.

HELL WAS SUPPOSED to be hot.

Everybody knew that.

Yet this version of hell was cold.

It certainly wasn't like the cold was Opal's biggest problem right now, but it was a nuisance piled on top of being chained, caged, and trapped with people who saw her as nothing but a bag of money and it was annoying.

Also made it harder to concentrate.

Definitely made it hard to sleep.

For hours now she had been shivering, unable to focus on much of anything else.

Time had no meaning down here. There were no windows, so she had no idea of how many hours had passed since she had been taken, but since she had received two meals she had to assume that it was now morning the day after her abduction.

Not surprisingly, the food was good. Dinner had been a huge piece of chicken schnitzel, steamed broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, and a baked potato. While there were no seasonings or spices added to the food, it was good and nutritious, and would help to make sure her body had the nourishment needed to grow a healthy baby. The portion sizes had been so generous

she'd hardly been able to finish the meal. In fact, if there hadn't been a guard walking up and down the dark room deep in the hull of the large ship ordering her and the other prisoners to finish their meals she wouldn't have.

Breakfast was a huge bowl of oatmeal and a plate of fresh fruit. Again, the servings were larger than she would have eaten, and even though she actually liked oatmeal she usually added honey and the plain oatmeal seemed to clog in her throat.

It wasn't the food, it was everything else. Being trapped, her baby in danger, not seeing a way out.

That was the worst.

Right now, she couldn't come up with any viable plan that would get her or the others out of here.

Knowing there only chance at escape likely rested on her shoulders made it worse.

They had no training, they were just everyday women who had been snatched based solely on the fact that they were pregnant. The dock had been empty of any other people when they'd been loaded onto the ship. Most likely Elsbeth had paid off the workers to take a break so they wouldn't witness the line of chained women being loaded onto the boat.

Wherever they were going it would likely be the same.

No one was going to see them, rescue them, it was on her to find a way out.

In the cage beside her a young woman had been crying most of the night. The sound only added to the heavy burden Opal felt pressing down upon her shoulders.

She wanted so save these women, she just didn't know how.

Shuffling over to the edge of her cage, Opal leaned against the bars. The cuffs on her wrists and ankles hadn't been removed when she'd been put in there, just the chains used to attach her to the line of prisoners. It had made eating difficult, using the bucket in the corner to do her business hard, and

sleeping uncomfortable. Not that sleeping on a cold concrete floor was ever comfortable.

Obviously, Elsbeth didn't see the lack of a suitable bed as a hinderance to her prisoners growing healthy babies.

"I know it's hard, but try not to give up," she said softly to the woman.

Large gray eyes, shimmering with tears, looked up at her. "They took us for our babies, didn't they?"

Lying wasn't an option. If they had any chance at getting out of here, Opal was going to have to find a way for all of the women to work together. An idea would come to her, she had to keep believing that.

"They did."

"To sell them?"

"Yes."

"W-what are they going to d-do to us after we give b-birth?"

Every instinct she had told her to coddle, to soothe, to tell the woman what she wanted to hear so she wasn't scared.

But right now, fear could work for them.

They needed to hold onto that fear but not let it control them. Sometimes, fear could be a friend, it sharpened your senses, filled you with the self-preservation you needed to do things you otherwise would never consider, like killing to save your own life.

"They won't need us once the babies are born," she said gently.

"So, they'll k-kill us?"

"Yes."

A noisy sob broke out from the woman she'd been talking to, along with a couple of dismayed exclamations and more tears from some of the other women close enough to their cages to overhear.

Keeping one woman calm in these conditions would be a challenge. But keeping three or four dozen would be next to impossible. It was clear from the number of women here that while the warehouse Prey had raided was the main base of operations for Elsbeth Riviera, she had several others.

Now it seemed the woman was moving all her merchandise at once, probably because of the raid. She knew people were onto her, it was safer to pack up and move somewhere else. But where?

“Try to stay calm,” she said a little louder. There were no guards down here with them that she could see, they seemed to just come at meal times, and then they’d been coming in pairs to take the women away one by one. Just because you couldn’t see them didn’t mean they weren’t there though, and it didn’t mean they weren’t being watched via cameras.

For now, she didn’t want Elsbeth to know she was a highly trained operative. So far her lie about wanting to sell her baby seemed to be holding and she wanted to keep it that way.

“Calm? How can we be calm?” a woman across the corridor shrieked.

“I’m not giving them my baby!” another said.

“How are you going to stop them?” one demanded. That one sounded more angry than hysterical so Opal took note of which one she was.

“My baby is due any day now, I’ll probably be dead before we even get wherever they’re taking us,” another said through a noisy sob.

“But you’re not dead yet, which means we have time,” Opal said, attempting to calm the growing terror in the room.

“Time for what?”

“We’re locked in cages. We can’t do anything!”

“And the guards have guns!”

“We have handcuffs on, even if they weren’t armed we couldn’t fight them.”

Actually, that wasn't quite true.

When the guards came and took away a woman, when they brought her back, she was no longer shackled. The women were also naked, but a mattress and blanket had been put in the cell while she was gone. Being naked would bother these women, but Opal had long ago learned that clothing was a privilege not a right and one you could easily do without.

Convincing these innocent women of that fact wouldn't be a wise use of her time. They hadn't grown up in this world, where evil reigned and you had to be prepared to do whatever it took to survive.

There was only so much she could teach them with limited time, no resources, and the possibility of being watched.

If Elsbeth found out her true identity, the woman could decide revenge was more important than a baby and kill her now. They obviously hadn't gone through her purse, learned her name was Opal Smith and not Ophelia Sampson because if they had, she believed she would already be dead.

Ophelia Sampson didn't know how to kill like Opal Smith did, so she couldn't risk teaching these women what she could about how to kill, but she could at least keep them calm. Focused. Working together as a team.

A team was only as good as its weakest member and right now she had a whole lot of weak links. Not their fault of course, but what she wouldn't give to have her sisters here with her, or another of Prey's teams, or CJ.

Nope.

Not going there.

Allowing herself to think about CJ weakened her, and right now she needed every ounce of strength she possessed.

She could not afford to be weak.

Strong.

Opal knew she had to be strong.

For herself.

For her baby.

For these women and their children.

“Anyone taken a self-defense class?” she asked.

The room grew quiet for a moment, the panic fading a smidgen.

“I have,” one woman said softly.

“I’m a black belt in taekwondo,” the angry one from earlier said.

A couple of other women said that they, too, had taken some self-defense classes, and her confidence grew a little.

“It won’t be easy, and I know we all have babies we want to protect, but we’re not completely helpless, no one ever is. There’s always some strength you have, even if it’s overlooked, and your enemy always has a weakness. We all want to survive, we all want to keep our babies safe, we all want to get home to our families. I don’t have a plan yet, but that doesn’t mean we can’t come up with one. Working together is our best chance, watching out for one another. A team. Are you with me?”

No one spoke at first.

Then the angry woman said, “I’m with you.”

More assents echoed from around the room and for the first time Opal actually believed that maybe they stood a chance at getting out of here alive and with their babies.

* * *

DECEMBER 22ND

8:22 A.M.

THEY WERE CLOSING in on the forty-eight-hour mark.

This time two days ago, CJ had been finishing up the rabbit and trying to dredge up enough courage to face Opal

and convince her to give him a second chance.

Now he was facing the increasingly real possibility that he wouldn't get her back alive.

Not that he was giving up hope.

As long as it took, he would find Opal and their daughter, and bring them home. Even if it was their bodies he wouldn't rest until he had them both back here where they belonged.

"Finally," Raven said with a weary sigh. The woman had been working on this almost non-stop, she'd barely taken time to sleep, the only time she hadn't been hammering away at her keyboard was when her husband Max brought their three-year-old son Roman around to the office to see her. Then she pushed away the worry and anxiety he knew she was feeling and gave her little boy everything she had.

Same way he knew Opal would push aside her own fears and concerns to do what it took to protect their baby.

That filled him with terror as much as it filled him with pride.

"What did you find?" he asked.

"Mama play trains?" Roman asked as he came running into the room, his daddy on his heels.

Raven's gaze met Max's and understanding passed between them. "Mama has to do something very important for Aunt Opal. I'll play trains with you in a bit," she told Roman.

The little boy looked disappointed for a moment, but then he turned his big brown eyes onto Ivory's husband Roman. Little Roman as they'd been calling him had decided he loved Big Roman best of all. "Big Roman will you play with me?" he asked in that adorably sweet way toddlers could that made them completely irresistible.

"Go," Ivory told her husband. "I'm okay."

Big Roman kissed her cheek then laid a hand on her stomach, caressing it, no doubt thinking how easily it could have been Ivory who was snatched leaving an appointment. "Sure thing, little buddy."

Swinging the boy up into the air, Big Roman carried Little Roman out of the conference room that was currently packed with people, papers and files spread out all over the table.

As soon as the toddler was gone all eyes turned to Raven.

“Did you find her?” he asked. Of course, it would be great if she had actually found where Opal was being held right this second, but for now, he just meant had she finally caught a glimpse of her on one of the CCTV cameras in the area where Opal had been taken.

“Yep.” There was more relief than anything else in Raven’s tired smile, he knew she was placing a disproportionate amount of blame on her own shoulders that they didn’t have a lead yet.

The obvious answer was that Opal had been taken by Elsbeth Riviera. The woman abducted pregnant women leaving appointments alone and she was still out there. They were definitely looking into other properties they could trace to her and had already searched two. Unfortunately, both had been recently cleared out, leading them to believe she had fled town.

Which meant she might not be the one responsible for Opal’s disappearance.

Putting all their eggs in one basket without having proof could mean the difference between life and death.

Opal’s life or death.

His daughter’s life or death.

“When we get her back, we need to see about setting up a decent system down there. Most of the cameras aren’t working and the ones that are are pointed uselessly at front doors of buildings or stores only. I finally got a glimpse of her about four blocks away,” Raven explained.

“Are you sure it’s her?” CJ asked. It wasn’t that he doubted Raven’s abilities, it was just that they’d gotten their hopes up yesterday only to find out after hours of following the vehicle the woman was in that she wasn’t Opal at all.

“Lacey confirmed the woman is wearing the same sweater that Opal was. Rookie mistake, they put a wig on her and sunglasses and a hat, but they left her in the same clothes. If they’d put her in a coat, we might not have picked it up as easily.”

An image popped onto the large screen taking up most of one wall. Two women walking close to one another, with their trained eyes it was obvious that the taller one was holding a weapon on the shorter one, aimed directly at her stomach.

The sight of a gun aimed at his daughter’s tiny, defenseless body had him seeing red.

Threatening the life of a woman’s unborn child to force her compliance had to be one of the lowest things you could do.

“I’m already starting to follow their trail but it’s going to take me a while,” Raven cautioned.

CJ hated that this was taking so long. He just wanted to know where his girls were and go and get them.

From the recording Opal had set off, they knew that she’d been walked for a while to a vehicle where at least one other person was waiting. It sounded like she’d been cuffed although since her phone was inside her purse there was no video only audio to go off.

A man’s voice had told Opal that as long as she did as she was told her baby wouldn’t be harmed. It reinforced the idea that this was the work of Elsbeth Riviera, and he could have sworn that the man’s voice was one of the guards who had ambushed him and Opal that night while they were driving to the hotel after dinner, but again that wasn’t proof.

Now they had it.

“That’s her. Elsbeth Riviera,” he said, nodding at the screen.

“Positive?” Raven asked.

“Not a doubt. We were right, she’s the one who took Opal.” When he got his hands on her the woman was going to pay for hurting his girls.

“But because she knows who you guys really are and wants revenge or a massive coincidence?” Keane “Ghost” Bryson asked. Ghost led a Delta Force team and he and the rest of his guys had shown up late last night. CJ knew it meant a lot to him and everyone else at Prey that these guys had dropped everything to be here.

From what he understood, Ghost and his team had also been involved in helping rescue Ivory a year ago when she’d been kidnapped during the undercover mission in which she’d met Roman. They’d also stepped up when Pearl had been taken earlier in the year by the psychopath who had raised Opal and her sisters, a man they had known then only as The Master.

A few months ago when Lacey had gone missing, the Delta Team had once again stepped in to help, and they had finally learned the truth about The Master. Opal had told him the whole story, how a boy named Mervin Matthewson who had been abandoned by his father, abused by his mother, and tormented by the other children in his class had grown into a man determined to get revenge on those other boys. Taking the girls was supposed to give him his own little army to take out his bullies, and apparently, he had intended to keep Lacey and force her to become his wife and mother of his children. Mervin’s mother Mable who had been complicit in at least some of the crimes was still out there and he knew Prey wouldn’t stop until they found her.

“Has to be coincidence,” Beckett “Coach” Ralston said. Coach in particular had become close with all four women, and he could see how worried the man was for Opal.

