



**SECURING**



**JULIA**

**DANIELLE PAYS**

SECURING JULIA (SPECIAL  
FORCES: OPERATION ALPHA)

MORGAN THOMPSON SECURITY

BOOK FOUR

DANIELLE PAYS



Securing Julia

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Dear Readers,

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

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

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

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

**READ ON!**

Xoxo

Susan Stoker



## ABOUT THE BOOK

### **Fox**

As a former Navy SEAL, I know danger. But it's never been as imminent as it is now. While away on an assignment, an adversary seizes the opportunity to take his revenge and kidnaps Detective Julia McNamara. She's my friend and colleague, and the woman I've wanted from the moment she began working with my security team.

Knowing the twisted mind of her abductor all too well, I'm painfully aware that the clock is ticking. I vow to get her back, no matter what it takes.

### **Julia**

As a detective, I'm often called upon to work with Morgan Thompson Security. Despite being Fox's friend, I can't stop thinking about him as more. He's strong, confident, and impossibly attractive.

I've been feeling something deeper for him. But crossing that line could ruin everything we have. I tried to settle for being purely platonic with Fox, but when someone tries to kill him, I'm willing to risk it all to find happiness in his embrace.

An assignment brings us closer together than we have ever been. Just when I think we have a chance, I fall into the clutches of a man with a dark vendetta against Fox. I must find a way out before he sells me to the highest bidder, a fate from which escape seems impossible.

In this heart-pounding romantic thriller, love and danger collide, and every moment counts.

## CHAPTER ONE

Royce “Fox” Davenport

AN ASSHOLE WALKS INTO A BAR. I chuckle at my own joke. Seriously, though, I need to be nice. The asshole is Dan, and he’s Julia’s boyfriend. It’s not his fault he’s dating the woman I’ve wanted for the past two years.

No, it’s entirely my fault. For two years, instead of letting Julia know how I feel, I did nothing. I told myself it’s because she’s someone we rely on a lot at Morgan Thompson Security. But that’s not the whole truth.

The truth was I was worried she didn’t feel the same and it would harm our working relationship. But my friend Peaches helped me realize life is short and sometimes you need to take chances. Unfortunately, the day I went to ask her out was the same day she introduced me to Dan. Her boyfriend.

Yeah, I was too late.

Now that he’s arrived, I want to leave, but Coff’s “Welcome to Morgan Thompson Security” party is just getting started.

My eyes go to Julia. Damn, she’s beautiful. Dan is almost to her when Rover stops him to talk. Maybe I’ll get lucky and Dan will keep talking with the guys. I don’t think I can take seeing him put his hands or lips on Julia.

Now I’m visualizing just that, and it’s too much. I go to the bar and order a beer and a shot. As I down the shot, someone sits on the stool next to me.

“Hey, it’s Fox, right?”

I turn and look right into Dan’s eyes. Well, I guess I have to be nice. “Yeah. Dan, right?”

We met at the police station once, and despite being good friends with Julia, I haven't run into him since, not that I've spent as much time with her since he came into the picture.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asks him.

He points at me. "Whatever beer he has is fine."

The bartender nods, then leaves to get his drink.

"Which one of you guys knows Julia the best?"

I study him, wondering why he's asking. "Depends on what you mean, I guess."

The bartender sets down his beer, and Dan takes a few gulps.

"I'm wondering how she feels about public displays." He turns to me. "Is she for them or against them?"

I laugh. "Public displays? Do you mean like billboards? Because I have no idea where she stands on those."

He laughs. "You're funny. No, I mean public displays of affection."

I grab my beer only to discover it's empty. Guess I drank it fast once Dan sat down. "Are you asking if she'll slap you if you kiss her in front of everyone?"

Actually, she is a private person; maybe she would. I smile at the new image filling my mind.

He frowns. "I'm not being very clear, am I?"

I shake my head.

He leans closer. "I'm going to propose to her, and I plan to do it at the station."

I choke on air. Propose? So soon?

"You all right?" Dan asks.

I nod as I take a deep breath. "You haven't been dating long. Isn't that a bit fast?"

His eyes find Julia as he smiles. "When you know, you know." He turns back to me. "What do you think of my station idea?"

It sucks. It's not romantic, and she'll hate it. And I don't want to talk to him about this. "I don't know. You should ask Rover's girlfriend, Connie."

He grins. "That's a great idea! Thank you." He leaves, but his words play on repeat in my mind.

"Hey, can I get three shots?" I ask the bartender.

"Sure." He lines them up, and I drink them down.

I waited too long, and now she's going to marry that douche. Since I

rarely drink, the alcohol hits me fast. But I like it; it's numbing the pain.

"Fox?"

I turn to find Julia standing next to me.

"Are you all right?"

I nod.

She stares at me. "Did Dan say something to upset you?"

I laugh because she's perceptive, but I can't tell her the truth. "Why would you think that?"

She glances back in his direction. He's talking to Connie. "You looked angry when he was over here. Then he left, and you ordered shots."

I turn to her and lean a little closer than necessary. "You keeping an eye on me?"

She shivers, and I can't help but want it to be because she has some feelings for me. I lean back up. What the hell am I doing? I don't hit on women with boyfriends.

"I happen to be looking over, and I noticed. That's all. So, what did he say?"

I keep my eyes on the bartender, willing him to come back to this side of the bar. "We just talked about the weather."

Please go back to the group. I'm not sure how long I can control my urge to tell you how I feel. Which would be a dick thing to do.

"Talking about the weather upset you?"

I shrug. "It's going to rain for days." Fuck, I'm a terrible liar.

"Julia!" Dan calls out.

I glance over, and he's waving his hand, signaling her to return.

"I better go. Hope you can get over that rain."

I sigh. "Doubt it."

She opens her mouth, but whatever she was going to say, she decides against it. She taps the bar and walks back to her boyfriend.

I spend the next hour talking with the guys and ordering more shots. Everything is going well until I spin and catch the moment Dan leans down and kisses Julia.

It's too much. I have to get out of here before I do something stupid. Without saying a word, I storm out of the bar. Or more like I stumble out of it.

Why the hell is he going to propose so soon? Are they more serious than she lets on? While I don't hang out with Julia as much as I used to, we still go

to the gun range every few weeks. She never mentions Dan, so I didn't think they were in love. Or maybe I didn't want to think that. I want to punch something, but instead, once I'm a block away, I yell.

*"Fuck!"*

"Hey, I've been looking for you," a familiar voice says.

I turn and stare into the face of Doogan, a man I tried to kill. This asshole kidnapped Julia in retaliation for a case she worked on last year. Fortunately, I stopped the plane they were both on right before it took off. It was close. Too close. One minute later and Julia would have been in the air on her way out of the country and likely sold to some man.

"Doogan, how did you get out of jail?" I'm slurring, and based on the man's smile, he knows I'm drunk.

That's when I notice two other men standing off to the side.

Doogan steps closer. It can't be good that now I'm seeing two of him. "It doesn't matter. What matters is I found you."

The two guys step closer, and I brace myself, ready to take them.

"Found me? Why were you looking for me?" I ask.

Doogan sneers. "That plane you destroyed wasn't mine."

Okay, so when I said I stopped his plane, what I really meant was I blew it up right after I got Julia off of it. No one else was on board, and unfortunately, Doogan wasn't standing close enough to the plane when it happened.

"And now I owe a very powerful man a lot of money. That makes me very angry."

The alcohol is kicking in fast now, and I'm pretty sure I'm swaying. The two men are starting to look more like four men.

"You should be angry with yourself," I say. "You put yourself in that situation."

"Just as you have put yourself here," he responds.

The two men move fast. They get several punches in, and I'm unable to block any of them. Dammit, it's like I'm moving in slow motion.

"Finish him!" Doogan demands.

A sharp pain erupts in my stomach. I glance down, and my shirt is covered in blood. Dropping to my knees, I look up at the guys. One is holding a knife. I press on my stomach as I go down, face first, into a puddle.

I roll to my side and reach into my pocket for my phone. It's not there. It's in my jacket. I reach for it, but I'm not wearing one. It must be at the bar.

My lids grow heavy. I can't move. Finally, I close my eyes and hope one of the guys realizes I'm missing before it's too late.

## CHAPTER TWO

Detective Julia McNamara

I SHOULD BE HAVING fun and enjoying the party, but I can't stop thinking about FOX. Ever since he spoke with my boyfriend, Dan, at the bar, he's been ordering shot after shot.

As his friend, I know Fox isn't much of a drinker. Something's wrong. He was fine when I spoke to him earlier. I wonder if Dan said something that rubbed him wrong. Because I know damn well that he wasn't upset about the weather.

Dan's arm is around me, as it has been all night. It might be my imagination, but I swear he's been more possessive since I spoke to Fox at the bar. I've told Dan repeatedly that Fox and I are only friends. While I always thought I'd love a possessive man, I'm finding I don't. Not one bit.

I lean close to Dan so no one else can hear. "What did you and Fox talk about at the bar earlier?"

Dan takes a swig of his beer and keeps his eyes straight ahead. "Oh, how great you are."

"Really? And what did Fox say?"

Dan removes the arm from my shoulders. He turns to me. "He said you're a great detective."

While Fox and I are colleagues of sorts, I doubt that's the first thing he'd say about me. But maybe he's picked up on Dan's possessiveness, too, and is trying not to make it worse.

“And what did you say?” I ask.

Dan smiles. “That you’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”

I should feel all warm and gooey inside when a man says something like that to me, right? Then why the hell do I have this urge to get away from him?

I kiss his cheek. “That’s sweet.” I wait a beat before saying, “I need to use the restroom. I’ll be right back.”

It takes all my effort not to run to the bathroom. I pass the pool tables and dart boards on my way to the back. By the time I throw open the door to the ladies’ room, I’m relieved to be alone. But the condition of the bathroom doesn’t help. The place was built over fifty years ago and has never been updated. The grout in the tile floor is permanently black with caked-in dirt.

Connie, Rover’s girlfriend, is at the sink. She turns, and her eyes widen. “Julia? Are you all right?”

Clearly, I must look as uneasy as I feel. I’ve met Connie on a handful of occasions, but I don’t really know her. “I’m fine.”

I splash cold water onto my cheeks and calm my breathing. After drying my face, I glance up, and she’s staring at me with her arms crossed. “What?” I ask.

“For a detective, you’re a shitty liar.”

I toss the paper towels into the trash can. Now, I have two choices. I could continue to lie and walk out. Or I could get another woman’s opinion. Considering my life is my job and I work with all men, I don’t really have any women to talk to. My mom doesn’t count since we’re no longer close.

“Fine,” I turn to her. “But what I’m about to say is in confidence. Can you promise you won’t tell anyone else?”

Something flashes in her eyes as she smiles. “I’m an attorney. I keep secrets for a living.”

I’d forgotten about that. “Fine.”

“Hopefully, you have more to say than simply fine.” She raises a brow. She’s spunky; I’ll give her that.

“My boyfriend just told me I’m the best thing that’s ever happened to him.”

“Okay, that’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

I turn back to the mirror, unable to face her for what I say next. “It should be. But instead of being happy, I panicked and ran into the bathroom. I’m a shitty girlfriend.”



Connie crosses her arms. "Huh."

I turn to her. "What does that mean?"

She shrugs. "It could mean a couple of things." She doesn't say anything more as she stares me down.

I wave my hand in the air. "Such as?"

"Well, if this guy is great and you really like him, perhaps you are simply afraid of commitment."

I've had relationships before, and I never felt ill when those men expressed strong feelings. "I don't think so."

Connie smiles. "Hmm. I guess it's the second thing. You have feelings for someone else."

An image of Fox flashes in my mind. We've been friends for a couple of years. There was a time when I thought he was interested in me, but he never made a move despite having opportunities. I finally got up the nerve and planned to ask him on a date. I walked into Kelly's, where a group of us were meeting, and he was hugging a blond woman I didn't recognize. When she stepped back, she had hearts in her eyes as she looked up at him. I had no idea he was dating anyone.

The next night, I met Dan at a bar, and we've been together ever since.

"It's someone else," Connie says. "I knew it!"

I spin back to her. "You knew it?"

She blinks a few times. "I mean just now. I could tell because you look torn."

"Well, it doesn't matter. The other guy only views me as a friend."

She flinches. "Ouch. I'm sorry."

I shrug. "It's life. I moved on."

She pats my shoulder. "Did you?"

I don't say anything because it feels like I didn't.

Connie puts her hand on my arm. "I need to get back out there, but if you want to talk some more, let me know."

After she leaves, I stare at myself in the mirror. Did I move on? I squeeze my eyes shut, knowing the truth. The last couple of times Fox has asked me to go to the gun range, I've told him I was busy. I stopped popping in at MTS to say hi to the guys in order to avoid him. Although since we sometimes work together, that hasn't been completely possible.

I've been spending more and more time with Dan. I thought we were casual. But after tonight, I'm questioning if we're on the same page. Maybe it

was a mistake to invite him here. But since Rover told me about the party at the station in front of Dan, I really didn't have a choice. Soon, I'll talk to Dan and make sure we want the same thing.

Enough wallowing. I return to the group, and Dan pulls me to him and kisses me deeply. He knows I'm not one for public affection, so I jump back.

I push him away. "Dan? What the hell?"

He grins. "Sorry, you're just so sexy tonight."

My attention is back at the bar, but Fox is gone. He's nowhere in sight. I try to step away from Dan, but he grabs my hand, pulling me back.

"Julia, I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"McNamara! Dan said you had a story involving a perp with a goat in his trunk. We have to hear about this one," Rover says.

Leave it to Rover to ask about a goat because I don't know how else he could have gotten this out of Dan. The story is several months old.