“Agreed,” Cormac “Fletch” Fletcher said. “There was no talk of revenge, and they knew she was pregnant. Opal herself only just found that out. If they had taken her because they learned she had been undercover and was the reason for the raid, they wouldn’t know about the baby. Someone is tipping them off, they have a mole in at least one doctor’s office, paying them off, blackmailing them, whatever it is the only thing that makes sense is if a doctor, nurse, or administrator is sending them intel.”

“In and out quick, professional,” Graham “Hollywood” Caverly added.

“But not perfect,” Dane “Fish” Munroe said. “We know it’s her, so all we have to do is figure out where Elsbeth Riviera would go if she needed to hide out.”

“I have an idea on that,” Troy “Beatle” Lennon spoke up. “I’ve been reading through all the intel we have on Elsbeth Riviera, and one thing stood out to me. Her parents were killed in a light plane crash in the Solomon Islands. Elsbeth was in the plane with them but survived. Every year since she turned eighteen, she’s gone back to visit the sight on the anniversary of the day she was found. Not the day of the crash, but the day she was found six days later.”

“The Solomon Islands don’t have an extradition treaty with the US,” Ford “Truck” Laughlin volunteered.

“Exactly,” Beatle nodded, his light brown eyes serious.

“If you wanted a backup base for your illegal baby selling operation then a country that won’t extradite you back to your home country could be a good idea,” CJ said. “And the place has a dark history for her. Maybe she feels like the old Elsbeth died in that crash along with her parents. It’s a place of rebirth for her, maybe even in a weird way a place that she feels safe because she survived not just the crash but six days in the jungle.”

A place where she might be heading right this second with his woman and unborn daughter in tow.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

December 22nd

2:54 P.M.

THEY WEREN'T in any rush.

That told Opal that wherever it was she and the other women were being taken was nowhere close to home.

She'd been given two dinners, two breakfasts, and two lunches since she'd been snatched which meant she was currently on day three of her ordeal.

Three days.

The longest three days of her life but also the shortest.

They were the longest because there was nothing to do but sit in her cell and wait for her turn to be taken for what she now knew would be an examination of her physical health and her baby. The shortest because with each second that ticked by, her chances of escape drastically diminished.

Not that she was going to tell the others that.

She and the other women had developed a kind of tentative bond over these last couple of days. When they were alone, they whispered and chatted, shared names and information about themselves, passed along intel up and down the two long lines of cells. So far, she'd managed to calm everyone down and given them a cautious hope that if they kept their eyes and

ears open that an opportunity to change their fate might present itself.

Part of her felt like a fraud, that maybe the hope she was giving them was false hope.

How *was* she going to get herself and thirty-four other women out of here?

Opal had no idea.

Not a single one.

But for now, at least everyone was as calm as they were going to be. Several of them had at least some self-defense training, and there was a former military sniper and a cop amongst them, so between the three of them they'd been able to help keep it together.

It was nice to know that she wasn't the only one with training here and it did actually improve their chances.

Who knows, maybe they could pull this off.

"Stand up," the gruff order had her head snapping up to find two armed guards standing outside her cell.

Guess it was her turn.

The women who had already been taken and examined had at least come back without the cuffs, plus they had a comfortable mattress to lie on. Her entire body was bruised and sore from constantly having to sit or lie on the hard, unforgiving concrete.

Plus, she was still cold.

Knowing she would be given a thick, warm woolen blanket when she was brought back made what was to come somewhat bearable.

Awkwardly, Opal used the metal bars separating her cage from the one beside it to get to her feet, then she shuffled toward the door. She hadn't been out of here in days and even just the chance to stretch her muscles a little, perhaps even get some fresh air if she was taken outside all invigorated her. With thirty-five women in here, none of them had showered in

days, all of them were forced to do their business in a bucket, which was collected every time they were brought a meal, this place smelled.

Plus, this gave her an opportunity to get the lay of the land, perhaps see something that might be useful, maybe even procure some sort of weapon. Even something as simple as a pen when used under the right circumstances could inflict some damage.

Right now, she'd take anything.

Her cell door was opened and two beefy hands grasped her elbows, guiding her out of the dungeon room as she thought of it and up three flights of stairs. Stairs weren't any easy feat, shackled as she was, but somehow she managed it. Although they didn't directly head outside, she was able to glimpse blue sky through the windows.

That and rolling ocean was all there was to see, but it was better than rows of cages and imprisoned women.

She was led to an exam room that might very well have been the one in her ob-gyn's office. The place was clean, well equipped, the walls were a crisp white, the carpet the same kind of dirty brown color often used by office buildings. For a room on a boat, it looked surprisingly non boat like.

Not that she knew a whole lot about boats. And certainly not huge ones like this with space for an entire dungeon area. Maybe this was going to be their permanent home, you could certainly deliver a baby in here, and disposal of their bodies would be easy, you'd just throw them overboard and let the ocean and its inhabitants do their thing. It also would make things difficult from a prosecution standpoint as Elsbeth could remain in international waters indefinitely meaning Interpol would have to be brought in.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Sampson.” An older man turned from the desk where he had been jotting down notes. “How are you feeling?”

An odd question to ask someone who was being held captive.

How did he *think* she was feeling?

But Opal knew the question had little to do with her emotional and psychological wellbeing and was merely an inquiry as to whether there were any potential issues that might affect the viability of her pregnancy.

Shooting him a withering glare she huffed. “I’d be feeling a whole lot better if I wasn’t cuffed and didn’t have guns pointed at me.”

A faint smile appeared on the old man’s wrinkled face, and he nodded to the guards, who took her toward the exam table. Instead of uncuffing her so she could climb on herself, they merely lifted her and set her on it. Then they lifted her bound hands, pulled them over her head and attached them to the back of the table leaving her in an awkward sitting position and unable to do much of anything but wriggle uncomfortably.

“I’m going to start with an ultrasound, then we’ll take some physical measurements of you, height and weight, pulse, blood pressure, etc. After that, I’ll put you through a work out to determine fitness, and then I’ll have some questions about health and genetics, including things like IQ, particular skills that run in your family like musical ability or creativity, then we’ll finish up with a list of any known medical issues that run in your family.”

It was all so clinical, the man was acting like he was gathering information to write a report on something, not intel that would be given to prospective people who wanted to purchase her baby.

Bound as she was, she couldn’t stop him from lifting the hem of her sweater or unzipping her jeans. The gel he placed on her stomach was cold, and unlike last time she wasn’t excited to see her baby on the screen or hear its heartbeat.

This time she wanted to protect her child from these people, but she couldn’t.

Exposing her daughter to these monsters felt wrong, like a failure, even though she knew she was powerless to stop it.

There was no joy only fear as her daughter's image appeared and the sound of her tiny beating heart filled the small exam room.

Looking almost bored, the doctor jotted down notes then looked at her. "How far along are you?"

Refusing to answer wouldn't do any good, he could tell anyway and just wanted to verify his findings. "Fifteen weeks."

The doctor nodded. "I don't see issues. How has your body been handling pregnancy?"

"Fine other than some morning sickness that has continued into the second trimester."

"More common than people realize. I'll add a prescription of anti-nausea meds to go with your pre-natal vitamins." A nod at the guards had them moving to unlock her cuffs. "So long as you behave there's no need for you to be bound. This can go as easy or as hard as you make it. Don't cause trouble and your last months can go smoothly and pain free."

That he said it like she should be grateful was beyond annoying, but she didn't let it show.

Taking her silence as assent, she was uncuffed at both the wrists and ankles. Once she was free, she was instructed to strip and hand over her clothes which she did with minimum fuss. It wasn't that she was unaffected by being naked in front of these men, it was just that she was practiced in shoving those emotions away, still she hurried to put on the hospital gown she was given. The Master used to take great pleasure in humiliating her and her sisters by making them go without clothes.

"This is your blanket, you'll take it with you when I'm finished," the doctor informed her as he set it on the counter and then pulled out a syringe.

Opal couldn't take her eyes off it as he drew blood.

If she could get her hands on something like that, she could definitely use it to her advantage.

As he drew blood and took her vitals the doctor asked questions. She answered as best as she could pretending all the while to be Ophelia Sampson.

When the doctor set the used syringe down on the counter, close to her blanket, instead of directly in the bio waste bin, her heart soared.

Could she be that lucky?

It was hard to keep her attention on the questions and not on the syringe, but she tried. The last thing she wanted to do was draw his attention to it.

“We’re going to head next door now to put you through a workout,” the doctor announced.

Opal scrambled off the table and snatched up the blanket, slipping the syringe between the folds.

The doctor chuckled. “Don’t worry, so long as you continue to remain cooperative no one will take your blanket.”

She merely offered him a tremulous smile as though in thanks. Inside she was rejoicing. It wasn’t much but she now had a weapon.

Her hope no longer felt false.

* * *

DECEMBER 23RD

6:04 P.M.

“So?”

CJ looked over as Coach asked him the question. They were in a helicopter flying over the ocean, following the path the ship they believed Opal was on had taken.

Prey had mobilized and were going all out to bring Opal home and bring down Elsbeth’s trafficking ring.

Not only were he and the Delta Team going in after her, but Fox and the guys were as well, and Athena Team, Prey's other all girl team that worked out of the West Coast offices. CJ had met all four of the women before, but he didn't know them well.

It had been decided that Ivory, Lacey, and Pearl were too emotionally invested to be involved, plus Ivory was pregnant so they had to keep her off Elsbeth's radar in case the woman evaded capture again. Lacey had been with Opal at the appointment, so they thought it best to keep her away as well since it appeared that perhaps Opal's Ophelia cover was still holding.

They were divided between the three helos and CJ knew he was lucky he hadn't also been benched because he was too emotionally invested.

This was the woman he loved.

His child.

He was more invested than anyone else.

The stakes were higher than they had ever been before. They couldn't afford a single mistake, so he'd been doing his best to keep it together, running through in his head everything he wanted to say to Opal when he got her back. He was playing out the conversations the way he hoped they would go, but in his version, Opal was a lot more forgiving and understanding than she likely would be in real life.

"So, what?" he asked, not sure what the man wanted to know.

"How did you mess up?" Coach asked.

"No one told you?" CJ was sure that someone from Prey would have told the Delta Team how he'd walked away when Opal told him she was pregnant.

"We know you didn't handle Opal finding out she was pregnant well," Ghost said.

"Just don't know why," Fish added.

He'd planned on talking to Opal first before telling anyone else about his past, but maybe it would help to do a dry run. Certainly couldn't hurt. Plus, if he talked it through now then maybe he would focus better when they found Opal and the boat.

"Babies freak me out," he admitted.

"In a you didn't want to be a father kind of way or just in general?" Aspen "Blade" Carlisle asked.

"General. I don't like them and don't want to be around them. I'm scared of them."

"Scared of babies?" Beatle asked clearly confused.

"I was an only child until I was seven, when my parents told me I was getting a little brother or sister I wasn't happy. Actually, I hated the idea," he told them.

"Lots of kids don't want a sibling, that's totally normal," Truck said.

"And I would have gotten over it, but my baby brother passed away from SIDS when he was three months old. I was watching him at the time while my parents went next door."

"You blamed yourself," Ghost said.

CJ nodded. "I wasn't the only one."

"Who else blamed you?" Fletch asked.

"Everyone. Starting with my parents," he admitted. "They told the police I hated the baby—they weren't wrong—and that I probably smothered him in his sleep. I was taken down to the station and questioned. I was terrified, but I told the cops the truth, didn't lie about anything, including how I didn't like DJ because he took too much of my parents' time and attention. They knew I didn't do anything and sent me home, DJ's death was ruled a tragic accident. My parents continue to blame me to this day."

"Wow," Hollywood said slowly.

"That's ... I don't even know," Fletch growled.

“I don’t have a great relationship with my parents, we’re estranged, but I can’t imagine any parents sinking that low,” Truck said.

Uncomfortable by the sudden attention even though he appreciated them standing up for him, CJ shrugged. “I got out of the house as soon as I turned eighteen, wanted to get out earlier, almost wished I would be put in foster care as I got older. In the end my parents just froze me out, ignored me, but they didn’t give me up. I don’t know why, I think it would have been better for all of us.”

“You blame yourself for your brother’s death,” Blade said.

“I didn’t kill him, but I did ignore him when he was crying and I wished he would go away. I feel responsible even if I didn’t lay a hand on him.”

“You have to know that it was just an accident though,” Hollywood said.

“I know but I don’t,” he admitted. “I feel like I played a part in what happened and the thought of being near a baby just reminds me of finding DJ’s cold, still little body. When Opal found out she was pregnant I panicked. The thought of doing something to hurt my own child was so overwhelming that I couldn’t think of anything else. Couldn’t think clearly. All I could see was my own child lying dead in a crib because of something I did or didn’t do. At the time it felt like I was doing the right thing. The only thing.”

“You wouldn’t hurt your baby,” Ghost reminded him.