I glance back to the bar; Fox is still missing. I tell the story quickly, then excuse myself. He's nowhere in the place. Based on how much he drank, I need to make sure he isn't going to try to drive home.

I step outside, and once the door closes, it's quiet. Bucky's Bar is the only business open in Pine Valley past nine at night. Most of the citizens of this small town are at home getting ready for bed. All except the few who frequent Bucky's.

There is no sign of Fox anywhere.

"He's dead now!" someone shouts from down the street.

My skin crawls, and I hope I'm wrong about what I'm thinking. I grab my service revolver and run toward the commotion.

Three men race out of an alley and down the street. I'm about to go after them when I hear a groan. It's dark, so I use my phone to illuminate the alley.

That's when I see him. "Fox!" I run to him, and there's blood everywhere. "What happened?" I ask as I call for help.

"Doogan," he croaks out. "His goon stabbed me."

"Doogan was here?" I ask as I pull up his shirt and spot the source of the blood.

"Yeah." His voice is weak.

I alert the emergency operator a man has been stabbed and is critical. I set the phone on the ground and yell out the address as I apply pressure to stop the bleeding.

"An ambulance is three minutes out," the operator says through the

speakerphone.

Fox is staring at me, but his eyes do not seem focused.

“Stay with me, Fox.” The sirens grow louder. “You hear that? Help is close.”

He doesn't say a word, and his eyelids drift closed.

“No! You stay with me.” I check his pulse. It's weak.

The ambulance pulls up, and two medics rush out with a gurney. Everything happens so fast.

“I'm coming with you,” I say.

The medic is about to tell me I can't, but I reach for my badge.

“She's a detective with the Pine Valley PD,” the other medic says.

“All right,” the first medic says. “Let's go.”

I climb into the back and watch them frantically work. I call my chief and fill him in, letting him know Doogan's back in town. That's a man I hoped never to see again. He was a perp on a prior case, and things went sideways. I ended up his prisoner on a plane headed somewhere outside the United States. Thank God Fox showed up in time to save me. But why is Doogan free? He's supposed to be locked away in prison for years.

“We need more blood!” one of the paramedics shouts to the other.

“Last one,” the other paramedic says as he hands him the bag.

“Is he going to make it?” I ask.

The first paramedic doesn't even look up. “He's lost a lot of blood, and his pulse is weak. I'd give him a fifty-fifty chance at best.”

His answer is meant for the detective in me. But this is Fox, and I can't lose him. I'm not able to stop the tears. I blink them back as they start to fall.  
*Please live, Fox. I need you.*

## CHAPTER THREE

Julia

“WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED?” Trax asks as he enters the waiting room.

I stand up but can't speak. Instead, all the tears I've been holding back rush out.

He grabs me and pulls me close. “Is he alive?” His voice wavers.

“He was when he got here. They said it could be hours before they update me since he's in surgery.”

His grip on me tightens. Trax is Fox's best friend. I don't know the man too well, but Fox speaks highly of him.

The rest of the group arrives, including Dan, whose eyes narrow when he sees me in Trax's arms.

“What's going on?” CT asks.

Trax releases me and turns away, wiping his eyes.

“Jesus, are you all right?” Dan says, staring at my blood-covered shirt.

“It's Fox's blood. He was stabbed. He's in surgery now, and it could be hours before we get an update.”

CT goes to the front desk.

Saying those words brings another round of tears, and I step toward Dan for support. He steps back.

“What's wrong?” I ask.

He points at me. “You're covered in blood.”

I glance down, even though I'm aware it's there.

Dan scratches his head. "Sorry, I just don't want to get it on me."

Get it on him? I blink in disbelief. The man is wearing a flannel that I'm certain is from the 90s and he's worried about a little blood? Most of it has dried anyway. After what I went through, my boyfriend is more worried about his shirt than me.

What the hell would happen if it had been me on the ground and he needed to apply pressure?

As these thoughts swirl in my head, Connie steps up and hugs me. Connie looks like she dresses in designer clothes. But she's here holding me.

CT returns to the group. "He's alive. But that's all they can tell me right now."

Connie releases me, and we both sink into chairs. "That's good news," she says to me.

I nod. Dan sits next to me but doesn't say anything. In fact, the room is eerily silent as we wait for news.

Dan's phone rings, causing me to jump. He frowns at it and then stands up. "I need to take this." He walks outside.

My mind goes back to the last time I spoke to Fox. It was brief, and he was clearly upset. I should have pressed further to find out what was wrong. What if I never get to talk to him again? I sniffle. Peaches gets up and locates a tissue box. He puts it on the table in front of us.

"Thanks," I say as I take one.

Connie leans close. "Is Fox the other guy?"

I can't answer as more tears fall. All I can do is nod.

"Hey, Julia."

I glance up to see Dan shuffling his feet. "Something came up with work, and I'm afraid I need to go."

"A yoga crisis on a Friday night?" I snap.

He avoids my eyes. "Yeah, the furnace went out, and unless we get it fixed, there will be no hot yoga in the morning."

I stare at this man. He's serious. I know damn well he doesn't have any clue how to fix furnaces and is using this as an excuse.

"I'll see you later," I say. I shouldn't be mad. Wasn't I just thinking we were casual? But even casual means he can hold my hand at the hospital.

He steps forward and kisses the top of my head before he turns and walks out of the waiting room.

Peaches huffs, and I turn to him. "Why the hell are you with that

douchebag?”

Rover shoves his elbow into Peaches’s ribs. “Hey, not a good time.”

Do they both think that? Suddenly I need to know. “Peaches, will you come with me to get some coffee?” I ask.

His eyes widen. “Sure.”

We head to a small cafeteria. There is a carafe of coffee that’s likely been sitting around many hours, but at this point, I don’t care. We each pour ourselves a cup. Peaches pays for both.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

On our way back, I stop him. “A douchebag? Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

He wraps both hands around his coffee. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“But you did.”

He shrugs. “I guess I just see you with someone different. Not that it’s any of my business, but you don’t strike me as someone who is into yoga and green juice.”

I nod. “He’s different than me, for sure. That’s why I’ve tried to keep things casual.” I frown. Why the hell am I telling Peaches this?

Then it all hits me. Fox might not survive the night.

“I can’t lose him,” I say.

“Dan?”

I meet his eyes. “No, Fox.”

Peaches opens his mouth but doesn’t say anything.

“What?”

He sips on his coffee, his eyes focused on the lid. “If you don’t want to answer this, don’t, but do you have feelings for Fox?” His eyes meet mine, and I’m caught off guard by his question.

Turning away from him, I take a deep breath and manage to avoid answering his question. “Fox is my friend, and that’s all he wants.”

Peaches sighs. “Really? You sure about that?”

I spin around, but before I can respond, his phone rings. Well, not so much a ring but a song about Peaches. Someone keeps changing his ringtone to various songs about peaches.

“Motherfucker,” he says. He reaches into his pocket and stares at his phone. “Sorry, I need to take this.”

“It’s fine. I’ll meet you back in the waiting room.” I walk away, happy he

didn't grill me more. A bullet dodged. Not that I'd tell Peaches the truth. That's too embarrassing and, frankly, none of his business. But if Connie could tell I was lying, Peaches could, too.

They are both right. I'm not a good liar. At least not about anything personal.

Peaches rejoins us a few minutes later, holding his phone in one hand and his coffee in the other. "You guys wouldn't fuck with me under these circumstances. Right?"

Trax jumps up. "What's going on?"

Peaches holds up his phone. "Another damn peaches song." His eyes move to Connie. "Right?"

She shakes her head. "I've told you it isn't me. It was happening long before you met me."

His eyes move to Rover, who is also shaking his head. "Trust me. No one here is thinking about your damn phone."

Peaches sighs as he sits down. "Sorry, you're right. I'm just frustrated that I haven't figured out who it is."

"Where's Cara?" Rover asks, then coughs, trying to cover the grin we can all see.

"It's not her," Peaches says.

We spend the next couple of hours waiting. Stormy and Cowboy join us, and fortunately, they have coffee for everyone.

"They must know something by now," CT says as he stands and walks back to the main desk.

A doctor in scrubs comes out of the double doors. "Who is here for Fox Davenport?"

We all stand.

"We are," Stormy says.

The doctor walks closer. "I'm Dr. McCoy. Fox made it through surgery. He's very lucky the knife missed all of his internal organs. There were no signs of internal bleeding or hemorrhage. But he did lose a lot of blood."

My hands go to my shirt. There was so much blood.

"Can we see him?" Trax asks.

The doctor nods. "Once he's out of recovery, he can have visitors. The nurse will let you know when."

A nurse steps up beside him. "Is there anyone here who can help fill out some forms? All we have is his name, and I was assured he had insurance."

The doctor frowns. "That can wait."

Stormy stands. "I can help with the forms."

They all walk away, and I'm feeling lightheaded. But I need to focus on the fact that he's alive. He'll get through this. He's strong.

Connie puts an arm around my shoulders. "You okay?" she asks.

I nod, keeping my mind focused on the fact that he will be all right. He has to be.

Connie stays with me until the nurse steps back into the waiting room. "Fox is ready for visitors. But only two at a time."

Trax turns to us. "I'm going."

Peaches steps up. "I'll go with you."

They don't stay back too long. When Trax reenters the waiting room, he wipes his eyes. "He's pretty out of it. But he did ask for McNamara."

"Do you want me to go back with you?" Connie asks.

I shake my head. "I'd like to see him alone." I step forward, and no one stops me as a nurse points me in the direction of his room.

I open the door and gasp when I see him. There are so many machines surrounding him. My eyes well with tears. I wipe them away as I step closer.

His eyes are closed, and his hospital gown is open in the front, revealing all the monitors taped to his chest. Lower, there is a large bandage where he'd been stabbed. But my eyes wander to the areas not covered. I've never seen him without a shirt on.

While I appreciated his form in his snug T-shirts, I was not prepared for how chiseled this man's body is. The blanket sits a little low, and there is a trail of hair on his stomach that goes down. I imagine how it might look without the blanket.

"Hey," he says, causing me to jump. He smiles. "Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt."

"Interrupt?" My cheeks heat up, and they must be bright red. "I was taking in all the machines you are hooked up to."

"It's okay to look, Julia."

Hell, there's no point in lying about it. "I really didn't mean to stare, but I don't think I've ever seen someone built like you in real life."

Of course, Dan is in great shape, as you would expect from someone who has made exercise and nutrition his life. But while Dan looks fit, Fox looks like he should be an underwear model.

Why the hell is my mind going there? My friend almost died.



“You scared me,” I say.

“Sorry.”

“Why did you leave the bar?”

His eyes close, and he doesn't answer. A moment later, he's lightly snoring.

“He's going to be in and out of it for a while,” a nurse says as she enters the room.

I guess I'll have to wait for my answer. For now, I'm just happy he made it through.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Fox

ON THE ONE HAND, I'm happy to have been released and on my way home. But on the other, I know Trax is waiting to get me home before he lays into me.

And I can't blame him. If the roles were reversed, I'd do the same thing. But right now, I want to call Julia and make sure she's all right. Stormy assured me he'd have someone with her in case Doogan shows up again.

Trax steps ahead of me and unlocks my door. We walk in, but it doesn't look like my place.

"Why are there so many plants?" I ask.

He places my keys on the tray next to the door. Then he stretches his arms over his head. "People were asking if they could send flowers, and I said you'd prefer plants."

"Why did you say that?"

He shrugs. "I prefer plants, so it came out."

I laugh, but pain slices through me, so I stop. "Well, take some home, please."

He shakes his head. "No, these are all meant for you. Besides, they brighten up the place."

I look around and realize he's right. My house consists of a television, a black couch, a black chair, and white walls. It needs something, and the plants do help. I make myself comfortable on the couch.

He goes into the kitchen, and I hear the faucet turn on. Then he walks back, carrying a pitcher. “Your fridge and freezer are both stocked. All you need to do is heat up whatever you find.” He proceeds to water all the plants.

“Thank you for everything. I really appreciate it.”

He doesn’t speak until he finishes. “There are a lot of plants. I better come by in a couple of days to water them again.”

After returning the pitcher to the kitchen, he sits in the chair next to the couch and leans forward. “What the hell happened?”

And here is the moment I knew was coming.

“Why did you drink so much? And why did you leave the bar? Hell, you left your jacket and phone.”

While I’ve mostly talked to Peaches about my feelings for Julia, Trax is aware I’ve been harboring a crush since I met her.

“Dan told me he’s going to propose. I lost it.”

Trax leans back and runs his hands over his face. “Shit. I’m sorry, man. That really sucks.”

I lean my head back. “Yeah, it does. I wasted two years being too chicken shit, and I ended up losing her because of it.”

“Maybe she won’t say yes.”

I look over at my friend. “I can wish that all I want, but she’s been with him for a while. She’ll probably say yes.”

He sighs. “I’d offer you a drink, but you know.”

“Drinking is what got me into this in the first place.” I hesitate but ask a question I’m not sure I want the answer to. “Have they arrested Doogan and those two men yet?”

A couple of officers took my statement at the hospital, and they also brought mugshots of men known to associate with Doogan. I pointed out both assholes, so hopefully, they won’t remain free for long.

He avoids my gaze. “Unfortunately, no one has been able to locate any of the three men.”

“Is Julia out looking for them?”

“McNamara? No.”

McNamara. That’s how all the other guys refer to her. And how I should, too, but when I open my mouth Julia comes out instead.

Trax frowns. “She’s technically a witness, so she’s not on this case.”

“Witness?”

“Don’t you remember she found you in the alley?”

Julia found me? Now that raises a lot of questions, but I'll save those for her. "I remember a lot about that night, but no, I don't recall that."

I slide down a little so I'm lying on my couch now.

"Is someone watching Julia? If Doogan's still out there, he might come after her."

Trax stands up. "I'll find out who's watching her when I get into the office. For now, let me get you set up. Want me to grab your pillow and blanket from your bed?"

Most people only see the quiet and reserved side of Trax. They don't know that underneath it all, he really is a caring friend.

"Yes, but can you grab the stuff from the guest bed?"

He nods and leaves me alone for a minute. While it hurts to move, I can at least sit up and walk, so I'll be fine on my own.

He returns and places the pillow at one end of the couch and then tosses the blanket partly over me. After he's done, he sits back in the chair and stares up at my ceiling.

"Hey, are you all right?" I ask him.

He laughs. "I'm supposed to be asking you that."

"Yeah, but I know something's been bothering you for a while. You want to talk about it?"

He shakes his head. "Not yet." After a long sigh. "It's funny how you think you have your life figured out, and..." He sighs. "I don't know, fate, God, or shitty bad luck intervenes."

I chuckle but wince because it hurts. "You mean how I was doing fine and then was nearly killed? That was shitty bad luck, all right."

He leans forward. "Were you really doing fine?"

I lie down, pulling the blanket over me. "Yeah. I have a job I love, good friends, hobbies—"

"What hobbies?"

Well, there's only one, but it still counts. "I like to shoot. I go to the firing range every few weeks."

"Ah." He grins. "I'm not sure that counts."

I frown. "Why wouldn't it count?"

His smile morphs into a frown. "Would you still go if McNamara didn't go with you?"

And there it is. It always comes back to her. I don't schedule my life around her, but damn, I do think about her way too much. Would I go

without her? Yes, I think I would. But maybe not as often.

“Of course, I would. I’d go with you.” But the words don’t ring true in my ears. And I don’t think Trax bought it, either.

“You have a choice to make. Either you let her go and move on.”

The idea of letting her go off and marry Dan makes me sick to my stomach.

“Or,” Trax stands up, “you tell her how you feel and let her decide what she wants to do.”

Yeah, tell her and ruin a perfectly good friendship and working relationship. If she didn’t want to be with Dan, she wouldn’t be. I just have to accept that.

“Personally, if it were me, I’d tell her.” His words surprise me. “Otherwise, you will always wonder what if. And sometimes the what ifs are harder to move on from than actual rejection.”

I sit up a little. “Are you talking from personal experience?”

He shoves his hands into his pockets. “Something like that. I need to get going,” Trax says. “Do you need anything before I head out?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks.” Well, I’m not good. Not after this talk. If I’m being honest, since Dan spoke to me at the bar, it’s all I can think about. And now I’m wondering what situation Trax was in, but I know not to push him.

“Okay, call me if you need anything. I’ll let you know what I find out about who is watching McNamara.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

Once he leaves, I close my eyes. But instead of sleeping, I see Julia and Dan standing at the altar, and again, I feel ill.

Suddenly, I can’t wait for Trax to get information on Julia, so I call Stormy.

“Hey, Fox, are you home?”

“Yeah, Trax brought me here. I wanted to ask you something. Do you have eyes on Julia? Has Doogan been arrested yet?”

Stormy sighs. “No, the police haven’t found Doogan yet. Her chief is concerned about her, so he’s made sure she’s being watched around the clock. I told him if that changes to let me know, and I’ll get my men on it.”

I’m happy to hear her chief is looking out for her. I’d prefer it if it were one of our guys, but I know no one at the station would let anything happen to Julia, either.

“Thanks for the update,” I say.

“Don’t worry. Everything is taken care of. Just rest and heal. As soon as Doogan is in custody, I’ll let you know.”

I end the call and lie there, staring at the ceiling. If Doogan wanted to finish me off, he’d have a fighting chance. Instead of taking a pain pill, I make my way to the bathroom and find my bottle of ibuprofen. There is no way that asshole is going to catch me off guard again.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Julia

THE MOMENT I'm in my apartment, I kick off my shoes and toss my keys onto the table. The last update on Fox was from Peaches, letting me know Fox was released this morning and is at home resting.

I wonder if he has anything to eat. I check my freezer to see if there is anything I can take him. What the hell am I doing? I slam the freezer shut. The guys are his best friends. I'm sure they are keeping him fed.

I open the fridge and grab a beer. I pop off the top and take a large pull. My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I reluctantly grab it. The last thing I want tonight is to be called in on a case. I need a few hours to myself.

Dan: *On my way over with takeout. Figured you'd be hungry.*

Well, he's not wrong. Part of me feels bad that I haven't called him back in a few days, but I'm still pissed at him for his made-up excuse to leave the hospital.

Me: *Sounds great. Thanks.*

I turn on some music, sit back on the couch, and relax. My eyes catch on a vase of flowers from Dan. They're dead. Dammit. I forgot to change the water.

Before he arrives, I toss the flowers out and clean the vase. The bell rings as I'm putting it away. I finish my beer, then answer the door.

"Sweetheart," Dan says as he leans in to kiss me. "Brought lasagna from the new Italian place we've been dying to try." He steps past me and walks to

my kitchen.

I close the door with a sigh. I do not like Italian food. I've told Dan many times, but he doesn't seem to hear it. Fortunately, I'm too damn hungry to care tonight.

"Sounds good," I lie. When I get to the kitchen, he already has two servings plated. I grab another beer and take a seat at the kitchen table.

Dan raises a brow.

"What?"

"That's not your first beer, is it?"

I blink at this man. "No. So?"

He takes the bottle out of my hand and sets it on the counter. I cross my arms as he retrieves a glass and fills it with water. "You've been working hard this week. I'm here to take care of you." He sets the glass in front of me.

I'm still staring at the beer he took away. "Why the hell did you take that from me?" I point to it.

Dan smiles. "Because it doesn't serve you. Water will."

He likes to fancy himself some sort of health expert. Fine for him but it's not what I need right now.

I stand and retrieve my beer. "The beer is serving me. I've had a bad week." I sit down again.

He frowns but is smart enough to not try to take it again.

Huh. He's been here five minutes and has already annoyed the shit out of me.

He takes my hand in his as he sits next to me. "I have some good news to share."

I'm so hungry; I dive in with my free hand. After a few bites, I glance up, and he's staring at me. Smiling.

"What?" I ask.

"Aren't you going to ask me about the good news?"

I set down my fork. "What's your good news?" It doesn't escape me that he hasn't asked me about my day, about Fox, about anything. But maybe his news is too exciting, and that's all he can think about.

"Remember that retreat in the San Juans I told you about?"

I stare at him blankly.

"The one that sold out, but I was trying to get us tickets? My friend highly recommended it."

"Sorry, don't recall. I've been a bit preoccupied."



And that's the truth. Not just with Fox and finding who did this to him, but the rumor is we are getting a new chief of police soon, and I'm not a fan of change. Well, more likely, I'm concerned that asshole Greenhow will get promoted once Chief Stevens retires.

"We got in!" Dan yells, causing me to jump.

"In to what?"

He frowns. "The retreat! It's in three weeks. We leave Friday morning and return Sunday night."

I stop mid-bite. "Wait, three weeks?"

He grins. "Yes."

"There's no way I can get the time off so soon. I'm in the middle of a couple of big cases." Well, that isn't completely accurate. Until Doogan is caught, I doubt my chief would let me out of his sight.

Dan grins. "Don't worry. I handled everything."

I drop my fork. "What does that mean?"

He takes my plate even though I haven't finished. Guess he misunderstood the dropped fork. "I spoke to Detective Greenhow. He said he'd cover for you all weekend."

I clench my fists. Is he kidding? Of course, that asshole will cover for me. He's been trying to take the Childress case from me for weeks.

"You should have discussed this with me first," I say.

He rinses the plates and puts them into my dishwasher. "That would have ruined the surprise."

The last thing I want is some stupid retreat, but maybe I can at least relax and read a book or something. "Are we going to get to go to the beach?" It's a bit cold up there, even in the summer, but as long as the sun's out, that's all I need.

"Maybe," Dan says. "They have quite a packed itinerary." He grabs his phone. "I'll send it to you."

My phone buzzes, so I pull it up. As I scan the schedule, I have to wonder what the hell he's thinking. "This isn't relaxing. This is boot camp."

Dan laughs. "It won't be so bad. Look, we get Saturday night to ourselves."

Why was this sold out? Each hour is filled with a lecture of some sort. Well, Dan can go to all of those sessions. I'll check out the beach. I yawn. "Look, I'm really tired. I just want to go to bed."

"No problem. I brought my overnight bag."

Great.

We get ready for bed, and I climb in. Before Dan joins me, he takes off his shirt and tosses it on top of my dresser. I shouldn't compare, but I don't drool over Dan the way I did Fox the other day. Dan is a nice guy. Could I simply be trying to use Fox as a way to avoid getting closer to this man?

He climbs into bed and moves right up next to me. He leans in and kisses my neck.

And I feel nothing. When did that happen? The physical attraction between us has never been earth-shattering, but it was pleasant.

"Dan, I'm sorry, but I really need sleep."

He pulls back and stares at me. "Oh, okay. I just figured since it's been a while... you know."

I yawn. "Maybe tomorrow. Goodnight." I turn my back to him and turn off my lamp.

Part of me feels bad putting him off, but why should I? I've had a rough week, and frankly, I wanted to be alone tonight. I never gave him any indication otherwise. But he's lucky I'm too tired to argue.

"Are we all right?" he asks.

I want to say we're fine, but I can't. I turn back to face him. "I've been through a lot this week, and you haven't asked me about any of it. You haven't asked me about me, how I feel, how Fox is doing. Instead, you came over here with your news, your food, and then wanted sex. I get that we're keeping things casual, but that doesn't mean one-sided."

Oops. I didn't mean to spit all that out, but once I got going, I couldn't stop.

"Oh, Julia. I'm so sorry. I figured you didn't want to talk about it since I haven't heard from you this week." He reaches over and strokes my cheek. "As for casual, I never said I wanted that."

No, I did.

"I'm very much in this. Do you want to talk about what's been going on with you this week?"

I yawn. I really am exhausted, and discussing *us* is the last thing I want to do. "Maybe tomorrow. I'm just really tired. I haven't gotten much sleep since Friday. I've been working my own cases plus helping out with what happened."

It's the truth. I don't tell him that I didn't get any sleep until Fox was moved out of the ICU. It was touch and go for the first twenty-four hours.

“Okay. I understand. I really care for you, Julia. If you ever need anything, let me know.”

“Thank you,” I say before I turn my back to him again.

He wraps his arm around me, and it’s clear he doesn’t get it. I sleep best when I have my own space.

“Just sleep, no cuddling,” I say.

He removes his arm and turns his back to me. “Goodnight, Julia.”

“Goodnight.”

## CHAPTER SIX

Fox

THE MOMENT I step out of my car, I'm assaulted by that damn bird.

"Fuck!" I shout. "I don't have any damn Cheetos!" I quickly make my way into the Morgan Thompson Security office.

"Hey, surprised to see you in here so soon," Stormy says. "You're supposed to have the rest of the week off."

Peaches walks up, holding a cup of coffee. "Yeah, why are you in early?"

"I'm going stir crazy at my house. I've been sitting around playing video games for three weeks. Figured I could at least catch up on paperwork from my last assignment."

I'd just flown back from my last assignment a few hours before Coff's welcome party, where I was nearly killed. When I was released from the hospital, Stormy told me to hold off on the paperwork until I could come into the office. And according to Stormy, that wasn't until the doctor said it was all right. The doctor, understanding my work was physical, ordered me to stay home for four weeks, so I've fallen behind. But I'm fine to sit at a desk and fill out a report.

Stormy nods. "All right, but that's all you're doing."

"Yes, sir."

Peaches follows me into my office. "How are you doing? Want me to get you some coffee?"

I take off my jacket, and I hang it on the hook on the back of the door.

“I’m fine. I can get it.” I step into the kitchen, and fortunately, no one is there. After I pour my coffee, I return to my office, and Peaches is still there.

“You told Stormy that Doogan stabbed you,” Peaches says.

I slowly sit down in my chair, doing my best not to wince. Fuck. I had hoped never to see that man again, but it appears he holds a grudge. Although he shouldn’t have been free to find me. “There were three men. One of them was Doogan. He wanted to pay me back for the plane.”

Peaches leans forward. “The one you destroyed with the explosion?”

I nod. “Why the hell was Doogan free? Was he released? Did he escape?”

Peaches shakes his head. “Stormy had been digging into it. I think he knows something but hasn’t told us. Maybe he was waiting to talk to you about it first.”

I hope he found answers. Because that man should have been in prison for the foreseeable future. Before I go grill him, I need to know what’s going on with Julia. “Who’s watching Julia today? Are the officers at her station rotating duty?”

“No, Trax is on it now.”

“Really?” He hadn’t mentioned that to me.

“Yeah, as of about ten minutes ago. You just missed him leaving.”

I lean back in my chair, relieved. Of course, these guys would have my back. They know what happened with Doogan.

“Once Trax heard the person watching her was Greenhow, he volunteered. That guy is a dick.”

Instantly, I’m relieved. One thing I know for sure is that Julia doesn’t trust Greenhow. I’ll have to thank Trax when I see him.

“Have you seen her?” Peaches asks. “Is she engaged?”

I told Peaches what Dan said to me while we were playing video games one night.

I shrug. “I haven’t talked to her. We exchanged a couple of texts, but it was only about my being released, stuck at home, stuff like that.” I stare at my desk.