“I did though. In trying to protect them I hurt Opal and the baby. I want to make it right but I’m afraid Opal won’t give me a second chance.” It was a hard thing to say out loud. He’d thought it a thousand times inside his head but saying it to others seemed to make it that much more real.

“Is she worth the risk?” Coach asked.

“Yes,” CJ answered without hesitation. Opal was worth any amount of risk, he just wished he had figured that out before now.

“Do you love her?” Coach asked.

“More than anything.”

“Do you love the baby?” Coach asked.

Remembering the tiny little baby body he'd seen in the video and in the sonogram picture that was secure inside a waterproof bag and tucked inside his wetsuit, he nodded. “I'm still terrified of hurting her, but yeah, I already love my daughter.”

“Are you truly sorry for hurting Opal? For pushing her away?”

CJ winced as he remembered how cold and harsh he'd been. Telling her that he would provide financially for the child but wanted nothing to do with it, and ignoring her when she told him she wanted more even though it was everything that he wanted.

“Never done anything I regret more,” he said.

“Then you tell her that when you get a chance,” Coach said. “You tell her that you love her, that you love the baby, and you're sorry. Simple as that. Maybe she needs time, maybe she can't forgive you, maybe she can but she can't trust you. Whatever happens, you just be there for her. You guys are having a baby, nothing is going to change that, you're going to be joined together through that child for the rest of your lives. Love your daughter, love her mother, and be there for them both every step of the way. That's all you can do. Prove to her that you learned from your mistakes and that you're not going to repeat them. That pushing her away was a one-off.”

It was good advice and all he could do.

There was no going back, no way to make Opal forgive him or give him another chance. But he could work hard for as long as it took to prove to her that he would never hurt her again, that he was a man she could trust.

He was more than willing to spend the rest of his life working to earn Opal's love and trust back.

“I love her, I wish I figured it out earlier, but I can't imagine my life without her in it. My girls are everything to me, I'd kill for them, and I'd die for them, I'm also prepared to

battle my demons for them. Whatever it takes, no giving up, they're everything to me and I'll do whatever it takes to keep them in my life. I want to be worthy of them and their love," he vowed.

"Then you know what you need to do," Coach said.

"You guys are her friends, so is everyone at Prey, I'm not asking anyone to be on my side. I don't want it. I want you all to have her back, give her whatever she needs. If what she needs right now is for me to take a step back, I'll do it. I won't walk away, but I'll stay back for a while if it's what she needs. You all need to be there for her. That's what I want. Have my girl's back, please." Opal's happiness was his priority. She'd been through so much, she needed to have her people at her back, and if that couldn't include him right away then he didn't want her feeling like her people's loyalty was divided. She deserved them, needed them, and he wouldn't interfere with that.

Approving looks from the guys told him he had in fact cemented their loyalty as well. While it hadn't been his intention, he knew that what he'd said had in fact meant that they would fight with him for Opal.

He appreciated it so long as she remained the priority.

She was going to be his priority now and forever. Opal and their daughter would always come first.

In just a little while they would be jumping out of this helo and into international waters—the only reason they as SEALs were allowed to participate in this op—to swim the final distance to the boat, where he would do whatever it took to get back the two most important people in his life.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

December 23rd

8:13 P.M.

HER BRAIN WAS BUZZING.

Opal had been energized ever since she got back from her visit with the doctor. It was hard to contain, but since she was trapped in her cell there wasn't anything she could do to walk out all that pent up energy.

Since she couldn't do much of anything physical, her hands, tucked underneath the blanket, were running through the sign language alphabet. She'd learned it as a child, one of The Master's many lessons, and she often ran through it when she was nervous or anxious. It was one of those things she could do on autopilot that was kind of soothing in its simplicity.

The syringe she'd stolen must have gone unnoticed because nobody had come searching for it. Likely the doctor hadn't even realized he hadn't put it in the bio waste bin like he normally would have. Opal had no idea why he hadn't, a slip of the brain that had worked to her advantage.

So far, she hadn't told anyone that she had it. She wanted to wait until the timing was right. If she told someone too early, it gave them the ability to mess up any plan she might make.

Not on purpose, she knew everyone here was in the same boat she was, they all wanted to go home to their families and their lives. But people under pressure often didn't think clearly, they panicked, and were impulsive.

Learning to control that panic and instinct to hurry into the first action that jumped into your mind had been another of The Master's lessons. You had to be calm, controlled, your survival depended on you being able to think beyond the fear to analyze all the possibilities and outcomes then make an informed decision.

If someone knew she had the syringe and gave that away at the wrong time it could ruin it all.

She was still thinking up a way to use it. Maybe she wouldn't know until the opportunity presented itself. For now, she just had to play along, pretend she was the same as all the other women here, and wait.

Patience.

The key to this was patience.

This wasn't one of those missions where it was all in and out and lots of action. She was playing a long game not a short one. There were too many variables for her to believe Prey was coming for her. They'd be looking and they wouldn't give up, but she didn't know if they would find her purse, the recording, or any CCTV footage that would show she'd been taken by Elsbeth. And even if they knew all of that, how would they know she was on a boat? They would be looking for her back in the city, she didn't even know where they were going so how could they have figured it out?

The opening of the door down the end of the corridor caught her attention as it always did. All of them had been for their physical examinations, and they'd already had dinner, so she wasn't sure who would be coming down here or why.

When she saw it was a woman her interest was piqued.

It wasn't Elsbeth and she hadn't seen any other women while she'd been here. This woman was older, maybe in her

sixties or seventies, she had a head of gray hair and there was something vaguely familiar about her.

Obviously, she wasn't one of the pregnant captives, so who was she and why was she here?

As the older woman came closer Opal sucked in a breath.

She knew who this was.

What were the chances the woman would turn up here?

Still, they knew she'd bought at least four babies before.

If it hadn't been for what happened to Lacey a few months ago, they never would have even known there had been a woman involved in their abduction and imprisonment. Mervin's mother had apparently cared for them when they were infants, but since Opal had no memory of her, she must have been gone by the time she was around four, since she had memories dating back to that age.

Without having seen photos of Mable Matthewson when she played a part in Lacey's abduction last August, she never would have recognized the woman, but now she would know her anywhere.

Mable was wandering down the aisle, pausing to talk to some of the girls who responded well to her, probably thinking that since she was a woman, she was an ally of sorts.

They were wrong.

Just because she was a woman it didn't mean Mable was going to show them empathy. Quite simply, the woman wasn't capable of the emotion. Mable was a self-serving psychopath who had abused her own son then helped him abuse others and stood by letting it happen without doing a single thing to stop it.

The woman was a monster as far as Opal was concerned.

She knew the exact second Mable saw her because their gazes met, and surprise flickered in the older woman's along with recognition.

It was in that moment Opal knew.

It was over.

There was no way Mable wasn't going to go running straight to Elsbeth and spill the beans. If the trafficker didn't kill her outright, then she would move Opal somewhere else away from the rest of the women. If there had been little hope of getting out of these cages, there would be zero chance of getting out of wherever she would be put next.

"Opal Smith," Mable said as she walked closer. "Fancy seeing you here. I must say I'm delighted."

"The feeling isn't mutual," she returned. There was no point in even making an attempt at continuing the charade. As soon as Mable said whatever she wanted to say then she would go and tell Elsbeth her true identity.

"Are you pregnant?" There was a spark of light and interest in Mable's eyes that Opal didn't like one little bit.

"Isn't that why all of us are here?" she said, waving her hands to indicate the dozens of cells lining the room.

Mable clapped her hands in delight. "That's wonderful. Perfect even. I hated walking away from my sweet grandchildren, but Mervin thought it was for the best."

"We weren't—aren't—your grandchildren," she reminded the woman.

"Perhaps not biologically, but then again, you Lacey, Pearl, and Ivory aren't really sisters are you? And yet it doesn't change anything. You grew up together, you have a sister bond, just like I raised you, my son's girls, my grandchildren. It was my idea you know," Mable said conspiratorially. "For Mervin to take babies. I always wanted more kids, but my husband refused, and then he left. Mervin, he was a good boy, but he was soft, weak, a disappointment. I told him he could make it up to me by giving me babies only no woman wanted a weak boy like him. He wanted revenge, I wanted babies, it was a win win."

The revelation was shocking and yet at the same time it made sense.

All of this circled back to Mable. She was the one who had physically and sexually abused her son at least from the time her husband left. She had attempted to treat Mervin like a man, like a husband, and yet he'd been nothing more than a boy.

A boy who never really stood a chance.

Not that she didn't despise the man Mervin—The Master as he would always be to her—had become, and she was glad that he was currently serving a life sentence in prison, but it all started with the woman who stood before her.

They suspected, but had no proof, that Mable was also abused as a child. Sent after her mother's death to live with relatives on a remote cattle ranch in the Australian outback there had been no other children, and no contact with the outside world. Until at sixteen she'd been sent back to live with her father after he was injured in an accident.

Had she been abused by her grandparents? Her father? There was no way to know but it made sense that Mable had been abused and had then continued the cycle by abusing her son who had continued the cycle with Opal and her sisters.

“I miss my boy, although I do hope prison manages to finally make a man out of him. I'm lonely. I was here helping out Ms. Riviera, taking care of the babies once they're born before they go off to their new families, but I want another baby, another grandbaby. This is just perfect. I can have the baby of my grandbaby. My great-grandbaby. I know Mervin always wanted Lacey to be his wife, but I always thought you would make the best wife, you were certainly the best mother.”

It would be a cold day in hell before Opal allowed this woman to take her baby, and perpetuate the cycle of abuse that had already claimed Mervin. She and her sisters had had each other but without that they may well have become like Mable and Mervin. They already knew that after them Mervin had abducted four teenage girls who had wound up deciding to kill themselves rather than continue to be abused by him.

There was no way she was allowing this woman near her daughter.

“Are you having a girl? I hope you are, I always wanted a girl, I like girls better. Maeve, I think I’ll call her Maeve.”

“You are not getting my baby.” Opal pressed her hands protectively to her stomach, she would forgo an attempt at escape if it meant taking out Mable Matthewson. She’d use the syringe to kill her or her bare hands if she could.

“That’s not up to you now, is it? I think I’ll go and tell Ms. Riviera that she has my granddaughter, a Prey Security operative in her possession.”

And that would be that.

The end of her life and her baby’s.

Because her daughter may as well be dead if she wound up sold to Mable Matthewson.

* * *

DECEMBER 23RD

9:24 P.M.

THAT FIRST SECOND when you hit the water was always the worst.

At least for him.

While CJ of course loved the water—wouldn’t become a SEAL if you didn’t—he hated that freefalling feeling when you jumped out of a helo or a plane, hated it even more when the landing was water.

There was just something about plunging down deep into the water like a torpedo that freaked him out. There was always that moment as gravity did its job and pulled you down deep where you weren’t quite sure if you were going to come up in time.

You always did but for a split-second CJ never felt quite sure.

This time was no different.

His body speared into the ocean, went down deep, even with the oxygen tank there was a single moment of panic.

It passed quickly, well *that* moment did, there was still a feeling deep in his gut that said he needed to get to Opal quickly.

Beside him the Delta guys also hit the water and then one by one they moved to the surface. After they knew who had taken Opal and where they might be taking her, they had immediately begun looking into how they might travel there.

Of course, there were only two options. Plane or boat.

Raven had managed to track Opal and Elsbeth to a van and then the van to a dock, so they knew the how. Next, they needed to locate the vessel they were traveling on. With her magical computer skills, Raven had looked into every ship departing from the dock in their time frame and located one that she quickly learned was owned by a shell corporation.

That was their vessel.

Not content just to have the vessel and destination, Raven had tracked it and gotten its exact location. Right before they jumped, they learned the ship had stopped moving. They didn't know why—or care—but a stationary vessel was much easier to board.

The helo would remain close by in case anything changed, but for now, their plan was to swim the final distance so they approached with the element of surprise. Then they'd board, take out the guards, secure Elsbeth Riviera, then rescue Opal and any other women being held captive.

It all sounded so simple, and CJ wasn't allowing his mind to dwell on the dozens of things that could still go wrong.

Although they all had comms they knew the plan, there was no need to talk, they put their effort into swimming. He was a SEAL, the Delta Force guys were also competent swimmers, so it didn't take them long at all to cross the distance to the vessel.

When he laid eyes on it, he'd expected to feel a sense of relief. Opal was on that ship, he was sure of it, she was within his sight now, or close enough. All he had to do was get on there and find her.

But there was no sense of relief.

Instead, his anxiety seemed to amp up.

Something was wrong, that feeling was only growing.

If she'd been taken because she was pregnant then Elsbeth Riviera wasn't going to do anything to physically harm her. As long as she had their daughter tucked safely inside her womb then Opal should be relatively safe. Comparatively speaking anyway, since she had been kidnapped and was being imprisoned.

Dressed in black as they were, they weren't likely to be spotted unless the ship had people actively keeping watch.

It didn't seem to because they made it up the side and onto the deck without incident.

Hold on, Piccolina. I'm coming for you.

For both of you.

His Piccolina and poca Piccolina.

His girls.

He loved them both so much and he wasn't ever going to feel peace until he had them safe in his arms.

They met the first guard almost immediately after hitting the deck. He wasn't prepared, he had a cigarette in one hand, his weapon resting uselessly on a table in front of him.

It was an easy kill.

The man's eyes had just widened as he caught sight of the nine black shadowy figures lurking on the deck and CJ was burying a knife in his neck.

The body hit the deck with a muffled thud he didn't think anyone else would hear.

CJ knew they weren't all going to go down that easily, but for now, he'd take it. Retrieving his knife, he left the guard to finish bleeding out as they began to methodically clear the deck.

By the time they headed inside, they'd taken out another four guards. Two hadn't even seen it coming, the other two had reacted too slowly. Whoever Elsbeth was getting her guards from should be put out of business because these men weren't up to the job.

You'd think they would be on high alert, giving that they were part of an illegal baby selling ring, but apparently, they believed they were completely safe out here on the water and didn't have to do the job they'd been paid to do.

He expected the guards inside to be doing a better job.

He was wrong.

As soon as they began making their way through the rooms on the top deck, he could hear the whooping and hollering that could only be one thing.

Drunk men.

When he got close enough to see through the window and into a large living room space, he saw there were fourteen men in the room. All were laughing and drinking, not paying attention to anything else, apparently confident in the guards outside to be doing an adequate job of eliminating threats.

They shouldn't be.

Over confidence would get you killed every time.

Since there was no way to take out all the men without making it known, he and the Delta team positioned themselves with cover and good aim and started shooting.

It was over in a matter of seconds.

All fourteen men dead.

Unlike the outside kills these ones had been noisy, and the gunshots brought with them more guards, these ones not quite so negligent.

Standing behind them was Elsbeth Riviera herself.

Too bad for her she hadn't spent more money on better security. Maybe if she hadn't been so greedy to keep every bit of profit she could, she wouldn't be about to be taken into custody where she would have to answer for her crimes. Or if she preferred, she could leave this ship in a body bag, didn't matter to him.

"You," Elsbeth muttered when she saw him.

There was so much hatred in that one word that he knew she was aware of who Opal really was and that the two of them were responsible for the raid at her warehouse.

What did that mean for Opal?

Was she safe?

Had Elsbeth killed her when she learned of their betrayal?

"Shouldn't have touched what was mine," he said, taking a menacing step forward. Elsbeth didn't know it, but only the Delta Force team was behind him, the two Prey teams were circling around to come at her and her men from behind, trapping them.

The woman huffed like she found him tedious. "I know she's not really yours. You two aren't married, you're not a couple, you were working undercover. I fell for her ploy at first. She told me that you two really intended to sell me a baby not buy one. I should have known better, the coincidence was too big that as soon as I meet you two I'm raided. But I did believe her. Wouldn't have doubted it if someone hadn't outed her."

Outed her?

Who could possibly have been here that would know Opal's true identity?

"You're wrong," he said.

"About what?" Elsbeth asked.

"About Opal. She *is* mine. They both are. And I don't tolerate anyone taking what's mine."

Elsbeth scoffed. “What do you think you’re going to do about it? You’re outmanned and outgunned.”

Only because eight of his guys were behind her. They actually outnumbered her people, and even if they didn’t, he’d bet on his side every time.

CJ grinned. “I don’t think so.”

His guys opened fire first, and seconds later, Elsbeth Riviera was left standing on her own surrounded by eight dead guards.

For the first time he saw fear in the woman’s face.

Wasn’t so much fun when you weren’t the one with all the power.

Since the trafficker was no longer a threat, CJ turned his back on her and headed further into the ship, trusting that a couple of the guys would secure her, and the rest would come with him as they searched the ship.

Opal was still here somewhere, and he was growing more worried about her by the second.

Her cover had been outed, that meant the fact that she was carrying a baby Elsbeth wanted to sell might not be enough to keep her physically safe.

They’d been banking on that.

That Elsbeth needed the women healthy to keep the babies healthy, but now that was no longer on the table when it came to Opal.

His girls were in trouble and the need to get to them was an all-consuming fire raging inside his body.

No more guards appeared as they cleared floor after floor. It seemed that Elsbeth really did believe she was safe out here on the open water and didn’t need to take her security too seriously.

As they cleared the floors and he didn’t find Opal that need to get to her grew more into a blinding panic.

Was she gone?

Dead?

Had Elsbeth thrown her overboard when she learned the truth?

If she had, Opal was already lost to him. There was little chance Opal could survive for long out in the open ocean. Hypothermia would claim her quickly and that was assuming she had gone into the water healthy and uninjured and that very well might not be the case.

Finally, they reached the last deck deep down in the bowels of the ship.

This had to be where she was, didn't it?

With Coach and Ghost at his back, he moved to a large metal door and swung it open.

Dozens of pairs of eyes snapped toward him when he did and he found at least thirty women, all in various stages of pregnancy, locked in cages lining either side of a wide corridor.

His gaze scanned each one, searching for the only pair of eyes he cared about right now.

Only he couldn't find them.

She wasn't there.

Opal wasn't among the captives. So where was she?

CHAPTER TWENTY

December 23rd

10:50 P.M.

THE COMPLETE AND utter dark was worse than the cold.

This was how she would spend the next five months.

Locked inside a shipping container, no one to talk to, nothing to see. There were no windows, no bars, just the four metal walls, and the metal floor and ceiling. She hadn't been given any mattress, but she had been allowed to keep the blanket which meant she still had the syringe.

Her wrists had been cuffed again, along with her ankles, and she was cold, tired, uncomfortable, and grumpy.

Opal wanted to be home, in her nice apartment, furnished with all the things she loved. She wanted her sisters and her Prey family. She wanted to know her baby was safe, that its life wasn't hanging in the balance before it was even born.

But you didn't always get what you wanted.

How many times did she have to be taught that lesson?

As a child, she had been the one to hold onto the dream of one day being free when her sisters wanted to accept their fate. Opal hadn't been able to do that.

She might not have known what the world outside their Alaskan compound was like, but she knew it had to be better than the lives they lived. Being part of that world would

occupy her thoughts when she was going about daily chores, training, or suffering through punishments.

Hundreds of ideas had formed in her mind about what that world was like. Although she and her sisters were unable to leave the compound, they weren't completely sheltered from the outside world. They studied all sorts of things, from history, to geography, to mathematics, and English. They learned multiple languages, had access to books, and were sometimes even allowed to use the computer.

They knew a lot about the world and yet they didn't.

Imagining what it would be like for other girls her age had kept Opal's mind busy when she didn't have her sisters to talk to.

If her daughter was taken by Mable Matthewson then she would have no one.

She'd be all alone.

Vulnerable to succumb to Mable's mind games. She wouldn't know love because the only person in her life was incapable of feeling the emotion.

There wasn't anything she wouldn't do to prevent that from happening.

Her hand curled around the syringe. She kept it close at all times because she didn't know when she would get an opportunity to use it. When she did get that opportunity, Opal didn't intend to waste it.

Getting her daughter off this boat and somewhere safe was impossible, especially from in here. There was no way she could stop Elsbeth from taking her baby once she was born, but she could make sure the monster who was responsible for all the hell she and her sisters had lived through never laid a hand on her little girl.

Opal had already chosen a name for the baby.

Camilla.

It meant warrior maiden.

Her baby was already a warrior as far as she was concerned because they were in this battle together.

If she wasn't going to get a chance to raise Camilla, then at least she could make sure her daughter had a slightly better chance at whatever came next for her. Since she wouldn't be the one to soothe Camilla at night when she had nightmares, cheer her on at games for whatever sport she played, or teach her to ride a bike, she prayed that whoever did wind up raising her child loved her like she was their own.

"I'm sorry, baby girl," she whispered. Her voice quiet though it was, sounded loud in and echoey in the shipping container. "You're my little warrior maiden and I love you so much. I want so badly to be there for you every day of your life, but I don't think that's going to happen. I know you won't ever remember me, might not even ever know that the people who raise you aren't your biological parents, but it won't change the fact that I loved you first and I loved you the most. You will forever be my sweet warrior maiden. I love you, Camilla. More than I've ever been loved. I hope no matter what happens you feel that love."

Tears trickled down her cheeks and because there was no one here, she didn't bother to hide them.

Even if she wasn't alone, she wouldn't bother hiding them.

There was nothing wrong with tears.

Nothing wrong with crying knowing you were going to be killed as soon as your baby was born and never get to be part of her life.

Anyone would cry in this situation, she had nothing to be ashamed of. Sometimes you could have all the training in the world, but it didn't mean that you got to come out on top, and in this case, she wasn't going to.

It wasn't giving up.

Not really.

More accepting her fate.

Opal still absolutely intended to take out the biggest threat to her daughter when she got a chance, and in her mind that was Mabel. Killing Elsbeth wouldn't change anything, someone else would just step up and take her place, maybe even Mable, and in the end, the woman would take Camilla and make her her own.

Her daughter was her priority.

As much as it pained her to think it, she had to prioritize her child above anyone and everything else.

When the door to the shipping container was dragged open, Opal instinctively darted to her feet, her body moving into a fighting stance. What good it would do she didn't know, but it had been trained into her as a child to always be ready to fight for your life.

Now she was fighting for two she had to be extra prepared.

"I need your help," Mable announced without preamble as Opal squinted and tried to see past the light streaming into the shipping container.

Thankfully, she hadn't been in here long and it was dark outside so the light from the ship was muted. Why did Mable think she would help her with anything?

And why did the woman need *her* help anyway?

She was nothing but a prisoner, one everyone was now aware was a threat and she was being treated as such.

"I don't know where everyone else is, but emergency protocols were executed and one of the women has gone into labor. I need your help delivering the baby."

Opal relaxed her stance. She couldn't make her move yet, not until she found where the woman in labor was. As much as she wanted to protect her baby, she couldn't allow another woman to deliver alone.

Once Mable took her to the other woman then she'd kill her. Hopefully whatever emergency was going on would also give her a chance to make some sort of meaningful move that might go a way to saving all of them. If she could get a

message out to Prey then maybe they could find her and the others, take Elsbeth into custody, and dismantle this cell.

Energy buzzed through her blood, and she held the syringe between her fingers, concealing it as best as she could.

“I’ll unlock your ankles because I need you to move quickly. Don’t make me regret it,” Mable warned.

Oh, she was going to make the older woman regret it all right.

In fact, she could hardly wait.

After unlocking her ankles, Mable grabbed her bicep and basically dragged her through the shipping container. It was a quiet night. *Too* quiet.

Something felt off.

There was no time to look around and figure out what because Mable led her into another shipping container right next to the one she had been locked in.

Inside it was a woman on an exam table. The room was set up like the one she’d been taken to for her examination. Obviously, this one was to be used in an emergency, she just wanted to know what the emergency was.

She immediately recognized the woman as the one who had been panicked that first day, worried that she was close to going into labor. Their eyes met and the woman silently pleaded for help.

Opal gave a nod but nothing else.

Mable led her to the gurney and attached the other end of the cuff still around her ankle to the table. Then she carried the key over to the door and hung it on a hook.

“If you try anything stupid, you’ll all die in here,” she warned, and Opal noted that the pregnant woman, Trish, was cuffed to the bed.

If Mable thought a cuff was going to be the death of her, she didn’t know how well her son had trained his four girl warriors.

When the older woman came closer, she did what Mervin had trained her to do and ended the life of his mother.

Using the syringe like a knife, she sliced into the old woman's carotid artery, shredding the artery in seconds.

Surprise filled Mable's eyes as she gurgled and flailed before hitting the floor.

There was a split second of rejoicing as Opal knew she had saved Camilla from the same fate that had befallen her before the door to the shipping container was thrown open and the doctor stepped inside.

The man's gaze was wild, and he clutched a weapon in a shaking hand.

"I'm not dying like the others," he muttered before lifting the gun and firing it at Trish.

Before Opal could do anything, he had aimed at her and fired.

* * *

DECEMBER 23RD

11:12 P.M.

GUNSHOTS.

The sound had CJ's heart attempting to jump right out of his chest.

They were yet to find where Opal had been stashed and had been methodically searching the ship looking for hidden rooms. According to the women in the cages, one of them had gone into labor and had been taken away by an old woman and a guard. They were yet to find any more guards, but there were no signs of the woman in labor, the old woman, or a doctor who was also reportedly on board.

Which one of them had fired the shots?

And who had been hit?

As much as he would like to believe that Opal had somehow gotten her hands on a weapon and killed her captors, Elsbeth knew who she was, knew she was a threat, so she would be treated as such.