He nods. “Want me to find out?”

I shake my head. “I’m going to see what Stormy knows about Doogan.”

Stormy appears in my doorway. “I was just coming to discuss that with you.” He walks in and closes the door behind him.

“I told him Trax is watching McNamara now,” Peaches says.

Stormy sits in the chair next to Peaches and leans on my desk. “I’ve made

a schedule with the guys to watch her. The schedule does not include you because you need to heal. But while you're home, I don't want you getting any dumb ideas."

Dumb ideas? Maybe he means killing Doogan because that's about all I can focus on right now.

"Why isn't Doogan still in jail? He was sentenced to ten years."

There's a knock on my door.

"Come in," Stormy says.

Coff opens the door and steps in. "Glad to see you're doing better," he says as he leans against a wall.

"Coff is between assignments and not someone Doogan might be familiar with. He's going to be the main point on this."

Coff frowns. "Who's Doogan?"

"An asshole who kidnapped Detective McNamara last year," Peaches says.

I grab my coffee and take a sip. "She had put his brother away, and he was angry. He targeted McNamara and was going to traffic her out of the country." I close my eyes as the memory of finding her comes back. She was already on the airplane. "I stopped him."

Stormy leans back and crosses his arms. "You more than stopped him." He turns to Coff. "Fox rescued McNamara and blew up the plane Doogan was using. Doogan was arrested, but according to the chief, the owner of the plane didn't take too kindly to Doogan for what happened."

Coff scratches the back of his neck. "I'm unclear what you need me to do."

"Keep that asshole away from Julia," I say. "And if you accidentally kill him, I won't complain."

Stormy groans. "Please don't accidentally kill him. He's the lead suspect in stabbing Fox. We want to bring him in so he does his time."

I huff out a breath. "Like he did last time? No one has told me. Why was he out?"

My body clenches in anger, which I immediately regret as pain slices through my stomach. Getting worked up like this isn't helping, but dammit, why was Doogan free?

"He cut a deal," Stormy says.

I rub my eyes. "That can't be right. The chief would never cut a deal with an asshole who hurt his detective."

“He didn’t. The FBI did.”

I’ve worked with the FBI here and there throughout the years. But I usually work with the local Pine Valley PD or Agent Harding with the CIA. But if it’s the FBI, I’d bet I know exactly which asshole it was. “Agent Carter?”

Stormy nods. “Now, before you get angry, you should hear the entire story.”

I can’t hear any more of this right now. I grab my jacket. “I know Agent Carter. He prioritized his own cases again. I need some air.”

I storm out toward my car, a familiar cawing above my head. CT and Rover are just getting out of their vehicle when I turn and come face to face with the damn peacock Stormy lured here for who knows what reason.

“Fox? Surprised to see you here!” Rover says.

I point to the peacock. “You better call off that damn bird, or I’m making him into stew!” The bird caws and swoops at me as if I’m not a threat at all.

“Damn, you all right?” CT asks.

Rover pulls something out of his pocket and tosses it onto the ground. The peacock runs for it. That’s when I spot the bright yellow item. A Cheeto. My favorite snack food.

“Why the hell do you have those in your pocket?”

Rover shrugs.

“Hey, what’s going on?” CT asks, trying to pull me back on topic.

“Ask Stormy. I need to take a drive.”

I get into my car and get the hell out of there before the bird comes after me again. My mind is racing. If Doogan came after me once, he’ll likely do it again. Or Julia.

Before I realize what I’m doing, I pull up at the police station. I walk inside, and Melvin is at the front desk.

“Hey, Fox. I heard what happened. How are you feeling?”

“I’ve been better. Is Julia around?”

He nods. “She is. Go ahead and go on back.”

This is one of the things I love about the small town of Pine Valley. Everything, for the most part, is informal. And more importantly, everyone knows everyone, so while I get the okay to head back, others wouldn’t.

Julia isn’t at her desk, so I go to their kitchen. She’s sitting at a table with a coffee in front of her, frowning at her phone. But even frowning, she’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Her long dark hair is pulled back into a

ponytail, and she's wearing a suit. Then her soulful brown eyes glance up, and she smiles.

Damn, I have it bad. "Hey," I say.

"Hey! I'm surprised to see you here." She walks over and gives me a hug. That's new, but I like it.

I hug her back but let go before I want to. "Wow, guess I should get stabbed more often for that welcome."

She points at me and grins. "Don't even joke about it." Her smile falls. "What's going on? Why aren't you resting?"

My eyes move to her hand. No ring. Interesting. "I just wanted to check on you since Doogan's still at large."

"Really? I thought you might be avoiding me."

I guess she has noticed I haven't responded to all her texts. "Never." Then I change the subject. "I understand Carter cut some kind of deal with him." She's worked with Carter in the past. "Did you know?"

She would have told me if she'd known, wouldn't she?

Her hands go to her hips. "No. Not before. I would have said something."

I nod. I figured she would, but I had to ask.

"How are you doing?" She nods to my stomach.

"Getting better. Slowly. I won't be running any marathons anytime soon."

She chuckles. "Well, damn, Fox. I had us down for a relay race this weekend."

I laugh. One thing we both share is our dislike of running. While most of my coworkers are regular runners, it's not my thing. I prefer to sweat from hiking. A common interest Julia and I share. Although, we haven't been on a hike together since shortly before she and Dan began dating.

"Stormy said he's got someone watching me at all times," she says. "It's kind of hard to do my job with a tail."

"Yeah, but as far as I'm concerned, the tail stays."

She arches a brow. "What about you? Who's watching you?"

I grin. "I can take care of myself."

She points to my stomach. "Evidence suggests otherwise." Yeah, she has a point there.

"That was an off night."

"Come, sit for a minute." She leads me to the table with her coffee. "You haven't told me what happened. Why did you get so drunk? That isn't like you."



I stare at the table. What the hell am I supposed to say? Your boyfriend told me he plans to propose? It's supposed to be a surprise.

"I got some bad news. And no, I don't want to talk about it. Yet."

She watches me. It's not a lie. Finally, I meet her eyes.

"I thought maybe Dan said something to you since you ordered drinks right after he spoke with you."

Damn, she is perceptive. Only one of the many things I really like about her. But she also gave me an in to ask something I've been wanting to know.

"How is it going with Dan? Is he the one?"

Her cheeks flush. "The one? I don't think so. Things are fine." She shrugs.

Not the one? I shouldn't be smiling, but dammit, I can't help it. "Not the one? Interesting. You've been together a while."

She shrugs again. "Sometimes you can't have what you want."

What the hell does that mean?

"McNamara, in my office now," the chief yells.

"Coming," she calls out. "Sorry, gotta go."

She walks out, leaving me there, wondering what the hell she was talking about. I want to press further, but this isn't the time or place.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Julia

I'VE NEVER BEEN SO happy to be called into the chief's office. Why did I say that to Fox? Can't have it all. Of course, he would question that. Who wouldn't? Something about almost losing him is making me want to tell him the truth about how I feel. Even if it risks the friendship.

But what if it causes me to lose him as a friend? My attempt to stuff my feelings down isn't working, either. Fox is one of my best friends at this point, but sometimes I think as long as he's in my life, I'll always be comparing other men to him.

"McNamara, please sit," Chief Stevens says.

I take a seat across from him.

He clasps his hands. "Look, someone has been keeping an eye on you at all times. But I just got a tip that Doogan has been seen in the area. I've decided I need to put you on desk duty until we catch him."

I jump up. "What? No, you can't do that! If he's nearby, let me bring him in."

He leans back. "I'm sorry. I know this is frustrating, but your safety is my top priority. And I believe you are safest here, surrounded by other officers."

I sit back down. While he's right, I hate it. "For how long?"

He frowns. "Well, until he's caught."

"But what if he's never caught? I understand you want to keep me safe, and I'm willing to stay inside this office for now. But if he's never caught,

I'm not willing to stay inside forever."

He turns to his laptop and types something. "Understood, but if Doogan is dumb enough to come back here, he'll make a mistake. But in case he doesn't, let's meet in one month and reevaluate. I sent you a meeting notice." He turns back to me with a smile.

"One month? You can't lose a detective for one month."

He sighs. "I'll make do. Greenhow has made it clear he'll put in more hours if asked. But right now, getting Doogan off the streets is my top priority."

The mention of Greenhow has me clenching my fists. But I try to focus on the topic at hand. "Can you assure Doogan will stay behind bars this time?"

Chief winces. "I'm meeting with Carter next week to discuss what happened. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again. You can go."

I stand up and am at the door when he calls out to me. I spin around.

"Regarding this weekend, when Dan asked for the time off for you, it was before all this. I was about to call it off, but Stormy said he's got a guy who will be up there watching you. A new guy."

"Coff," I say.

He's the only new guy over at MTS. Although he's not new since he's been working for Stormy out of his New York office for a while, and he's worked with all the guys here, too.

"Yes, that's it. Try to relax if you can."

I nod and walk back to my desk. My phone buzzes with a text.

Fox: *Lunch?*

Me: *Can't. Not allowed to leave. Maybe next week.*

Fox :(

I laugh. Fox isn't one to use emojis, so it catches me off guard.

I spend the rest of the day doing paperwork. The backlog I'm working on is usually reserved for an officer as some sort of punishment. But since I'm stuck here, I get it. The end of the day can't come soon enough.

I exit the station on alert but spot Coff immediately. He follows me home and parks outside. Poor guy got stuck with a boring assignment. I highly doubt Doogan is going to come after me again. Fox, maybe. He should be the one to have surveillance.

The next couple of days go by the same. Coff is there when I go to work and when I come home. After a quick exchange with Fox, I'm told a couple

of the guys are taking turns on the night shift. While I appreciate it, these guys are likely needed on assignments. Assignments that pay. And I'm certain the chief isn't paying for my protection. Not that he wouldn't want to, but the station has had its share of budget cuts this past year. Hell, we have to buy our own coffee now. If there is no budget for coffee, there sure as hell isn't money to pay former SEALs to keep me protected.

My phone buzzes, and I check it.

Fox: *Heard you're going out of town this weekend. What's up?*

I debate what to tell him. Although he knows I'm dating Dan, I find myself uncomfortable discussing the details with him.

Me: *Dan is taking me to the San Juans.*

Fox: *Oooh. Romantic.*

If Fox is seeing someone, he never mentions it, and now I'm wondering why. Only one time I saw him with a woman. The blond.

Me: *Why don't you ever tell me about whoever you are dating?*

Fox: *I'm not dating anyone.*

Me: *I mean at any point over the last two years.*

Two years ago, I ran into him at the gun range. That's when we found out we both like to go there regularly. Conversation flowed easily, and we've been friends ever since. There was one time I thought I caught him staring at my ass, but since he never showed any interest, I figured I was mistaken.

Fox: *I haven't dated anyone in the last two years.*

I stare at his words. How is that possible? Maybe he's only into one-night stands.

Me: *Okay, maybe not date, but you never mention who you pick up for the night.*

Fox: *Julia, I haven't been with anyone in two years.*

I sit straight up. What the hell? My heart is pounding at his words. He hasn't been with anyone in two years?

Me: *What about the blond you were with at Kelly's?*

Fox: *What blond?*

Me: *Last year. I walked in, and you were hugging her. She had curly hair and looked up at you with hearts in her eyes.*

He doesn't respond right away, but when my phone finally buzzes, I jump.

Fox: *That sounds like Kelly's daughter. I helped her out last year. She's seventeen. Trust me, not romantic.*

I misread it? I reread his texts again.

Me: *Why haven't you been with anyone in two years?*

I'm prying, but I'm curious. Again, he doesn't respond right away. I'm not a patient person, and he knows this, so hopefully, he isn't upset when I call.

"Well, you're getting awfully personal," he answers.

Shit, he's right. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"It's okay. Go ahead and ask." His voice is low. The way it gets when he's tired.

I've always found it so sexy in person, but on the phone, it's even hotter.

But he gave me the green light, and I have to know. "Are you saying you haven't had sex in two years?"

He chuckles, and dammit, the deep rumble of his voice through the phone turns me on. But it can't. He's my friend.

"That's what I'm saying," he says.

"Why? Are you injured?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I am."

I roll my eyes. "You know what I mean."

He sighs. "It's a long story. One I'd rather not discuss tonight."

"Oh. I get it. But I do have one more question."

He swallows, and I imagine what he might be drinking. Since he's still healing, it's probably water.

"What is it?"

I take a deep breath. "Does it work? I mean, is something wrong with it? Is that why you haven't used it?"

He laughs loud. "Jesus, woman. I didn't say I didn't use it. No, nothing's wrong with it."

"Yes, you said you haven't had sex...Oh." Realization hits me. "You haven't used it with another person."

"Bingo. But Julia, now you have to tell me something. Why are you thinking about my cock?"

I squirm as the deep timber of his voice turns me on. I've never heard him talk like that. "Uh..."

"Shit. Sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

I need to say something, but my body is on fire, and I want him to keep talking.

"Look, just pretend I didn't say that. Have fun this weekend. I'll talk to

you Monday.”

He ends the call before I can say anything more. I stare at my phone as I wonder if that really just happened. He may have said to pretend it didn't happen, but I don't want him feeling bad.

I mean, a woman would love to be talked to like that. I know I would. Not that Dan doesn't ever say anything dirty. I lean back on the couch, remembering his attempt. Two months ago, he tried, and I cringed.

Would I be more interested in Dan if I weren't so hung up on Fox? It's something I've asked myself many times in the last few weeks. I haven't been intimate with Dan since Fox almost died. I can't and that's what has led to me questioning everything. But it's something I need to figure out because I need to be honest with Dan this weekend when we are having our so-called “relaxing yet packed” weekend.

For now, I want to make sure Fox doesn't feel bad. He shouldn't.

*Me: Don't feel bad for talking like that. Any woman would be so lucky to have such a sexy man talk dirty to her.*

I send it, then reread what I sent. Wait. Did I just call him sexy? For a twenty-six-year-old woman, you would think I could handle talking to men.

*Fox: Did you just call me sexy?*

I want to say yes. But no, this is my friend. And I have a boyfriend. As if the universe is worried I'll forget, Dan calls. I don't answer, but he follows with a text.

*Dan: Goodnight. sweetheart. Looking forward to the weekend.*

I toss my phone aside, ignoring both men. Dan is really looking forward to this weekend and I don't want to ruin that for him. But I need to be honest with Dan. He's a great guy. Just not the guy for me.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Fox

“CAN YOU SIT STILL FOR A MINUTE?” Rover asks.

It’s Sunday, and I’m pacing on the back deck of MTS. “What does it matter if I’m still?”

“It’s distracting. I’m trying to spot Trax.”

CT called an impromptu paintball game, so we don’t have as large of a group as we usually do. And I was sidelined before I ever got in the game. The guys were worried I’d take a paintball hit to my stomach and reopen my stab wound. I didn’t argue. The truth is, I’m not up for running around or climbing trees yet.

“Besides, you’re supposed to keep score,” Rover adds.

I stare at him. “You’re the only one out. Not hard to keep track.”

Rover turns to me. “Hey, just because you’re grumpy doesn’t mean you get to be rude. I’m sorry you couldn’t play.”

He’s right. I’m in a foul mood. But it isn’t because I’m not playing. No, it’s because Julia is with Dan for some sort of romantic getaway this weekend. I’m also certain he’s proposing to her, too. Part of me wonders if I should have pushed it harder on the phone the other night.

No, we’re friends. That wouldn’t have been right. I sit on the stairs and run my hands through my hair.

“Dammit!” Peaches shouts as he stomps out of the woods. “CT took me out.” He takes off his coveralls and deposits them into the dirty bin we keep

for these games. He sits beside me and checks his phone.

“Any idea when Cara is coming back?” I ask.

Peaches is dating Cara Harding, a badass CIA agent we often work with. He and I used to commiserate together back before he finally got the nerve to ask her out. Actually, both of us were miserable motherfuckers back then. Now it’s just me.

“Hopefully tomorrow.” He sets down his phone and turns to me. “Want to go out for a drink after this?”

He’s aware of my feelings for Julia and of Dan’s impending engagement, which has probably already happened.

“Nah. I’m just going to head home.”

“You sure? If you don’t want to drink, I can stop by and bring some games.”

I laugh. “You mean a deck of cards?” That’s what he brought the last time he said he was bringing games. I’ll hand it to him; he knows about fifty different card games, but it’s the last thing I want to do. “No. I appreciate it, but I suspect she’ll call me with the news soon, and it’s probably better I’m alone.”

“What news?” Rover asks.

Damn, I forgot he was sitting there. Rover’s a cool guy, but when he gets a hold of a subject, he doesn’t let it go.

“He thinks McNamara is getting engaged this weekend,” Peaches says.

Rover sits next to me. “What? You don’t mean to that douchebag, do you?”

I nod.

“Shit, Fox. I’m sorry. That really sucks.”

I nod again because this isn’t the conversation I want to be having right now.

“Well, maybe she’ll say no,” Rover says.

“No!” CT yells. He walks out of the woods, shaking his head, and Trax follows, grinning.

“I don’t know why you guys keep trying. You can’t beat me,” Trax says.

Rover stands up and stretches. “Maybe not, but Sarina can. I think I’ll call her.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Trax says.

Maverick brought his girlfriend, Sarina, here after they started dating, and, much to our surprise, she beat Trax. He will never live that shit down.



Rover holds his phone to his ear. “Hey, Sarina, can you stop by and—” Trax lunges for Rover, but Rover dodges and runs into the woods. Trax follows.

“Should we intervene?” I ask.

CT shakes his head. “Whatever happens to Rover, he deserves it.”

Rover squeals as he runs out of the woods with Trax on his heels.

“Cheeto!” Rover calls.

And wouldn’t you know it? That damn peacock swoops in and lands on the ground. Rover grabs something out of his pocket and tosses it behind him. The bird lunges for it, and since it’s in Trax’s path, he trips and goes down.

Rover laughs as he runs inside. We all turn our attention to what Rover threw down.

“Is that a baggie of Cheetos?” Trax asks as he stands up.

I step closer to it. “It is. Rover tossed one on the ground the other day, but I figured he just had a snack in his pocket. But why the hell would it still be in his pants?”

CT tries but fails to stifle his laughter, and we turn to him. He holds up his hands. “Okay, but don’t be mad.”

Never good words to start with.

“Rover has been hiding Cheetos on Fox’s car tires for months.”

“That’s why that bird keeps attacking Fox?” Trax asks.

I stare at the scene before me in disbelief. “Why? I had to give those up because of this.” I point at the bird.

“He thought it was funny.” CT shrugs.

Funny? Well, we’ll see if he finds what I do funny. What will I do? I have no idea. But I’ll come up with something good. Once I’m healed.

A song about peaches plays.

All eyes move to Peaches. He grabs his phone off the deck. “Son of a bitch!” He stares at all of us. “Why won’t this end? Please stop.”

He storms inside. I stare at the other guys, and no one gives any indication they are behind changing his ringtone. They never do. Whoever is pulling this off is a genius, though. It’s been a couple of years, and it only happens when he’s not on assignment and usually in the office. Who knew he’d be in the office on a random Sunday?

After the guys clean up, we all walk to our cars. Yes, they insisted I wait for them in case Doogan was around. Fortunately, they don’t follow me home. Once I’m inside, I chance looking at my phone. I’d been avoiding it

until I was alone because I was not sure how I would react to Julia's news.

But when I check my cell, there are no missed messages or calls. Huh. Maybe she wants to tell me in person.

My mind goes back to our last conversation, where I admitted I hadn't had sex in two years. Maybe this will get me over my issues. After I met Julia, I couldn't imagine being with any other woman. I mean, who could compare? Julia is sexy as fuck with her long, dark hair and big, brown eyes. When she's not on the job, she wears these jeans that are molded to her curvaceous body, and the icing on the cake is watching her at the gun range. The more I got to know her, the more I knew she was perfect for me.

But I must have been wrong because she's with Dan. Shortly after she introduced me to her boyfriend, Dan, Trax took me to a bar. To say I was down would be an understatement. Trax thought hooking up with a woman would help.

There was a woman there who made it very clear what she wanted. I wanted to want it, too, but when her hand moved to my leg as we were talking, well, let's just say Willy crawled into the building. She was the opposite of Julia in every way. Maybe I just need more time.

After several hours of playing video games to take my mind off Julia, I check the time and am surprised it's after ten. She hasn't called or texted.

Wait, what if something happened to her? I send a message to Coff asking if he has eyes on her.

Coff: *Yes, she's at her apartment.*

Me: *Is Dan there?*

Why do I do this to myself? I couldn't stop myself from asking.

Coff: *No. She's alone.*

What? She's alone? And hasn't texted? Something feels off, so I message her.

Me: *Hey, back from your romantic getaway?*

Julia: *Yes. But it wasn't romantic. Picture a sweaty room full of thirty people doing yoga for hours on end in tight, skimpy clothes.*

I picture it, and of course, Julia is front and center. It's not romantic. It's hot. Damn, maybe I misunderstood what she went to.

Me: *Was it a sex thing?*

Julia: *LOL. Definitely not. Picture all those people are over sixty.*

I frown.

Me: *Are you being serious?*

Julia: *Yes. And you should thank me for not telling you about the two-hour class we had on bowel movements.*

What the fuck, Dan? Although I shouldn't be mad at him. The little bit Julia has told me is that he's a health nut. But not in a good way, obviously. Well, if that's what this weekend was, maybe he didn't propose.

At least, I hope he didn't because if he did at a place like that? Ah, Julia deserves so much more.

Julia: *I can tell you more tomorrow. I need sleep.*

I cringe. The idea of what she was doing with Dan keeping her up is not the image I wanted.

Julia: *Did you know it's a thing to howl at the moon every hour on the hour after midnight?*

I laugh. I shouldn't, but on a few occasions, Julia has said she's a light sleeper, so I doubt she'd be able to sleep through anything like that. Dan, I'm guessing, slept like a log.

Me: *I did not. Glad you made it back. Goodnight.*

I toss the phone onto the couch and stare at my ceiling. Maybe if Dan keeps taking her to things like that, their relationship will run its course. Because if she is ever single again, I'm not going to miss my chance.

## CHAPTER NINE

Julia

“GOOD NEWS!” the chief says as he walks out of his office and stares at me. “Doogan has been arrested in Portland.”

“Yes!” I shout. “Is he being extradited?”

The chief leans on my desk. “That’s being worked out. There are charges against him down there, so they might try him on that first. I’ll keep you apprised.”

I sigh in relief. “Does this mean I can resume assignments?” Please say yes. I’ve been stuck here for nearly a month, and I’m going stir-crazy.

He chuckles. “It does. And the timing is great because something came up involving MTS as well.”

I smile. My favorite assignments are working with the guys at MTS. It doesn’t happen too often, but when it does, it’s better than what happens in this town. Don’t get me wrong, investigating who has been stealing all the footballs from Havenwood University was an interesting case but going undercover with the MTS guys is much more fun.

“You will need to go to MTS. Stormy is pulling together a team meeting at ten tomorrow morning to go over all the details.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, until then, you’re free to go.”

I glance outside at the sun. We don’t get a lot of nice sunny days here, so getting a day to enjoy it is amazing. “Thank you!” I say as I grab my stuff

and run out the door before he can change his mind.

As soon as I get to my house, I change and head right back out for a hike. For a moment, I wonder if I should ask Fox to come along. Actually, he might still be healing from his stab wound. I should know, but I've kind of been avoiding him. We've texted a few times, but that's it.

It's been a month since the debacle with Dan at the retreat, and if I see Fox, he'll ask me more about it. How do I know? Because the few times we've texted, he always asks about that weekend. It's like he knows something happened.

I finally told him I didn't want to think about that weekend anymore. But I know Fox. The next time I see him, he'll ask about Dan. He always asks how things are going. And for some reason, I'm not ready to tell him that I ended things. I only wish I hadn't put it off until we were on the retreat. But I can't change what happened now.

Deep down, I'm scared Fox won't react to the news the way I really want him to. Hell, the way my luck goes, he'll probably tell me all about his amazing new girlfriend.

But I can't keep putting him off. Tomorrow I'm going to MTS. He's back this week on desk duty, so even though he likely won't be a part of the assignment tomorrow, he'll be there, and he'll want to talk.

All of this runs through my mind as I hike up the mountain. At the top, I sit and stare at the lake, thinking about where my life is going and where I want it to go.

I should be happy. Considering my mom and I had nothing when I was growing up, and now here I am, a detective—a damn good one—with my own house and no worries about bills.

My mind goes to my mom. I haven't heard from her in two months. That's the typical cycle. She meets a man, lives with him inside of a week, and I don't hear from her for months. Then the man cheats on her, and she kicks him out of her place. I should be thankful that her parents left her their house. Otherwise, she'd likely be homeless.

I blow out a breath. She's not my problem. That was the line a therapist told me to repeat over and over again. Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't.

By the time I make it back to my car, there's a breeze. I check the forecast, and sure enough, rain is coming in tonight. Only in the Pacific Northwest can you expect rain in July. I actually don't mind rain this time of

year as we usually need it.

I climb into my car and guzzle down the extra water bottle I brought. My phone buzzes as messages come in. One of the reasons I love this particular hike is because once you step away from the parking lot, there is no cell service. You are alone with your thoughts.

Before I pull out, I check my messages. My mother has left three—the first telling me she tossed the asshole out, the second asking if I could come over for dinner, and the third, when I didn't return her calls in five minutes, yelling at me for ignoring her.

It's the same every time. Since I'm sure she's drinking now, I'll call her in the morning and check up on her.

There's a text from Fox. A joke that makes me laugh. I shoot him a text that I'll see him tomorrow.

There's one more message I wasn't expecting.

"Julia! It's Loraine. Oh my gosh, it's been so long! I'm in town for a couple of weeks and would love to get together!"

I blink in shock. Loraine was my best friend in high school, but she moved away for college, and I haven't heard from her in years. She came back to town five years ago, and we hung out twice. But that's it.

For two weeks. And my assignment likely starts tomorrow. Maybe I should see if she wants to grab drinks tonight. I call her back and arrange to meet her in an hour. Then I rush home, shower, and get ready.

By the time I walk into the restaurant, I'm starving.

"Julia!" Loraine yells from a table near the back. She meets me halfway with a hug. "Oh my gosh, you haven't changed. You're still gorgeous!" she says.

I take her in. "You have changed. Wow."

Her once-brown hair is now a honey blond, and her once-flat chest is anything but. She pushes her breasts together, and they nearly pop out of her tight tank top.

"Yeah, I got these, lightened my hair, and now I use Botox. I love how it removes the fine lines."

She's right. She doesn't have any fine lines, but now that I notice, her smile isn't reaching her eyes, either.

"You should consider it. It will take that away for you," she says as she touches between my eyebrows.

It's true I have a slight crease, but it isn't bad. Certainly, nothing I've

worried about.

We sit down, and menus are already at the table.

“What are you doing back in town?” I ask her.