Scanning the deck, weapon drawn and ready to use on any threat that presented itself, CJ's gaze narrowed in on several shipping containers.

The sound appeared to be coming from that direction and they hadn't checked those earlier because they were locked from the outside, no way guards could have been hiding in there.

Now he took off toward them, Coach and Truck—the Delta Team's medic—right behind him.

One of the container's doors was open now and he approached that one first.

When he stepped around it, he found the container empty but there was a discarded tray by the door.

Someone had been in here, and recently.

Sobbing from nearby had all three of them leaving the shipping container and approaching the one beside it.

“Don't, please don't shoot me again,” a woman was crying.

“You don't want to do this, Dr. Ruffolo,” another woman said.

Everything inside him settled.

That was Opal.

She was alive.

He didn't even need to check in with the two Delta Force operators to know what their plan was. Eliminate the threat, get to Opal and the pregnant woman.

Get home.

Then cue major groveling on his part.

As he swung the door open, CJ made sure not to be silent, he wanted to snare the doctor's attention.

And he did.

Dr. Ruffolo spun toward them and fired, obviously assuming they were a threat before he even knew who they were.

CJ fired back.

The doctor's bullets went wide, spraying into the ceiling, but his hit the mark perfectly.

Knowing he could trust Coach and Truck to deal with the dead doctor and follow protocol he was too far gone to care about, he searched the room for the only thing that mattered to him.

Bare feet peeked out from behind the gurney.

Slowly those feet moved and a moment later Opal stood up.

By that time, he had crossed half the shipping container and was close enough to touch her. There was no hesitation on his part. He reached out, grabbed hold of her, and dragged her up against his chest.

Nothing else mattered in this moment other than holding his girls.

His heart.

His life.

His everything.

"We need to help Trish, she's in labor and Dr. Ruffolo shot her," Opal's muffled voice said against his neck. It hadn't escaped his notice that while he was clinging to her like she was the only thing that mattered in the entire universe, her hold on him was much lighter. More tentative.

"I got her, honey. You worry about you right now," Truck told her, the medic already assessing the other woman's condition.

“Are you hurt?” CJ asked as he reluctantly loosened his hold on Opal—well aware this might be the last time he ever got to touch her—and eased her back so he could scan her for injuries.

“I’m fine. Trish needs help,” Opal said, refusing to meet his gaze.

She wasn’t fine.

Blood.

There was blood streaking down her pale body.

At least two jagged holes, one in her arm and one in her thigh, caught his attention.

She’d been hit.

“You need help, too,” he said, more harshly than he’d intended, but he was terrified, not just because of what Opal had been through but because of the very real possibility that even though he’d gotten her back alive she wasn’t his anymore. That he’d lost the right to love her and have her in his life.

“I’m fine.” Gently pushing away his hands, she took a step toward Truck. “Is she okay?”

Even though he didn’t want to, CJ turned his attention to the gurney where Trish had been cuffed. There was a lot of blood. A lot. And not just from between her legs because she was in labor.

He met Truck’s eyes and saw the answer there.

It wasn’t likely Trish was going to survive her injuries.

Apparently, they weren’t the only ones who knew it.

“I-I’m not g-going to live, a-am I?” Trish asked, her voice weak, teeth chattering as she went into shock.

“I’m going to do everything I can,” Truck promised.

“Promise me you’ll save my baby,” Trish begged, even as her eyes fluttered closed.

“Trish!” Opal’s panicked voice broke his heart.

“I’m losing her,” Truck said as he scanned the room, probably looking for something he could use to save the woman’s life, but there was nothing. This shipping container was set up for delivering a baby nothing else.

“Can you save the baby?” Opal asked, pleading with Truck to tell her what she needed to hear. That it wasn’t hopeless. That this baby wasn’t going to die for nothing along with its mother.

Determination filled his face, and his blue eyes hardened. “Yeah, I can save the baby, but I need some help.”

As Truck grabbed a scalpel, CJ balked at the idea he might have to help.

Knowing he was having a baby and wanting to be part of its life didn’t magically override two decades worth of terror at the very thought of being near an infant. And this baby wasn’t even his. There was no emotional attachment to help make things easier.

“I ... I can’t,” he admitted, taking a step back.

There was disappointment in Opal’s eyes which he hated.

She was exhausted from her ordeal, bleeding from two gunshot wounds, and yet she was standing straight and tall, ready to do whatever she had to to help someone in need.

Ashamed, CJ took a step closer this time.

If she could do it, then he wasn’t going to be a coward.

“Take care of her,” he said to Coach who entered the shipping container with a blanket in his hands.

“I got her,” Coach said as he wrapped the blanket around Opal, then knelt in front of her and unlocked a metal cuff CJ hadn’t even noticed before standing and gently picking her up.

He could have taken Opal, let Coach assist Truck, but he needed to prove to everyone, Opal, the Delta Team, mostly himself, that he was serious about overcoming his phobia of babies so he could be a father to his daughter.

“What do you need me to do?” he asked Truck as the man prepared to cut open the dying woman’s stomach.

“Hold onto the baby once I get to it,” Truck replied.

Seconds ticked by with excruciating slowness. Watching Truck cut through layers of skin and muscle was worse than dealing with wounds in the field because this woman had been so close to going home only to die from a gunshot wound to the chest before even getting a chance to meet her baby.

CJ doubted Truck had ever done anything like this before, but the man’s hands were steady and confident as he performed the emergency c-section.

Would the baby survive?

They were all holding their breaths as Truck reached in and pulled out the infant. CJ’s hands were shaking as he went to hold it so the medic could do whatever was needed, but he knew Opal was watching him. She didn’t know about his past, but she obviously knew his issue went beyond just not wanting a kid to something deeper.

He wasn’t going to let her down.

It took every ounce of courage he possessed to hold the tiny baby, but he did it and as he watched, it began to squirm, its eyes fluttering, and then it opened its mouth and let out a wail, and he realized that he really could do this.

“You did it,” Opal breathed in wonder and as he turned he saw her gaze fixed on the baby.

“It’s a girl,” he said.

She nodded. “We’re ...”

“I know. A daughter. We’re having a daughter.”

Her eyes widened at his word choice and her gaze locked on his, held it. He didn’t know what she needed from him, what she needed to see, or what she needed to hear, but he kept his gaze open, offering her everything, hiding nothing.

“Opal, I ...”

Before he could get out the apology he owed her and wanted to give, her face scrunched up and she pressed a hand to her stomach.

Terrified eyes locked on his as she sucked in a pained breath. “Something’s wrong.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

December 23rd

11:49 P.M.

OPAL HAD NEVER KNOWN terror like this.

Pain in her stomach eclipsed all else.

Was she losing her baby?

After everything she'd been through the last few days, she couldn't lose Camilla now when she was already rescued.

"Opal? Piccolina, what's wrong?" CJ asked, sounding as panicked as she felt.

"Here, let me take the baby, go to her," Truck said, taking hold of the newborn.

CJ looked surprised to realize he'd still been holding it, and as soon as Truck had relieved him of his tiny burden, he was lunging for her, all but yanking her out of Coach's arms.

There was a part of her that wanted to resist his touch. They hadn't had time to talk, and she didn't know why he was here, much less why he'd been so adamant that he wanted nothing to do with her and their daughter. She didn't understand the panic in his eyes. Was it because he couldn't turn his feelings for her off—even if it was just friendship—just because he didn't want a baby with her? Or was it out of some sense of guilt or obligation, like maybe he thought her getting abducted was somehow his fault?

Or was he here because he really wanted to be?

Right now, she didn't have the will or strength to figure it out.

She was running on empty and the thought that she might be losing her baby was coming pretty close to breaking her.

"I got you, honey," CJ said as he took her weight, taking the decision out of her hands as he stepped away from Coach.

"Helo was on its way in to pick up Trish, but now it can take Opal and the baby," Coach said.

Her gaze fell on the now deceased woman lying on the table. She hadn't been able to protect Trish and if CJ, Truck, and Coach hadn't turned up when they did, she wouldn't have been able to save the baby either.

Shifting her gaze to the tiny bundle in Truck's arms, she felt a pang of regret.

The poor little baby would never know its mother, but she'd make sure that the little girl knew her mother's final words had been begging them to save her life.

If it had been her who had been shot in the chest, no one would be able to save her baby.

At only fifteen weeks old there was no possible way for her baby to survive outside her body, and she had come perilously close to receiving critical gunshot wounds as well. If the guys hadn't shown up when they had then Dr. Ruffolo would have killed them all.

She owed CJ, Coach, and Truck her life.

"Hold on, baby," CJ said as he hurried outside with her in his arms.

Even with the blanket wrapped around her, Opal shivered as they stepped out of the shipping container. The night was cold, and her bare feet and face stung with the icy wind blowing off the ocean.

It was purely instinctual to turn her face into CJ's neck. As she did, his grip on her tightened almost to the point of pain,

and she could feel tension vibrating through him.

Did he not want to be here anymore?

Did he feel like his job was done now she was safe?

It was driving her crazy that she didn't know, but at the same time, she didn't want to know. Right now, she couldn't take another blow, and learning that CJ had come out of a sense of responsibility or a nod to the friendship they'd shared for the last four years would break her.

Another blanket was draped over her, and she burrowed into its warmth. It was so soft and cuddly, and even with her fear for the baby her eyes began to grow heavy. Exhaustion had taken hold and was lulling her toward sleep.

No not exhaustion.

It was the soft sound of humming that was sending her drifting off.

Was CJ humming to soothe her?

If he was it was working.

The next thing Opal knew she was Jack-knifing up as a loud sound startled her awake.

"It's okay, Piccolina, just the helo," CJ told her, touching his lips to the top of her head.

Truck was holding the baby and led the way to the helo as CJ followed. It was clear CJ wasn't about to abandon her, but she no longer felt comfortable with him, and she quickly reached out to Coach.

"Come with us, please," she begged.

His hazel eyes moved from her to CJ like it was up him to decide whether or not she got what she wanted.

"Please," she repeated, sensing his hesitation. It was like he didn't want to get in the middle of whatever was going on between her and CJ, but the thing was *nothing* was going on between them, CJ had made sure of that.

“Sure, honey. Of course, I’ll come if you need me,” Coach assured her.

“I need you.” From the moment she’d met CJ, she’d instantly felt comfortable with him, but his rejection had shattered the trust she’d placed in him, and she didn’t even know if it was possible to get it back.

Coach gave her a reassuring smile as CJ climbed up onto the helo. As soon as they were all seated Truck handed the infant off to another medic and turned to her.

“Let’s check you out, yeah?” he said as he pulled back the blanket and picked up her wrist to take her pulse.

The more he checked her out, examining the wound on her arm, the more anxious she got. There hadn’t been any more pain in her stomach, and she prayed that meant everything was okay. But what if it was already done?

What if that pain had been a miscarriage and she’d failed her sweet baby girl?

“I’m going to check your leg now, okay?” Truck said. He was so calm, and while it wasn’t helping to calm her any, she appreciated he was trying.

As he pulled back the blanket her heart felt like it stopped beating in her chest.

There was blood between her legs.

It wasn’t from the gunshot wound.

“Truck?” she asked, shooting her panicked gaze to the Delta medic.

“Truck?” CJ echoed a split second later.

“Spotting can be normal,” Truck soothed, although his blue eyes were worried. “Are you still having pain?” His large hand pressed lightly against her stomach. Truck was huge, six-foot-seven, and his hand on her stomach made her look so small and made her think of just how tiny her baby was.

She loved this sweet little baby already and it would devastate her to lose Camilla now.

They'd survived their ordeal, they were going home, it was over.

At least she'd thought it was.

"No, no more pain," she answered.

"That's a good thing. Just hold on, okay? We'll get you to a hospital soon and do an ultrasound, make sure that little one is okay."

"Camilla," she whispered.

"You named the baby?" CJ asked, looking down at her with an expression she couldn't read. He couldn't be angry with her for choosing a name without him because he'd already cut himself out of their lives. If she was raising their daughter alone then she got the privilege of naming her.

"Yes."

"Camilla?"

Opal nodded. "It's a girl, and Camilla means warrior maiden. I thought that name was fitting for my little fighter."

"I found the sonogram picture, watched the video on your phone, Raven told me it's a girl. A daughter." There was wonder in his dark eyes as he looked at her stomach. Truck had moved his hand and CJ tentatively reached out toward her belly.

Part of her wanted to shrink away from his touch, worried it would hurt.

Not physically but psychologically.

CJ wasn't acting the same way he had in that hotel room, and it had her thrown. She was emotionally strung out, spent, and afraid to believe that he in any way cared about their daughter.

His hand stopped just shy of touching her skin. "Can I?"

Even though she was confused and scared, she could hardly deny him. Maybe didn't even want to.

When she gave a small nod his hand very gently covered her stomach. As his palm rested there his fingers gently caressed her skin as though he was attempting to communicate with their daughter, soothe her.