She rolls her eyes. “My cousin is getting married, and I’m a bridesmaid. The wedding is in two weeks, but I came back early so I could see everyone, and of course, I couldn’t miss Seafair weekend!”

Seafair is an annual event in Seattle where people gather to watch hydroplane races and the Blue Angels fly overhead. In high school, I went to it every year with Lorraine because her cousin had a boat, and it was fun.

“Want to come out with me again this year?” she asks.

The waiter interrupts us and takes our orders.

“I wish I could, but I’m starting a new assignment tomorrow, and I’m not sure how long it will last.”

She frowns. “You can’t work twenty-four seven. Take a few hours off and get some sun.”

I can’t tell her the nature of the work I do with MTS. But she knows I’m a detective, so I can tell her enough so that she understands. I hope. Because I had forgotten how persistent Lorraine can be.

“I have to go undercover, so it will be twenty-four-seven, actually.”

She pouts. “Tonight is all we have?”

I nod. “Sorry. But I’m happy to at least get to see you while you’re here. Maybe my assignment will end early and I can see you before you head back.”

“I hope so.”

Two glasses of wine are brought out.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I ordered us each a glass.”

“Thank you.” I stare at it. It wouldn’t be my first choice. Or my second or third. I’ve always had beer around Lorraine.

Which reminds me of Dan. He would order what he liked and assumed I liked it. Maybe I should introduce her to Dan now that we are done.

I sigh, thinking about what happened.

“Hey, what’s going on?” she asks. “That was a heavy sigh.”

I take a gulp of the wine for fortitude and have to fight not to gag. Damn, this stuff is disgusting. “I was seeing this guy. He invited me to a retreat in the San Juans, where I hoped to relax. But it was one of those healthy, fill-every-minute-with-fitness or learning-about-food types of things.” Yeah, I went to the retreat because I knew if I broke it off with him before he

wouldn't go. And I already felt guilty enough for what I was going to do.

"Oh! I've been to those. Love them!"

I blink a few times. The more I think about it, the more she does seem perfect for him.

"Well, I don't. Anyway, the only free time we had was Saturday night. We went out to dinner and afterward walked on the beach."

Our food arrives. Loraine digs in before she turns her eyes back to me. "Go on."

"The entire time we were there, I was trying to figure out how to end things. He's a nice guy, but we don't have enough in common."

She scrunches her nose. "I hope you didn't do it there."

"Why do you say that?"

She shrugs. "It would suck if he left you there. That's a long drive."

I pick up my fork and move my food around my plate. "I was staring out at the ocean, building up courage. I'd planned to tell him Sunday but this was literally the only moment we had alone together. Then I spun around to him and said, 'I think we should break up.'" The memory of it all causes me to feel queasy.

"What happened?"

I close my eyes. "I said the words as I was turning toward him, so they were out of my mouth before I saw what he was doing."

She drops her fork and leans closer. "Was he masturbating?"

I shake my head. "What? Why would he be doing that?"

Her eyes widen. "I don't know. It felt like you were building up to something big."

"I am, but not that."

She leans back. "Okay, sorry to interrupt. Continue."

I take another gulp of my wine, almost gag again, and wonder why I did that. "When I turned around, he was down on one knee, holding up a ring box. He was about to propose."

"Oh, shit!" Her hand goes to her mouth.

"Yeah, oh shit."

I shove a forkful of food into my mouth. I can barely taste it as the guilt I felt in that moment consumes me again. Dan really is a sweet man, and I had no idea he felt that strongly for me.

"What did he do next?"

"He stood up and put the box in his pocket. He went from sad to angry



and accused me of using him.”

She cocks her head. “Using him for what?”

“To go to the retreat, I guess. He kept saying I should have said something before this weekend. But the thing is, if I had, he wouldn’t have gone and would have blamed me for missing out. I already felt guilty and didn’t want to add to it.”

Loraine finishes chewing and puts her hand on mine. “I’m sorry, but it sounds like you’re better off without him.”

I nod. “You’re right, but I feel bad. He really is a nice guy. Actually, you might like him.”

She laughs. “I’ll keep that in mind, but I’m afraid I have no time for dating on this vacation.”

We eat in silence for a few minutes. Then Loraine leans back and stares at me.

“What?” I ask.

“This might be a sore subject, but how’s your mom doing?”

Loraine knows my situation better than anyone. When my mom would be in one of her moods, it was my friend’s house I went to. She also had the unfortunate experience of meeting some of my mom’s boyfriends.

“Same. Nothing’s changed.”

“How long has it been since you’ve heard from her this time?”

I finish my wine and find I don’t gag, which is a pleasant surprise. “She left me a few messages earlier today, but I haven’t spoken with her in two months.”

The waiter brings the check, and she grabs it.

“This one is on me. It sounds like you have enough shit going on right now.”

I laugh. “Thanks. I didn’t mean to vent to earn a pity dinner.”

“Oh, it’s not that. Tell you what, next time, it’s your treat.”

“Deal.”

By the time I get home, I’m smiling for the first time in a long while. It felt good to finally tell someone what happened with Dan.

After I get ready for bed, I check my phone. There’s a text from Fox.

Fox: *Looks like we’ll be working together again. Guess you can’t avoid me any longer.*

I smile. I didn’t want to avoid him, but it’s not only my fear of how he’ll react to the news that’s kept me away. The conversation we had before I left

for the retreat plays over and over again in my head. And it has only made my crush on Fox grow. I'm afraid when I see him that it's going to be obvious. Or I'll be so awkward that he'll confront me about why.

I may be a detective, and I'm damn good at my job, but when it comes to personal matters, I don't hide my feelings very well. Hopefully, whatever this assignment is, it will keep me distracted enough so I don't embarrass myself by staring at him the entire time.

## CHAPTER TEN

Fox

I'M ABOUT to see Julia for the first time since her getaway with Dan. Even if he didn't propose that weekend, I'm certain he has by now.

She's been avoiding me for nearly a month. Or rather, she's probably in honeymoon bliss with Dan and I'm the furthest thing from her mind. Either way, I haven't seen her in a long time, and I'm trying to prepare myself mentally for seeing another man's ring on her finger.

So far, I'm not doing too well. I was supposed to finish a report before the meeting this morning, and I can't concentrate. I go to the kitchen for coffee, despite the fact I'm so amped up that I really don't need to add to it.

"Hey, how are you doing?" Peaches asks from the kitchen table.

I jump. I never startle so that right there puts me in a worse mood.

"Ah, not well, I see," Peaches says.

"No," I grumble as I head for the coffeepot.

Someone left maybe one ounce in the pot. I turn toward Peaches and stare at his steaming mug.

"Did you really just leave this empty?"

He frowns. "It's not empty."

I grab a mug and pour the few drops in while he's watching. "Yeah, that's pretty fucking empty."

His eyes widen. "Wow, okay. I'll make more right now." He gets up and goes to the coffee maker.

I sit in a chair, my knee bouncing almost uncontrollably.

“What the hell is going on?” Peaches asks. “I can’t say I’ve ever seen you this off your game.” He spins to face me after hitting brew on the coffee maker.

“I haven’t seen Julia since her romantic retreat. She’s likely engaged, and when she walks in wearing that ring, I have to act normal.”

He crosses his arms and leans against the counter. “Do you?”

My knee stops bouncing. “What do you mean?”

He shrugs. “Well, let’s say she is engaged. She isn’t married yet. And the way I see it is that you have one chance to tell her how you feel finally.”

I stand up. “What are you talking about? I’m not hitting on another man’s woman. Besides, if she’s in love with him, all that will accomplish is blowing up our friendship.”

Peaches grabs the mug I used and dumps out the old coffee, then pours me a new cup. He sets it on the table before he sits down. I sit back down as well.

“If she marries this guy, do you really think you can continue to be friends?”

I hadn’t thought about that. I figured we’d always be friends.

“Because I don’t think you can. You’re miserable. You’ve been miserable. Hell, your misery almost got you killed in an alley.”

He’s right. Ever since Dan said he was going to propose, I’ve been a wreck.

“If you let her marry him and never say anything, you’ll always wonder what if. Take the risk. You have nothing to lose.”

I lean back, thinking over his words. “I do have something to lose. We work together. How could we do that if I make things awkward?”

He grins. “Really? That’s the best you have? If it’s awkward, one of us will be the point person with her. The only reason you are is because you keep volunteering for it, and we all know not to get in your way.”

“Julia!” Stormy says from down the hall.

“Guess she’s here.” Peaches stands up and leaves the room.

Should I go to my office to see if she stops in? Or remain here? Why the hell am I questioning myself? I need to get my head on straight.

I stand and turn and bump right into her. Her hands go to my chest to steady herself, and I grab her waist.

“Oh, sorry,” I say.

Her eyes meet mine, and my heart begins to pound harder. I squeeze her waist as I force myself to step away, despite the fact that I only want to pull her closer.

“Hey, long time no see,” she says.

Even though it’s the last thing I want to see, my eyes go to her left hand. But there’s no ring. Maybe it’s too big to wear to work. Yeah, Dan strikes me as the type of showy guy who would buy some gaudy jewelry for her.

“How have you been?” I ask, giving her an opening to tell me.

“I have news,” she says.

I grab my coffee from the table and take a sip, hoping it will hide my reaction.

“I broke it off with Dan.”

I choke on the coffee and go into a coughing fit. She slaps me on the back.

“Fox? Are you all right?”

I nod, then set the cup back down. After several deep breaths, I turn to her. “What did you say?”

Her eyes take me in, concerned as I’m holding my stomach. Coughing while trying to heal from a knife to the stomach is not recommended. Even though I’m basically fully healed at this point, it still hurts.

“I said I broke up with Dan. How is your wound? Was it worse than you let on?” Her eyes meet mine, and she genuinely is concerned.

“I’m fine. I’m just a bit shocked about Dan. I thought you two were pretty serious.”

She sighs. “He thought so, unfortunately. But no, he wasn’t the one for me.”

Tell her! Tell her! I’m yelling to myself. “Julia, I didn’t think he was right for you, either.”

Her head tilts as she frowns. “You didn’t?”

I shake my head.

“Why?”

Here’s my chance. Just say it! “Because I—”

“Fox! McNamara! It’s time. In my office,” Stormy calls out to us from down the hall.

I open my mouth, but instead of professing my love, I say. “We better go.” I take several calming breaths as we walk down the hall together. I almost told her. And frankly, I can’t believe it because we were in the kitchen

at my office. No, I need to find a way to tell her somewhere private.

We are the last to enter Stormy's office, and I'm surprised when I see Phantom and Bubba sitting there.

"Hey! Working together again?" I ask as I sit next to Phantom.

"Indeed, we are," Ace says as he enters the room and sits next to Stormy.

I have no idea what this assignment is about, but if these guys are here, I know it's dangerous. So, I'm confused about why McNamara is here, too. Usually, we work with her on local threats or high-profile security for celebrities or politicians.

Stormy clears his throat. "All right. The FBI intercepted some communications that indicate a group might attempt to bring a bomb into the Seafair activities this coming weekend."

Seafair activities? "What activities? You mean the park or log boom?"

The log boom is where a lot of boaters tie up to watch the hydroplane races and drink all day. I went one year and decided it wasn't my sort of event. The entire time, instead of relaxing and watching the races, I was too busy worrying about the guys on the boat next to me. They were extremely intoxicated and not wearing life jackets. Fortunately, none fell into the water.

"Yes, the log boom is where the concern lies. But there are also some family activities that take place around Seattle, and Agent Carter says they are monitoring those sites to make sure they aren't targeted."

"Who is the group?" Phantom asks.

Stormy sighs. "Agent Carter was supposed to be here to fill you all in, but he got stuck in traffic." Stormy checks his phone. "I'll let him give you those details when he shows up."

"Why would this log boom be the target?" Ace asks. "Why not a baseball game or something more crowded?"

"Guess you haven't been to a Mariners' game," Peaches says. "It probably isn't as crowded as you think."

Ace frowns.

"Don't you dare say anything negative about the Mariners," Julia says. "Besides, Ace has a point. Their games are crowded." She arches a brow at Peaches to challenge her.

Cara clears her throat to cut them off. "You're right that there will be fewer people at the barge than a stadium, but based on the intercepted communications, the target is the Blue Angels."

"Fighter pilots?" Julia asks. "That doesn't seem like an easy target."

“It wouldn’t be,” Bubba crosses his arms. “Can you trust these communications? It sounds like they might know you’re listening and are sending through bullshit.”

Cara glances at Stormy.

“Yes, that is very possible. That’s why we have so many of you for this assignment. We need one team to have eyes on the log boom, and another team will have eyes on the Blue Angels’ planes before their performance.” Stormy opens a folder in front of him. “We were able to rent a space on the log boom.”

“Wow, how?” Julia asks. “Those sell out well in advance.”

Stormy leans back. “Because of the security issues, we’re working with the Director of Operations at Seafair. He was able to secure the spot for us. He is also the man Ace and Phantom will be working with. You two will be on Team Blue Angels. The rest of you will be on Team Log Boom.”

“Why aren’t they canceling the event?” Harding asks. “This sounds too risky.”

“Sorry, I’m late,” Agent Carter says as he enters the room. “And to answer your question, Harding, I pushed for them to at least cancel the air show part of the event, but the organizers and my boss decided it would be best to move forward with the show and have men—” he glances around —“and women on the ground.”

“Best? How so?” Harding asks.

Carter sets his briefcase on the table. “I was told we won’t cower to threats. But I suspect the real reason has to do with money.”

He opens the briefcase and grabs something from inside. “This event generates a lot of revenue.”

Stormy clasps his hands. “Well, I’m glad you’re here. We’re ready to hear about this terrorist group.”

Carter’s holding a large envelope he grabbed from his briefcase. He opens it, pulls out several glossy photos of men, and tosses them across the table. “The group is based out of Algeria. So far, we haven’t been able to connect them to any of the other terrorist cells, but we’re certain they are connected in some way.”

We pass the photos around, trying to memorize the men’s faces.

“What we do know is that they express a strong hatred of the United States. The attack planned at Seafair is one of three they are planning in the coming month,” Carter says.

“Where are the other two?” I ask.

“San Francisco and Virginia.”

I frown, but Carter doesn't say anything further about those two locations.

“You're confident about your intel?” Harding asks.

“I am,” Carter says.

Stormy and Carter spend the next hour detailing the assignment. Five of us will be on a boat pretending to be there for the fun, while Ace and Phantom will be with the Blue Angels' jets from the moment they arrive in Seattle, which is later this afternoon.

“Team Log Boom, you have the rest of today and tomorrow to get the boat ready. Then you will go to the log boom Friday morning before everyone else arrives. The director has someone who will give you all a tour of the area on Thursday evening.”

A tour? From what I remember, there is a park and some logs in the water. But that was years ago. Maybe things have changed.

“And this part you might not like,” Carter says. “We don't know when the attack is scheduled to take place, so you will need to stay with the log boom the entire weekend.”

Bubba nods. “You mean sleep with the boat? That won't be a problem.”

Carter nods. “Good. That's why we have five of you so you can take shifts sleeping.”

They haven't mentioned the size of the boat, and I'm hoping it isn't a small ski boat.

“How big is this boat?” Peaches asks.

“Twenty-seven feet. It has a toilet, places for a few of you to sleep in the cabin, and it even has a grill,” Carter says.

I relax a little. At least we won't all be on top of each other. My eyes go to Julia. I'll be on a boat with her. For three days. But wait, I still don't understand why a detective is involved in a mission like this. I'll ask Stormy once the meeting is over. The last thing I want to do is embarrass Julia if she thinks I'm questioning her abilities.

“Okay, I need to get back to Seattle for a meeting. If you have any questions, Stormy knows how to get a hold of me.”

He grabs his briefcase but leaves the photos for us. We sit silently until we hear the front door close.

“This is bullshit,” Harding says.

I'm surprised but shouldn't be. Harding is not one to hold back her



thoughts if something is wrong.

“What’s bullshit?” Stormy asks.

“Does Carter really think we should sit on a boat in the middle of all of this and wait for the terrorists to come to us? Like they will.” She shakes her head.

She’s right. Carter’s plan is shit.

Stormy’s lips curl up, but he forces them down. “How would you propose we handle this?”

Harding stands up. “First, we need to tour the area. Then I’ll tell you our plan.”

Stormy nods. “All right. I’ll move up that area tour to this afternoon. Afterward, Harding, give me a call so we can discuss your thoughts.”

I lean back, smiling, because when Harding takes charge, things go right.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Julia

AS WE HEAD to the log boom location, I have to hide my grin. This isn't a typical assignment for me. I'm excited to get out of Pine Valley and possibly into more action.

Not that I want there to be any bomb or anyone to get hurt. Of course not. But getting out of the office after being tied there for a month is wonderful, as is working with some of the Seattle Police Department.

Part of me wanted to ask Stormy why I was chosen for this assignment, but I didn't want to do anything that would give him second thoughts. I don't have expertise with bombs or terrorists.

I am very happy to be in the same boat, literally, as Harding. Any chance I get to work with her, I grab it. She's a badass and doesn't take shit from anyone. When she spoke up in that meeting this morning, I was screaming "yes" in my head. That plan was shit.

Now we're here, evaluating everything as we assess the situation and come up with a better plan. Or Harding is. That's what she told Stormy when he asked her what she wanted to do.

The Seattle detective leading us through the area decided we'd start with a water tour of the log boom first. As we pull near it, he turns to us. "This is the area where your boat will be docked."

It really is a log. Connected to another log. Then another.

He takes us closer to land and pulls up at a dock. We all get out of the

boat. “Over here is the area we are concerned with.” He points out all the areas where people will be.

“Are there any areas off limits?” Harding asks.

He shakes his head. “It would be hard to enforce. Unfortunately, this event brings with it a lot of alcohol and not always the best behavior.”

That’s my assessment from my experience with it years ago.

“I need to answer a call, but you can check out whatever you need to,” he says as he steps away.

A second boat is headed this way. Bubba, Fox, and Peaches are all on it with another Seattle police officer.

“McNamara,” Harding says, and I realize I was staring at Fox.

“Yes?”

“Do you know why you were chosen for this assignment?”

I shake my head.

She stares out toward the guys. “I had hoped Stormy would have told you by now.”

Her lack of eye contact and vagueness are causing me concern. But then she turns and looks me straight on. “I’m told you worked on a case involving Aden Hart.”

My stomach churns, hearing that name. He was responsible for the deaths of fourteen people in a nearby town. They called in reinforcements to help investigate, and I volunteered. “I did. He killed fourteen men and women in the town’s bakery.”

“I thought you’d remember him.”

I clench my fists, thinking about it. “He should be rotting in prison, but he was acquitted.” At his trial, the defense was able to show that one of the local detectives had planted evidence at Aden’s home. Once the defense was able to get that on the record, they led the jury to believe everything collected against Aden was planted. It wasn’t. And the jury let him go.

“Well, he’s back.”

I sigh. “Why wasn’t his photo included with the others this morning?”

“Because we don’t have proof he’s working with this group. But my gut feeling is that he is.”

My eyes move to the dock as the guys get out of the boat and walk toward us. Fox is wearing shorts. It’s not often I see his legs, but they are muscular, and it’s hard not to stare.

I turn to her to force myself to stop staring at Fox. “Why?”

“While monitoring this terrorist cell, he’s been spotted having lunch with one of its members. It could be a coincidence, but he flew back to Seattle three days ago, so I don’t think it is.”

I shiver at her words. Aden left town as soon as he was cleared, and I had hoped he’d never come back. “Aden Hart is back in town?”

She nods. “I believe so.”

If that’s true, why haven’t I heard about it? The detective I worked with on that case assured me if Aden returned to this area, he’d let me know. Maybe he isn’t aware.

“Hey, did you get close to the log boom?” Bubba asks as he walks up to us. “There’s a shit ton of space to attach a bomb that no one would see.”

The officer with them crosses his arms. “The bomb is supposed to be aimed at the jets. But just in case, we have a diver coming Friday morning to inspect every inch of the underside of the logs, docks, anywhere they can go.”

“Good. But you will need to monitor those areas throughout the weekend. If I were planting a bomb, I would dive under when everyone’s attention is on the races,” Bubba says.

Peaches shakes his head. “No, they only have to wait till Friday afternoon. This area will be packed with people, and most of them will be drinking. A person could move throughout this entire space unnoticed.”

“We can send down a diver again Friday afternoon,” the officer says.

“Nah. I’ll handle it,” Bubba says. He grabs his phone out of his pocket and steps away.

“Let’s check out this entire area,” Fox says as he begins to walk toward a building.

I follow him because something has been bothering me since this morning.

“Hey,” I say when I catch up to him.

“Hey.” He smiles.

“Before our meeting this morning, you were going to say something to me, but you got cut off. What was it?”

“Oh.” He coughs and glances around in every direction but mine. “There is something I want to talk to you about but not here. Maybe later?”

Now I’m curious. “You can’t do that.”

“Do what?”

We get to the building and discover it contains restrooms and a third door

that's locked.

"We need to get a key to check this out," he says.

"It's probably just supplies, but yeah, we should check out everything. Now, back to you. You can't get me all curious and then not tell me."

He slips off his sunglasses and turns to me. "You're all curious?"

I nod.

"Well, Miss Curious, you have to wait a while longer." He winks, and my stomach flips.

He's winked before, hasn't he? Then why am I getting all worked up about it now? Damn, my cheeks are warming up. Even though it's the beginning of August in Seattle, it's still early in the day and cool. I have no excuse for my visible reaction, so I turn away, hoping he doesn't notice.

Finally, he steps away from the building. "We should get back to the group."

We rejoin the group at the same time Bubba does.

"I spoke to my commander. He's going to request some local Navy officers handle surveillance under the water."

"That's great," Harding says. "I didn't think one scuba diver on Friday morning was sufficient."

"Well, I don't have the best news," Peaches says. "In addition to log boom, I'm told there will be a number of vendors set up on the grassy area over there." He points, and we all turn to look. "Which means there will be booths, trucks, and more. Plus, likely many deliveries each morning."

"At least it isn't right in the heart of the crowd," Harding says.

"It's off to the side, but trust me, around lunch, it's where the crowd will be."

"I don't understand how someone can justify going forward with this event rather than canceling it. They might think it's showing some kind of weakness, but the risk isn't worth it," I say.

"I agree, and I brought the issue to the deputy mayor last night, hoping he'd agree. He didn't," Harding says. "I got the same line that he could not succumb to terrorists' threats." She sighs. "The reality is he doesn't want to be the one who throws away all the money this event brings in. No one does."

"Well, that's a dick move," I say.

"It is. This is a really shitty situation," Harding says. "But we have to make the most of it. Are there any other areas of concern you guys found?"

Fox nods. "The restroom over there has a locked door. It's likely a supply

closet, but we need a key so we can check on it ourselves throughout the weekend.”

The detective who drove our boat here steps up. “I can get that for you.”

“Thank you,” Harding says.

He licks his lips. “There’s an area of deep concern I have, and that’s a parking garage a few blocks west. It has roof access to anyone who goes up the stairs. My concern is it has a direct view of where the Blue Angels will be flying. If they really are the target, that place needs to be monitored. That’s why there will be a number of my men stationed there.”

He’s right. But that can’t be the only parking garage. “How many other buildings have roof access and a direct line of sight to this event?” I ask.

“Only two within the range that was determined to be dangerous. None of the residences allow public access. That leaves two garages,” the detective says. “The second garage isn’t as close, but I’ll talk to my chief and make sure we have someone monitoring it as well.”

“Thank you, Detective. Would you mind giving us a minute?” Harding asks.

The detective frowns. “Sure. I need to talk to Douglas anyway.” He glances behind him at the officer walking over. “Douglas, come with me.” Then he turns back, and his eyes meet mine. He arches a brow, and I shrug.

He shakes his head and heads toward the bathrooms with Officer Douglas.

Harding steps closer to all of us. “All right. Now that we see the lay of the land, I’m convinced even more than before that all of us sitting and sunning ourselves on a boat is a bad idea.”

“Agreed,” Peaches says. “Do you have a better plan?”

Harding smiles. “Of course I do.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Fox

PART OF HARDING'S plan was for all of us to walk through the area at different times of the day yesterday to keep an eye on things. Although they did open the log boom to boaters yesterday, that was a practice day. And a great way for us to note all the vulnerable areas. Now that it's Friday, the real crowd will show up later this morning.

Harding and Peaches took the morning shift yesterday and walked all around. They bragged that they got fifteen thousand steps. Julia and I took the afternoon shift and, of course, had to outdo them. We clocked in just over twenty thousand steps. Bubba took the evening shift, and I doubt that man got much sleep because he sent us a photo showing he got twenty-five thousand steps. Now I'm concerned he might be groggy today due to our little competition.

Speaking of groggy, it's four in the morning, and we are all on our way to where our boat is docked. Bubba picked it up yesterday afternoon, and the mayor offered his personal dock at his home to keep the boat overnight. It's convenient. It's on the same lake as all the Seafair activities.

And as the mayor rubs his eyes when he answers the door, I'm guessing this wasn't his first choice.

"Well, you must be the team here for the boat. It's around back. I've unlocked the gate for you."

"Thank you," Bubba says.

The mayor nods. “I hope you find those bastards. If they disrupt the show, there will be a lot of pissed-off people.”

I glance at Peaches, who is frowning.

“Disrupt?” I ask. “Was the full situation explained to you?”

“Probably not. I don’t usually get all the details of these situations. I trust the Seattle PD to do what it needs to.” He goes to close the door, and I block him.

“Sir, we were led to believe you did understand, and it was your decision not to cancel this event,” Fox says.

The man crosses his arms. “They did ask if I would consider canceling, and I said hell no. This is Seattle’s biggest weekend. I’m not going to cancel it for some lame threat. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go back to bed. Goodnight.”

He closes the door as I stand there in shock. “Is he that clueless, or does he not give a damn?”

Peaches slaps my shoulder. “My money is on him not giving a damn.”

We walk around the house and out onto his dock. My mind drifts back to yesterday, strolling around the area with Julia. She asked about what I was going to say the morning before the meeting, and I made some shit up about wondering if we could hang out more now, like we used to. At least that got me a big smile. I do plan to tell her how I feel, but the day before a big assignment seemed like bad timing.

While Harding’s plan involves us not being on the boat the entire time, we all agreed to pick it up and head there together.

We all climb on board, and I’m pleasantly surprised. Despite Carter’s assurance, I really expected a smaller boat. If I had to guess, I’d say this is thirty feet, and there is plenty of deck space. I follow Julia into the cabin, where she turns on a light. There is space for a few of us to sleep at a time, although I don’t expect we’ll get a chance to do that. She turns around to head back, not realizing how close I am, and runs right into me. I grab her waist to steady her.

She looks up. “Sorry.” Her hands are on my chest, and she turns her attention to them as she presses one hand into me a little.

“What’s going on?” I grin.

Her cheeks flush. “Oh, I uh...” she swallows. “Sorry, it’s just I never realized how muscular you are.”

I don’t let up my grip or step away. I’m enjoying this moment too much.