This time instinct had her reaching toward him rather than pulling away. Opal lifted her hand and placed it on his.

CJ's eyes widened as his head snapped up to look at her, then it relaxed into a huge smile.

“Camilla. I like it. It's perfect. A warrior maiden just like her mama. Camilla,” he said again, a softness to him that hadn't been there when she'd told him she was pregnant. “Our daughter.”

Was she?

Did he really want to be part of her life?

Or was it just the fear of losing them and once they were home and safe he'd go back to wanting no part of being Camilla's father?

* * *

DECEMBER 24TH

2:38 A.M.

WAITING WAS THE WORST.

When they'd finally gotten to a hospital, Opal had been whisked away and he hadn't been given any updates on her condition.

Had she lost the baby?

Camilla.

Having a name for his daughter made her that much more real. Losing her now would be devastating. At first, he hadn't wanted it to happen, he hadn't wanted to fall in love with his

child, he'd wanted to pretend it didn't exist so he didn't have to confront his past.

CJ had thought walking away from Opal and the baby would be easy.

Well, perhaps not easy.

He'd always known not having Opal in his life would hurt, and that never being able to see her again, or talk to her, text her when he was feeling lonely would leave a huge hole that nothing and no one would be able to fix.

But he hadn't expected to miss the baby, too.

How could he miss something he hadn't wanted?

Whether he initially wanted this baby or not, he did now. He already loved his daughter and her mother, and he wanted to be in their lives. Not just in their lives on a part time basis. He didn't just want to see Camilla on weekends or Opal when they did drop offs and pick-ups. Didn't want to miss out on birthdays and Christmases.

He wanted it all.

Wanted to tuck Camilla into bed at night after reading her stories and showing her there were no monsters under the bed. Be there when she woke up in the morning, make her breakfast, and help her choose what outfit to wear, learn how to do her hair, and make sure she brushed her teeth.

Not singing her happy birthday first thing on her special day or seeing her excited little face when she came down the stairs Christmas morning and saw what Santa had left for her weren't options. Neither was missing her first day of school, her soccer games or dance recitals, or even the mundane things like driving her around to various activities and helping her with her homework.

He wanted to be there for it all.

"Any news?" he asked Coach as the Delta Operative came back into the waiting room.

Before the other man even said anything, CJ knew that something was off. Opal hadn't reached out to him, but she

was also uncomfortable around him, she'd asked Coach to come with her so it made sense that she might tell the Delta Force operator anything the doctor said.

"Is it Camilla? Did Opal lose the baby?" If she'd miscarried their child alone in her room while he'd been sitting out here twiddling his thumbs, he would never forgive himself. He should have insisted on going in with her when she was examined. This was his baby, too, and Opal was the woman he loved, it was his job to be there for the both of them.

Coach's gaze softened. "Both Opal and the baby are going to be fine. She's already told her sisters who will let everyone at Prey know, and she asked me to come out here and tell you so you weren't worried and could leave."

"Leave?" The word burst out at much too loud a volume for a hospital waiting room and he quickly moderated it. "Leave? She thinks I'm just going to leave her here alone?"

"I told her I'd stay with her," Coach offered.

"Not the point. I *want* to be here."

"Look, man. She's exhausted, scared, confused, and overwhelmed. Maybe best to leave things be for a while."

"No."

It was as simple as that.

In the hotel when she told him she was pregnant, he'd left without talking things through and it had only made things worse. If he had stood up to his demons rather than running from them, he would have been with Opal at her ob-gyn appointment and she never would have been kidnapped. Would never have been at risk of losing their daughter.

There was no way he was making that mistake again.

"I need to see her."

For a long moment Coach studied him, then nodded slowly. "I know what it's like to have people look at you like you're the bad guy. When Harley went missing the cops thought I did something to her."

“You weren’t the bad guy in that situation though. No one was. Here, I’m definitely the bad guy. I *am* the one who hurt Opal.”

“Nah, you’re not the bad guy. You’re just the guy who messed up, recognized it, and is trying to make it right. Know what we call him? The hero.”

CJ was not the hero of this story.

A hero would have chosen to battle against his fears not give into them. He would never walk away from the woman he loved and his own child.

“I’m no hero.”

“I’ll be here if she needs me, but I think you have it covered.”

He certainly didn’t feel like he did as he walked through the hospital and stopped outside the room he knew was Opal’s. Fighting his fears seemed a lot less scary right now than facing the woman he’d hurt so badly.

The woman it was his job to love and protect.

Opal was tough, strong, and competent, but she was his and that made it his job to protect her from anything that could hurt her. He’d thought by walking away he was doing just that, but now he knew he had just been running scared.

“Coach, I was ... oh ...” Opal trailed off when she saw it was him standing in her doorway.

She looked small lying in the bed amongst a pile of covers. Her hair was a tangled mess, there were dark circles under her eyes, and while he couldn’t see them, he was sure there were bandages around her wounds. One of her hands rested on top of the blankets with an IV inserted in the back of it and she was slumped against a couple of pillows as though too exhausted to hold her head up.

Despite everything, she had never looked more beautiful to him. She had fought for her life, and she was carrying their little warrior maiden inside her, protecting their daughter with everything she had.

“I’m sorry,” he said right away.

Her brow scrunched adorably. “Is that why you came after me? Because you felt guilty?”

“Hold on, I’ll be right back.”

Ducking out the door before she could say anything else, he went to the nurses’ station, got what he was after, and returned to her room.

When he did, she was frowning at him now. “You just came to tell me you’re sorry and leave?”

“Nope.” CJ held up the brush one of the nurses had loaned him. “Scoot forward a little.”

He half expected her to refuse, but she eyed him warily and shuffled forward a little in the bed so he could climb in behind her, settling her between his spread legs. Then he went to work detangling her long hair.

“I didn’t come because of guilt, although I do feel like I’m to blame for what happened. I came because you’re everything to me,” he admitted.

“You walked away. Even after I told you I love you.”

Pain tore through his chest. CJ hated that he’d hurt Opal so deeply. “I was a coward. I left because I thought I was protecting you. You and the baby.”

“Protecting us how? I don’t understand.”

“I should have talked to you instead of walking away. I know Coach said you didn’t want to see me, but I can’t make that mistake again.” Smoothing the brush through her hair was as soothing to him as he could tell by the way she was relaxing into him that it was for Opal. “I was an only child until I was seven. When my parents told me I was getting a baby brother I was so angry. I didn’t want a sibling. I liked getting all the attention. I wasn’t a good brother, I hated DJ, never missed an opportunity to tell my parents that either. DJ died from SIDS while I was watching him, I blamed myself and ... my parents blamed me, too.”

“Oh, CJ. I’m so sorry.” Opal reached up and grabbed his hands, tugging on them until she brought his arms around her, their hands clasped together over her stomach. “It wasn’t your fault. You were just a little boy, and adjustments and big life changes like that are hard. Your parents should have done more to help you get used to being a big brother, make it fun for you and something to be proud of, a responsibility you could enjoy. I’m so sorry for their loss, but they treated you awfully, not at all like parents should.”

“I’m ... afraid of babies. Reminds me of finding my brother dead,” he told her. “That’s why I reacted the way I did. I thought if I stayed in our child’s life, I would wind up hurting it somehow.”

“You hurt our daughter by leaving. She wouldn’t have understood why her dad didn’t want her. I didn’t understand. I’m so sorry for what you’ve been through, and it makes me get why you did what you did. But walking away, hurting me, it’s not okay.”

“Oh, Piccolina, I know that. And I hate that I hurt you. I promise that I will never walk away again. I can’t promise I won’t hurt you again because I’m human and I’ll make mistakes, I’m just asking for a chance to earn your trust back. Next time something happens I’ll talk it through with you, because I want a future with you, Opal. I want to be with you, I want to raise our daughter—Camilla—together, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Only question is, did I already mess everything up?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

December 24th

3:03 A.M.

“I HOPE I DIDN’T. I want a chance to earn your love back.”

CJ sounded so earnest, so worried, and she felt his love for her flowing through his body as his arms encircled her, holding her against a sturdy chest that right now was trembling with the weight of what he’d done.

“You never lost my love, CJ,” Opal assured him.

“But I lost your trust, and I broke the bond we shared.” There was true regret in his tone, and she’d seen that same remorse from the moment he’d stepped into her hospital room.

It had been a cowardly move to send out Coach to tell CJ that the doctor had confirmed that the baby was fine, but she hadn’t been able to handle anything else today. She had intended to try to get some sleep before getting on a plane in a couple of hours to head home.

She was glad that this time CJ hadn’t honored her wishes.

They’d needed to talk through what had happened because if nothing else, they shared a child and Camilla deserved to have a mom and a dad who got along and didn’t make her life uncomfortable and harder than it had to be.

Opal would *always* put her daughter first.

“The bond isn’t broken, maybe just a little frayed,” she assured him. It was true, too. Knowing that CJ regretted what he’d done, and that he’d been trying to protect her and the baby the best way he knew how helped a lot. Even though he’d hurt her, and she might struggle to trust him again, at least for a while, she couldn’t just turn her feelings off. There was no switch that made her stop loving him, no switch that ever could.

“I’ve lost your trust though.” There was so much regret in his words that her eyes grew teary. She didn’t want to punish him for hurting her and walking away, but he was right, she didn’t trust him right now and it would take time to earn that back.

If it was just her, Opal might be willing to jump right back in and see how they worked as a couple, go from zero to one hundred in a second. But now she had a child to think of. If she and CJ were going to provide a stable future for their daughter, they had to move slowly and rebuild what had been damaged. They had to rework their relationship from friends-with-benefits to a couple.

“Can I get it back?” he asked.

Opal didn’t know if he realized it, but his fingers hadn’t stopped stroking her stomach from the moment she’d grabbed his hands and pulled his arms around her. He already loved Camilla just like she did. With both of them loving their daughter and each other, there was no reason they couldn’t get back what they had before.

More than what they’d had before, because before they’d both been hiding from the truth. They might not have been ready to admit it then, but they were now.

“We can get it back,” she promised him.

“Thank you.” His breath shuddered out of his body and his arms tightened almost reflexively around her. Wanting to soothe him because even though she’d been hurt by him she didn’t want him to hurt in return, Opal shifted slightly so she was angled enough that she could press her cheek to his chest.

With her ear above his heart, she could hear and feel it beating against her, the steady, rhythmic sound soothing.

There had been no time to process what had happened and how close she'd come to losing her life and her daughter. No time to process that Mable Matthewson was dead, no threat to Camilla, and had finally paid for her role in Opal and her sisters' abductions and imprisonment.

"You should get some rest before the plane comes," CJ said as he resumed brushing her tangled locks.

As exhausted as she was, Opal wasn't sleepy. "Don't think I can sleep yet."

"At least close your eyes," he urged.

"I should have asked you to be in the room when the doctor did the ultrasound since you missed the first one." It hadn't been spite that kept him away, it was just a sense of self-preservation. Teetering on the edge with no idea what CJ was thinking, feeling, or wanting, she'd just wanted to avoid the whole thing.

"I saw the picture, and the video on your phone," he reminded her, and she realized he'd said that in the helo on the way here.

"Not the same though. Will you come to the next one with me?"

"Piccolina, I'm coming to every appointment with you, every Lamaze class. I'm going to be there for our daughter's birth, and when we bring her home from the hospital. I'm not missing out on a single moment of the rest of her life."

Tension drained out of her. "I'm sure she's going to love that when she gets older." Opal sobered. "You know there are going to be lots of moments we both miss. Between the SEALs and Prey, we're both away a lot."

"We'll figure it out. The important thing is that we're together."

"Together." While she liked the sound of that, CJ's abandonment when she'd needed him the most was too fresh

for her to believe it.

A sigh rumbled through him, but not an annoyed one and she knew he was disappointed in himself not her. “I’m sorry, Piccolina. I’ll tell you that as many times as you need to hear it. Whatever you need me to do to prove to you I won’t let you down again you tell me, and I’ll do it.”

“I just need time,” she said. “I just need you to be there. Right now, I feel ... raw. This is supposed to be one of the happiest times of my life and instead it’s been ...” she trailed off not sure how to adequately finish that sentence.

“A complete and utter disaster,” CJ finished for her making her laugh.

“Yeah, that.”

“I have something for you. Well not really for you, it’s for Camilla, but I want to show you.”

“Yeah? You bought something for the baby? When did you have time?”

“Piccolina, I didn’t come because you were missing, I came because I got some sense talked into me. I turned up for your appointment only I was late, just missed you. I’m the one who found the sonogram picture you dropped when you were taken. I’m the one who called it in because I knew something was wrong.”

“You really came to the appointment?” Knowing he wasn’t just here out of fear of losing her made all the difference. It meant maybe he really did want this baby as much as she did.

“If I hadn’t been such a coward and scared you wouldn’t let me in the room, I would have been there in time. I’m sorry, Opal. I let you down again.”

“I think you saved my life. If you hadn’t been there who knows when someone would have realized I was in trouble. Thank you.”

CJ smiled and eased her forward so he could slip off the bed and pick up a bag he’d set down earlier. He carried it

almost reverently over to the bed and she wondered what was inside.

When he pulled out a carved rabbit with a string around its neck and wheels, she smiled. It was cute and quirky, and she loved it.

“Where did you find it?” she asked, taking hold of the cute bunny.

He cleared his throat somewhat self-consciously. “I made it.”

“You made it? For the baby?”

“I don’t even remember starting, just that wood was in my hand, and I was carving it into a rabbit. I think I knew I loved the baby before I even realized it. I never walked away from you because I don’t love you, Opal. Or because I didn’t want more than friends-with-benefits, too. I left because I was terrified of being responsible for a baby when the last time I was left in charge of one it died.”

“Oh, CJ. It’s not your fault. I hope one day you believe that. If it helps, looking at this beautiful rabbit you carved for our daughter I know how much you already love her. You’re going to be a great dad, and I already trust you to take care of Camilla.”

“Really?”

The hope in his eyes broke her heart. “Of course I do. You’re her daddy and Camilla is going to love you so much.”

“Camilla,” he repeated.

“Do you want to name her something else? I’m sorry, when I chose the name I thought I’d be doing this alone. If you want to choose something together we can,” she offered. If it was important to him, they’d pick a name together and Camilla could be her middle name.

Reaching over, CJ scooped her up and settled on the bed with her on his lap and the bunny toy on hers. “I love it. It’s perfect. The perfect name for the most perfect baby, who has the most perfect mother in the entire world.”

Opal felt her cheeks heat. “I’m not perfect, CJ.”

His eyes were soft as he looked down at her. “To me you are. Perfection.”

* * *

DECEMBER 24TH

9:27 P.M.

“FEELS like I’ve been waiting forever to get you alone,” CJ said as he paid the Uber driver then scooped Opal into his arms and carried her to his condo.

“We were alone in the hospital,” she reminded him.

He scoffed. “That wasn’t alone. Nurses were coming in and out, and then pretty much all of Prey showed up.”

She laughed. “That wasn’t even close to all of Prey, and you know it. It was my sisters and Fox and the guys.”

“And those Delta Force guys,” he added, balancing her as he pulled out his keys and let them inside.

“Well, you got your wish, now it’s just us.”

CJ flicked on the lights and carried Opal over to the couch setting her down. She looked good here in his house and he wanted to keep her here, but they’d agreed to take things slowly, adjust to being a couple rather than friends. Although considering the amount of time they usually spent together he didn’t expect it to be much of an adjustment.

Going slow would be hard when he wanted it all and he wanted it now, but he owed it to Opal and Camilla to earn back Opal’s trust and build a solid foundation. A foundation that would last a lifetime because that was what he wanted.

Forever.

It felt like the perfect amount of time and yet also not long enough.

“With everything going on I forgot today was Christmas Eve,” Opal said as she glanced at the Christmas tree in the corner and the garlands on the fireplace. “Feels like forever since we decorated, but it was only just over three weeks ago.”

“A lot has changed since then.” CJ lit a fire and turned on the lights, giving the room a warm, comfortable feel. “Changed for the better.”

The smile she gifted him with was everything. “Couldn’t agree more.”

Even though things had changed quickly in a way they really hadn’t. This shift in their relationship had been building since the first time they met, and CJ knew now that they had always been going to end up together.

It wasn’t the unexpected pregnancy that had instigated the change because he had already known he wanted more before they found out.

While he couldn’t say his fears had disappeared, the thought of being responsible for an infant still filled him with dread, but he was determined to push through the fear and work on it.

The payoff would be more than worth it.

“You want to grab something to eat before bed?” he asked. Even though they’d had the long flight home, Opal had been too wired to sleep. He knew she had to be close to crashing, but he didn’t want to send his girl to bed with an empty stomach.

Desire danced in her eyes, in the light of the flames they seemed more red than brown, and her hair shimmered and glimmered right along with them. “Oh, I’m hungry for something, but not food.”

There was no way his body couldn’t respond to the heat in Opal’s gaze, but he resisted. “Piccolina, you have two gunshot wounds,” he reminded her.

“You had a concussion and it didn’t stop you coming after me.”

“Different. I had the head injury days before, it wasn’t a hindrance.”

“Nope, seemed more like it knocked some sense into you,” she teased. “The gunshot wounds hurt but they’re not in any vital areas for love making.”

She was probably right. The wounds hadn’t been superficial, but neither were they particularly serious. Both would limit some use of her arm and leg for a couple of days, but with a little bit of PT, she’d be back to normal by the time the wounds were healed.

Still ...

He looked at her stomach. “Is sex ... safe? For Camilla?”

Opal’s gaze grew tender. “Sex won’t hurt her.”

“You sure?” Once already he’d failed his daughter, he might make mistakes along the way—all parents did—but he would never fail her again.

“Well, I didn’t ask the doctor at my appointment—no need to since there had only ever been one guy for me—but trust me, Roman was *very* relieved when he found out he didn’t have to wait nine months plus to have sex.” She wrinkled her nose up adorably. “I know they do but I don’t like thinking of sex and my little sisters in the same sentence.”

His heart stuttered and then swelled at her admission.

She hadn’t even been thinking of moving on when she thought he didn’t want her.

Would she have changed her mind over time?

Maybe.

But he doubted it.

Opal wouldn’t have been able to move on and neither would he. They both would have remained single and miserable the rest of their lives if he hadn’t got his head screwed on right.

How could he not make love to her?

It would be their first time together as an official couple. His already hard length managed to harden until it felt like it had been turned into stone.

Picking Opal up, he pressed his mouth to hers, kissing her, ravishing her mouth until he had to pause to take a breath.

“Here or upstairs?”

“Kinda feel like we’ll be defiling the whole Santa thing doing it down here in front of the tree on Christmas Eve given that this time next year our daughter will be born, so going to go with upstairs,” Opal said, making him chuckle.

“Upstairs it is.”

Like magnets, his lips automatically found hers as he carried her up the stairs and into the master bedroom.

“Shower,” she murmured against his mouth when he made for the bed.

Whatever his girl wanted, she got.

In the bathroom he managed to stop kissing her just long enough to strip off both their clothes.

“We shouldn’t get your bandages wet,” he reminded her.

“Waterproof bandages,” she corrected. “Never took them off after that quick shower I took before we left the hospital. I want you in there, where we first made love three years ago, I want to restart this chapter of our lives the same way we began, and this is where I want to make love to you for the first time when we’re husband and wife.”

CJ groaned as his length twitched at her mention of marriage.

Yeah, buddy, I can’t wait to get inside her either.

“You thinking marriage in our future, Piccolina?” he drawled as he backed her into the huge walk in shower.

“You not?” she challenged.

“Already know exactly what the ring I choose for you will look like.”

“We both want it, and we’ll get there.”

“Going to be a fun journey.” Reaching around her, he turned on both showerheads, the rainmaker on the ceiling, and the shower massager. “Spread your legs,” he ordered.

There was no hesitation, Opal complied immediately. Resting her back against the wall, she spread her legs.

Moving slowly, lazily, he grabbed the massager, adjusted the setting then braced a hand just below Opal’s ribs to hold her still.

She gasped at that first touch of the spray, her body moving subconsciously away from the pressure.

“That’s too much,” she said even as she moaned and thrust her hips forward.

“Nothing is too much for you, you can take it all.”

As he held her, his fingers trailed along her ribs, stroking her petal soft skin, caressing it, knowing that every single inch of it was his. His to enjoy, his to touch, his to kiss, his to pleasure.

Opal had given him all of herself from the very beginning, but he’d held back his past, his shame, his guilt.

Not any longer.

Now he had given her every part of himself. The good, the bad, and the ugly.

Beneath his hand she began to tremble, her legs quivered as pleasure mounted inside her.

Spinning her around, he pressed her back to his chest, gently kicked her legs further apart, and slammed inside her in one smooth thrust.

A gasp followed by a moan tumbled from her lips as he filled her.

Returning the spray from the massager to her sensitive bud, he banded an arm around her waist and claimed one of her breasts, teasing the nipple as he set a steady pace, thrusting in and out, never moving the spray from between her legs.

As though they really were one body, he felt the pressure building inside her, each gasp, each moan, the trembles that rippled through her gorgeous body.

When she exploded, her internal muscles clamping down on him as his name fell from her lips, he followed her over that precipice.

It felt like he was falling.

And falling.

And falling.

Like there was no landing.

He didn't need a landing, he wanted to keep falling down this hole of peace and pleasure that only Opal could give him.

When the pleasure began to ebb, CJ shut off the shower massager and slid out of her, but he kept her anchored against him.

"I always think I can't take everything you give me but then somehow I do," she murmured as she rested sleepily against him.

"I hope you know all I'll ever give you is joy, pleasure, and love." He touched a kiss to her temple then reached over and turned off the rainwater head as well.

Gathering Opal up, he stepped out of the shower, toweled them both down then picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. At the bed, he pulled back the covers and climbed in, with her tucked safely against his side he pulled the covers back up and held her close.

Her head rested on one of his pecs, her breath warm against his skin, her hair tickling his chin, and he found true peace for the first time in twenty-one years.

It was all thanks to this amazing woman who had given him her heart and her trust. Not an easy feat given the hell she had grown up in.

She was his everything.

Always had been.

His body had known that first moment that she was it for him even if it had taken his brain a while to get with the program.

For now until forever, Opal would be his only.

The only one he would ever want, the only one he would ever need, the only one he would ever love.

Snuggling her sleepy body closer, he brushed a kiss to her lips then feathered one to her forehead. “My only.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

December 25th

10:16 A.M.

“MERRY CHRISTMAS, PICCOLINA.”

The words were accompanied by a kiss, and Opal couldn't think of a better way to be woken up.

Blinking open heavy eyes, she enjoyed the warmth streaming through the window over the bed, but more than that, she enjoyed the warmth that came from the man currently stretched out above her.

She could feel his impressive length prodding at her entrance, and she let her knees fall sideways, opening her body to him.

Same way she was working on opening her heart to him again.

He might still own it, but she had to learn to trust him again.

There was no doubt in her mind they'd get there, back to where they'd been before, and then even better. Her future was with the man sliding inside her, filling her. He was everything she had ever wanted when she was a terrified child trapped in a nightmare she'd had no chance of escaping.

Now she was free, happy, loved, pregnant, and one day soon she'd be married.

CJ's thrusts were slow and controlled, and when his lips found hers, his kiss was every bit as slow. Sweeter than their kisses had been last night. Last night had been make-up sex of sorts. Moving past what had happened, desperate to reconnect, to get back what they'd lost, but this was sweet with the promises of what the future held.

Pleasure began to tingle through her body, and when CJ reached between them and pressed his thumb to the little bundle of nerves that had the power to make fireworks go off inside your body, that pleasure began to grow.

It didn't stop. CJ massaged her bud, circling in the way he knew she liked until she was writhing beneath him, the pressure almost too much, the need for release close to overwhelming. If he hadn't been ravishing her mouth, she would have begged him to hurry up and throw her over the edge.

When he took her bud and tweaked it between his thumb and forefinger she exploded, a tidal wave of pleasure knocking through her body.

CJ didn't stop, increasing the pace of his thrusts as he started massaging her bundle of nerves all over again and another orgasm began to build.

He was holding back, she could tell from how tense his body was, but he was a master of control and wouldn't allow himself release until he made her come again.

Knowing how important her pleasure was to him set her off, and this time she screamed his name into CJ's mouth as another wave of bliss overtook her. Feeling him come inside her prolonged her pleasure and by the time it slowly started to fade she felt thoroughly loved.

Not just sex, but she could feel how much CJ loved her every time he touched her. His regret was there, too, simmering in the back of his eyes. She wanted it gone, but understood just like it would take her time to trust him again, it would take time for him to forgive himself.

The good thing was they had all the time in the world.

“Mmm, morning sex is the best way to start the day.” She hummed a sigh as CJ eased out of her.

“Happy to oblige whenever you’re here.”

Of course, she caught the hint in his words, no way to miss it. “After the hoopla of Christmas and New Year settle down, we can talk more about me moving in here.”

Surprise was evident in the way his eyebrows about jumped to the top of his head. “You’d move in here?”

“Condo has more space than my apartment, plus I know how much you love this place.”

There was so much tenderness in his eyes as he whispered a kiss to her lips. “Don’t know what I ever did to deserve you.”

“Be there for me every day, in any way I asked, for almost four years.”

“Then messed it all up.”

“Mistakes can be forgiven, CJ,” she reminded him. “Now speaking of Christmas, what time is it?”

“Ten-thirty,” he replied a little sheepishly.

“Ten-thirty?” she repeated, swatting at his shoulder. “My sisters are going to be here in thirty minutes or less. You were supposed to wake me at nine so I had time to get everything ready.” She shoved at his much larger body, but he refused to budge.

“You needed the rest, and I woke you in enough time.”

“Barely,” she muttered.

“Hey.” His thumb and forefinger grasped her chin, holding her face in place. “My responsibility is to you and Camilla. I will always do what is best for the both of you, and this morning that was sleep.”

How could she be mad at that?

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Hurry up and shower and dress because I want to give you your gift before everyone arrives,” CJ told her.

“My gift for you is still at my place.”

CJ shrugged. “We can grab it tomorrow when we pick up some more of your things. I want you to at least stay here till your wounds heal, then you can move in whenever you think the time is right.”

Since showering together would only lead to more lovemaking, she used the master bathroom while CJ went down the hall to use the other one. By the time she was dressed in a dark red, loose-fitting dress, her hair lightly curled, a little makeup on, and heading downstairs, she realized she hadn't felt any morning sickness these last few days.

Hopefully that phase was over now.

In the living room, CJ was waiting for her, dressed in dark jeans and a crisp, whitebutton-down shirt and looking utterly delectable.

Too bad her sisters would be here any minute now.

“For you,” he said, holding out a small white gift bag with a bright red ribbon.

“Thank you.” Opal took the bag and opened it. Inside was a jewelry box and she opened it, excited to see what CJ had chosen for her. He'd never bought her jewelry before, and she knew he'd had no time to get this since they found out she was pregnant, so he must have bought it before they knew. Seemed like both of them had been feeling that things were changing.

When she opened it, she gasped at what was lying inside.

It was a heart shaped pendant, on the front were several small red gemstones in the shape of a rose.

“I thought of you as soon as I saw it,” CJ said, a hint of nervousness in his tone like he wasn't quite sure she would like it. “They're opals, because well ... that's obvious. And red ones because red's your favorite color.”

Tears blurred her vision as she threw herself into CJ's arms. Both her leg and her arm protested the movement, but CJ caught her and held her tightly against him.

"Thank you, I love it, it's the best gift I've ever gotten," she said through a few tears as she buried her face against his neck.

"I'm glad you like it."

"Love it," she corrected as the doorbell rang. "Guess the gang is all here."

CJ set her on her feet and together, hand in hand, they walked to the front door to let her sisters and their partners in.

"Merry Christmas," Ivory said as soon as the door opened. "I can't believe by next Christmas we're both going to have *babies*," she gushed. "You two better hurry up and get busy so our babies can all grow up together," she told Pearl.

"We started trying last night," Pearl said, casting a heated glance at Jesse.

"And this morning," he added, kissing his wife's cheek.

"Guess what?" Lacey shoved between her sisters and held out her hand. "See what Ben got me for Christmas?"

"You guys got engaged!" Opal squealed, thrilled for her sister.

Actually, as everyone filed into the condo, offering congratulations to Lacey and Ben, setting gifts under the Christmas tree, laughing and talking, she was thrilled for all of them. She and her sisters had grown up in hell yet every single one of them had managed to find heaven with men who had also gone through their own versions of hell.

Sometimes out of the darkness grew the greatest light.

Their lives were full of light now. For so long she hadn't even been sure there would be light in her world, but now the man she loved stood behind her, pulling her hair to the side so he could put on the necklace he'd given her and do up the clasp.

CJ took her hand and when he looked at her it was with pure love.

Christmas magic was all around them, but it was pure determination to find that light that had brought her and the people around her to this place. Friendship, family, marriage, children, and a whole lot of love.

The future was bright for all of them.

Ready for another team of strong, tough, female warriors?! Coming May 2024 is the first book in the action packed and emotionally charged Prey Security: Athena Team series!

[Fighting for Scarlett \(Prey Security: Athena Team #1\)](#)

ALSO BY JANE BLYTHE

Prey Security Series: Artemis Team

IVORY'S FIGHT

PEARL'S FIGHT

LACEY'S FIGHT

OPAL'S FIGHT

Prey Security Series: Alpha Team

DEADLY RISK

LETHAL RISK

EXTREME RISK

FATAL RISK

Prey Security Series

PROTECTING EAGLE

PROTECTING RAVEN

PROTECTING FALCON

PROTECTING SPARROW

PROTECTING HAWK

PROTECTING DOVE

Saving SEALs Series

SAVING RYDER

SAVING ERIC

SAVING OWEN

SAVING LOGAN

SAVING GRAYSON

SAVING CHARLIE

Candella Sisters' Heroes Series

LITTLE DOLLS

LITTLE HEARTS

LITTLE BALLERINA

Broken Gems Series

CRACKED SAPPHIRE

CRUSHED RUBY

FRACTURED DIAMOND

SHATTERED AMETHYST

SPLINTERED EMERALD

SALVAGING MARIGOLD

River's End Rescues Series

COCKY SAVIOR

SOME REGRETS ARE FOREVER

PROTECT

SOME LIES WILL HAUNT YOU

SOME QUESTIONS HAVE NO ANSWERS

SOME TRUTH CAN BE DISTORTED

SOME TRUST CAN BE REBUILT

SOME MISTAKES ARE UNFORGIVABLE

Detective Parker Bell Series

A SECRET TO THE GRAVE

WINTER WONDERLAND

DEAD OR ALIVE

LITTLE GIRL LOST

FORGOTTEN

Count to Ten Series

ONE

TWO

THREE

FOUR

FIVE

SIX

BURNING SECRETS

SEVEN

EIGHT

NINE

TEN

Christmas Romantic Suspense Series

CHRISTMAS HOSTAGE

CHRISTMAS CAPTIVE

CHRISTMAS VICTIM

YULETIDE PROTECTOR

Conquering Fear Series

(Co-written with Amanda Siegrist)

DROWNING IN YOU

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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!

To connect and keep up to date please visit any of the following

Email – <mailto:janeblytheauthor@gmail.com>

Facebook – <http://www.facebook.com/janeblytheauthor>

Instagram – http://www.instagram.com/jane_blythe_author

Reader Group – <http://www.facebook.com/groups/janeskillersweethearts>

Twitter – <http://www.twitter.com/jblytheauthor>

Website – <http://www.janeblythe.com.au>



There are many more books in this fan fiction world than listed here, for an up-to-date list go to www.AcesPress.com

You can also visit our Amazon page at:

<http://www.amazon.com/author/operationalalpha>

Special Forces: Operation Alpha World

Christie Adams: [Charity's Heart](#)

Linzi Baxter: [Dangerous Rescue](#)

Misha Blake: [Flash](#)

Anna Blakely: [Rescuing Gracelynn](#)

Julia Bright: [Saving Lorelei](#)

Cara Carnes: [Protecting Mari](#)

Kendra Mei Chailyn: [Beast](#)

Melissa Kay Clarke: [Rescuing Annabeth](#)

Gia Cobie: [Saved from Revenge](#)

Samantha A. Cole: [Handling Haven](#)

KaLyn Cooper: [Spring Unveiled](#)

Jordan Dane: [Redemption for Avery](#)

Tarina Deaton: [Found in the Lost](#)

D.M. Earl: [Claire's Guardian](#)

Riley Edwards: [Protecting Olivia](#)

Dorothy Ewels: [Knight's Queen](#)

Lila Ferrari: [Protecting Joy](#)

Nicole Flockton: [Protecting Maria](#)

Hope Ford: [Rescuing Karina](#)

Amy Gamet: [Guarded by the SEAL](#)

Desiree Holt: [Protecting Maddie](#)

Danielle Haas: [Crossroads of Betrayal](#)

Jesse Jacobson: [Protecting Honor](#)

Rayne Lewis: Justice for Mary
Ireland Lorelei: The Detective
Kristin Lynn: Worth the Risk
Callie Love & Ann Omasta: Hawaii Hottie
JM Madden: Rescuing Olivia
A.M. Mahler: Griffin
Ellie Masters: Sybil's Protector
Trish McCallan: Hero Under Fire
Naomi McKay: Twist
Rachel McNeely: The SEAL's Surprise Baby
KD Michaels: Saving Laura
Olivia Michaels: Protecting Harper
Annie Miller: Securing Willow
MJ Nightingale: Protecting Beauty
C.K. O'Connor: Delaney's Bodyguard
Melinda Owens: Betraying Katie
Victoria Paige: Reclaiming Izabel
Danielle Pays: Defending Sarina
Taryn Rivers: Savage Cove
Lainey Reese: Protecting New York
KeKe Renée: Protecting Bria
Taryn Rivers: Savage Cove
TL Reeve and Michele Ryan: Extracting Mateo
Ariana Rose: Chasing Paige
Deanna L. Rowley: Saving Veronica
Angela Rush: Charlotte
Rose Smith: Saving Satin
Tyler Anne Snell: Cowboy Heat

Lynne St. James: SEAL's Spitfire

E.M. Shue: Discovering Tyler

Bella Stone: Rexar

Jen Talty: Burning Desire

Reina Torres, Rescuing Hi'ilani

LJ Vickery: Circus Comes to Town

R. C. Wynne: Shadows Renewed

Delta Team Three Series

Lori Ryan: Nori's Delta

Becca Jameson: Destiny's Delta

Lynne St James, Gwen's Delta

Elle James: Ivy's Delta

Riley Edwards: Hope's Delta

Police and Fire: Operation Alpha World

Freya Barker: Burning for Autumn

B.P. Beth: Scott

Jane Blythe: Salvaging Marigold

Julia Bright, Justice for Amber

Gia Cobie: Saved from Revenge

Hadley Finn: Exton

Emily Gray: Shelter for Allegra

Danielle M. Haas: Crossroads of Betrayal

Deandra Hall: Shelter for Sharla

Jenna Harte: Dead But Not Forgotten

Amber Kuhlman: Protecting Paisley

Reina Torres: Justice for Sloane

Aubree Valentine, Justice for Danielle

Maddie Wade: Finding English

Tarpley VFD Series

Silver James, Fighting for Elena

Deandra Hall, Fighting for Carly.

Haven Rose, Fighting for Calliope

MJ Nightingale, Fighting for Jemma

TL Reeve, Fighting for Brittney.

Nicole Flockton, Fighting for Nadia

As you know, this book included at least one character from Susan Stoker's books. To check out more, see below.

SEAL Team Hawaii Series

Finding Elodie

Finding Lexie

Finding Kenna

Finding Monica

Finding Carly

Finding Ashlyn

Finding Jodelle

Eagle Point Search & Rescue

Searching for Lilly

Searching for Elsie

Searching for Bristol

Searching for Caryn

Searching for Finley

Searching for Heather (Jan 2024)

Searching for Khloe (May 2024)

The Refuge Series

Deserving Alaska

Deserving Henley

Deserving Reese

Deserving Cora

Deserving Lara (Feb 2024)

Deserving Maisy (Oct 2024)

Deserving Ryleigh (TBA)

SEAL of Protection: Alliance Series

Protecting Remi (July 2024)

Protecting Wren (Nov 2024)

Protecting Josie (TBA)

Protecting Maggie (TBA)

Protecting Addison (TBA)

Protecting Kelli (TBA)

Protecting Bree (TBA)

Delta Team Two Series

Shielding Gillian

Shielding Kinley

Shielding Aspen

Shielding Jayme (novella)

Shielding Riley

Shielding Devyn

Shielding Ember

Shielding Sierra

SEAL of Protection: Legacy Series

Securing Caite (FREE!)

Securing Brenae (novella)

Securing Sidney

Securing Piper

Securing Zoey

Securing Avery

Securing Kalee

Securing Jane

Delta Force Heroes Series

Rescuing Rayne (FREE!)

Rescuing Aimee (novella)

Rescuing Emily

Rescuing Harley

Marrying Emily (novella)

Rescuing Kassie

Rescuing Bryn

Rescuing Casey

Rescuing Sadie (novella)

Rescuing Wendy

Rescuing Mary

Rescuing Macie (novella)

Rescuing Annie

Badge of Honor: Texas Heroes Series

Justice for Mackenzie (FREE!)

Justice for Mickie

Justice for Corrie

Justice for Laine (novella)

Shelter for Elizabeth

Justice for Boone

Shelter for Adeline

Shelter for Sophie

Justice for Erin

Justice for Milena

Shelter for Blythe

Justice for Hope

Shelter for Quinn

Shelter for Koren

Shelter for Penelope

SEAL of Protection Series

Protecting Caroline (FREE!)

Protecting Alabama

Protecting Fiona

Marrying Caroline (novella)

Protecting Summer

Protecting Cheyenne

Protecting Jessyka

Protecting Julie (novella)

Protecting Melody

Protecting the Future

Protecting Kiera (novella)

Protecting Alabama's Kids (novella)

Protecting Dakota

New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal
Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

www.stokeraces.com

www.AcesPress.com

susan@stokeraces.com