If she finds me muscular after I was essentially on bed rest for the last couple of months, then I can't wait for her to see me when I get back to lifting. "It's not often you touch me, so it makes sense you wouldn't know. But don't worry, you will by the end of today."

Her mouth opens a little. "What?"

I chuckle. "It's going to be in the upper eighties, and in order to fit in, I might have to take off my shirt." I don't know why I said that. The truth is, I won't be removing it since it masks the gun I'm carrying. Plus, my scar is still bright red, so showing it wouldn't help me blend in at all.

Her eyes move down my body, and I want to know what she's thinking.

"We should go back up," she says.

Maybe she's wondering why her friend is talking to her like this. Because that's what I am. Her friend. And she just got out of a relationship. Damn, maybe I shouldn't say anything. These are the thoughts warring in my brain. I release her, turn, and walk back up on deck.

"Everyone ready?" Peaches asks.

I take a seat as Julia moves forward and sits next to Harding. I sigh, disappointed. I need to get my mind focused on this assignment and not on every movement Julia makes. But one advantage is I can finally take in what she's wearing without looking like a creep. To everyone else, I'm simply staring ahead.

She's wearing a jacket over white shorts and a pink T-shirt. Her hair is pulled back into a ponytail, and my eyes travel back down her legs to see she chose running shoes. Her body is amazing, and I force myself to look away before I get hard with the inappropriate thoughts I'm having.

Peaches drives slowly to avoid unwanted attention. He drops Julia and me off on the main dock. He continues on to the other end of the park, where he and Harding will get out. Then Bubba will take the boat to the log boom.

Harding's plan has us separated, but we agreed we need to be. There is too much ground to watch, and there will be too many people to keep ourselves in the middle. While the Seattle Police Department will have officers there, most of them will be in uniform, so we need to watch the areas where they aren't.

Ace and Phantom still have their eyes on the Blue Angels. There will be three performances this weekend, each day around three in the afternoon. That is when we believe an attack will be made.

We are here hours before the crowd will show up, but this is when the

vendors begin to arrive. As they do, we keep our eyes on them, looking for anything suspicious. Throughout the morning, more and more people file into the park. Spectators set up chairs and blankets to claim space on the grassy lawn.

We walk to each of the areas we noted yesterday and find nothing suspicious. So, we do it again. As we stroll, I grow even more curious about Julia's role here. I bump her shoulder with my arm as we move.

"I'm curious about something, but I'm not sure how to ask without sounding like an asshole."

She laughs. "Well, that's a great lead-in. Go ahead. I'll let you know if you're being an asshole."

I stop walking and shove my hands into my pockets. My eyes continue to scan the crowd. "We've worked together on assignments before but never anything like this. I'm curious why you were assigned to this one."

She crosses her arms and narrows her eyes. "Think it's too much for me?"

I look into her eyes to make sure she really hears this. "No, I think you could handle just about anything."

She blinks in surprise. "Oh."

"But I'm curious why you were brought in on this one. It's outside of Pine Valley, and..." I pull my hand from my pocket and scratch my head. "I guess I don't like you being close to bombs." I lean in and whisper the last word.

"Thank you for your concern, but there is a reason I'm here. Other than the fact I'm a badass detective."

That brings a smile to my lips. "You are pretty badass." I wink.

Her eyes widen. Shit, I'm flirting with her. Not something I normally do, but knowing she's single, it's like I can't help it.

She clears her throat. "There's a man I'm familiar with that Harding is concerned might show up. I'm here as an extra set of eyes for him."

I don't like the sound of this. "Do I want to know in what way you are familiar?"

She laughs. "Good Lord, Fox. You think I have an ex who would be on Harding's watch list?"

I shrug, but she's right. It wouldn't be an ex but someone from one of her investigations. Why the hell did I jump to it being an ex? Oh yeah, because the idea of her with any man now drives me crazy. Well, it always has, but

it's worse now. Fortunately, she doesn't notice my internal struggle.

"No, he was a defendant in multiple murders. Unfortunately, he was acquitted. He's a horrible human being."

"Multiple murders and he was acquitted? Either he's really careful, or he's connected."

She stares at the crowd. "Or a rookie was assigned to the case and fucked it up."

"Ouch."

She nods. "Yeah, and because of his mistake, a monster is roaming free. And possibly even planting bombs now."

"Well, this time, we won't let him get away," I say.

"No, we won't."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Julia

THE SMELL of something deep-fried wafts our way, and my stomach growls. We had an early lunch since we've been at it since literally before dawn.

"I'm hungry, too," he says. "Let's grab something. What looks good to you?" His eyes move to the food trucks behind me, but then his smile drops.

"What's going on?"

"Here, take my hand. I want to get closer to check this out, so let's be a couple casually walking along."

I take his hand, and he intertwines his fingers. While I need to be focused on whoever he is, I can't help but bask in all the feelings I'm having at his intimate handholding. He takes us by two men who are watching everyone around them.

They appear suspicious, and both are carrying backpacks. Well, most people here have backpacks, but their attention is on the water and not on random people walking by.

We move past them and stop by a tree. He gently presses me against the tree and grins.

Oh my, is he going to kiss me? My heart rate speeds up, and I lick my lips as he leans down. He bypasses my lips, and his mouth goes to my ear.

"From here, we can hear them, but it needs to appear we are too into each other to care what they are doing. Can you pull that off?"

He pulls back and stares into my eyes. All I can do is nod. He grins as he

puts his hands on either side of me, essentially pinning me to the spot. He leans down, and his nose is on my neck.

“Let me know if this is too much,” he says.

Too much? Frankly, it’s not enough. I’m getting distracted. The two men are on my right. I turn my head so they are in my view but to anyone watching, I’m giving Fox access to my neck.

“How much longer?” one asks.

“Ten minutes,” the other says.

One of the men glances in our direction, and that’s when I find out exactly what he meant by if it gets too much.

Fox presses light kisses to my neck. My breathing picks up, and I strain to focus on the men with the backpacks. Fox’s hands are on my hips, and as he kisses his way down toward my shoulder, I let out a little moan. His grip on me tightens.

It’s a convincing show, and clearly, the men aren’t concerned about us as they keep talking.

“They’re ready for us,” the first man says.

Both men make their way toward the water.

Fox pulls back. “Sorry for that, but I needed them not to suspect us.”

“No worries.” I try to say more, but it just comes out as an incoherent mumble.

He grins. “I left you speechless?”

I nod. My brain slowly starts functioning again. “We need to follow those guys.”

He takes my hand in his again, and we walk in the direction the two men went. This place is so crowded that I’m certain we lost them until we break from the crowd and spot them heading toward the main dock.

Fox lets go of my hand and grabs his phone.

“Peaches, going toward the main dock. Two men, both carrying black packs.” He makes another call to tell Bubba the same thing.

He pockets his phone. The men step up onto the dock and walk to the edge. A third man on a paddleboard smiles at them. They hand him both of the backpacks. In the process, the third man’s sunglasses get knocked off.

My breath catches.

“What’s wrong?” Fox asks.

“It’s him.”

“The man you are familiar with?”

I nod. “Aden Hart. We have to tell Harding now.”

The words are barely out of my mouth, and Fox has already called her.

“Aden Hart. Yeah, on a paddle board, and two men handed him their backpacks.”

Within seconds, ten police officers rush the dock, guns drawn. They cuff the two men, but Aden drifts away, claiming he cannot get back to them. It’s bullshit, but they can’t exactly shoot an unarmed man in front of everyone.

“Hold this.” Fox hands me his phone before he jumps in the water. He gets behind the paddle board and pushes it into shallow water, where the officers apprehend Aden and the two backpacks.

Just as quickly as they arrived, the officers take all three men, the two backpacks, and the paddle board away.

Fox walks out of the water with his clothes now sticking to him, and it’s hard not to stare. He wrings out his shirt as he watches the officers.

Harding and Peaches run up. We explain what happened.

“Is that it then? Crisis averted?” I ask.

“No, that was too easy,” Fox says. He turns to Harding. “Was there an alert out for Aden Hart? Is it possible he knew someone was watching for him?”

“I only shared my suspicions about Hart with Detective Gordon and Officer Thomas. I specifically told them no alerts.” She puts her phone to her ear. “Detective, did you issue an alert for Aden Hart?”

She closes her eyes as the man talks. “No, it wasn’t the right thing to do. We just got distracted by a decoy. The real threat is still out there.” Her free hand goes to her hip. “You think I’m wrong? Tell me what was in those backpacks?” Harding paces up the dock. “Well, you won’t find anything else. Now I need to find the real threat.”

She pockets her phone. “The detective did put an alert out, and I’ll bet you a million dollars Hart found out about it. The damn backpacks had water bottles. That was it. We’re running out of time and have no fucking idea what could be going down.”

Bubba approaches the dock in a flamingo floatie. “Is that Bubba?”

I must be seeing things. But as he gets closer, it is indeed Bubba. He’s wearing swimming trunks and nothing else. And I can’t help but appreciate his body. The man is cut. Several women from a nearby boat whistle as he hoists himself onto the dock, all of his muscles bulging.

Fox clears his throat, and I turn my attention to him. He arches a brow.

I shrug. "I was just wondering why he's in a flamingo."

"Uh-huh."

He grabs the floatie and walks down the dock toward us. "Despite my efforts to keep a lookout for anything suspicious, I have seen nothing other than questionable behavior by a bunch of twenty-somethings."

A flash of light catches my attention. "What's that?" I point to a buoy in the water.

"A buoy?" Peaches says.

"No, watch it. It keeps flashing something."

We all watch, and it flashes again.

Peaches pulls out a small pair of binoculars from his pocket and zeros in on the object. "It could be something."

"Let me see." Bubba motions for the binoculars and checks out the flashing. "Worth checking out, at least."

Harding calls the detective back and fills him in. Just as she ends her call, a voice comes over the loudspeaker.

"May I have your attention, please? There will be a slight delay before the Blue Angels' performance. Thank you for your patience."

The message repeats on a loop three times before finally shutting off.

"Looks like our detective friend has some pull, at least," Harding says, referring to the delay.

In that time, Bubba jumped back into the water and made his way to the buoy. He removes whatever is flashing as a Seattle Police Department boat comes speeding up to meet him. He climbs aboard, and the boat drives him back our way.

They pull up, and Bubba shows us what he grabbed. "Someone wrapped the top of the buoy with mylar tape to keep the birds off."

"Why would anyone care if a bird sat on a buoy?" I ask.

Detective Gordon removes his hat. "I can't tell you why people do what they do, but sometimes they do strange things."

Bubba hops out of the boat and swims to shore.

"Hey, where's your phone?" Harding asks.

Bubba smiles and pulls it out from a pocket in his shorts. It's encased in a waterproof bag. "Always prepared."

I turn my attention back to the crowd as a familiar man walks by.

I reach out and tap Fox's arm without taking my eyes off the man. "That's Aden's brother," I say, remembering the man from the courtroom

supporting his brother during the trial.

He is also carrying a backpack that matches the first two men. I follow him. This isn't a coincidence. How many more men are here carrying backpacks? One of them must contain the bomb.

Fox is next to me in an instant. "You're sure?"

"I am."

We continue to follow the guy as he walks through the food vendor area. He stops, and Fox whirls me into his arms so my back is to the guy. To him, we appear as a couple having fun at the event. I stare at Fox as he's staring past me, watching the man.

Damn, he is a handsome man. His hair is dark blond this time of year from the sun. And his eyes are gray. I've never known anyone else with eyes like his.

"He dropped the backpack behind the place serving elephant ears." He lets me go and grabs his phone, alerting the detective. Several officers swoop in and grab the bag.

My eyes are tracking the man as he slowly makes his way to the other end of the food area.

"We need to follow him." I pull at Fox, and he follows.

The man disappears into the crowd as the roaring sound of the Blue Angels grows louder.

"I guess the show is back on," Fox yells to me. "Let's go back to the dock."

We run back in time to see the planes fly over. I'd forgotten how loud they were. The crowd is watching the planes' every move and cheering them on.

My eyes are scanning everywhere. I turn to Fox. "Why would they let this go on? We never found the bomb."

My stomach churns, and I swallow back the nauseated feeling that everything is about to go really wrong very fast.

"All we can do is keep looking." His eyes are scanning everywhere, too.

He checks his phone. Then holds it up to me to show me that Phantom and Ace verified the planes were clear of any bombs.

"We need to scan the crowd like we did before. And out onto the water as well," Fox yells. It's nearly impossible to hear him over the jets.

We walk toward the water, taking everything in. The show is supposed to last for forty-five minutes. Anything can happen in that time frame.



Everywhere I look, I see backpacks, and most of them are black, like the ones already confiscated. But these are regular ones brought in.

Fox reads something on his phone. Then he pockets it and leans down. “This way,” Fox says.

I follow him as we exit out of the park. It’s still loud here, but he doesn’t have to yell as much for me to hear him.

“Harding says the Seattle PD is in charge of everything immediately outside of the park, but I don’t trust that,” he says.

We walk faster on a street parallel to the park.

“You think there’s a dirty cop?”

He shakes his head. “No, Peaches thinks there’s another way in.”

We keep walking and meet up with Peaches and Harding, who are standing with another man I don’t recognize. But by the way Fox tenses up, he clearly does.

“Julia, this is Jasper, my brother,” Peaches says.

Suddenly, I understand all the tension. While I’ve never met the man, I’ve heard about him from Fox. And what I’ve heard isn’t good.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Fox

OF ALL THE people to run into now, Jasper. This isn't going to go well. The man uses any chance he can to get money out of Peaches, and it usually works. I talked to Peaches about it once, and it's clear he carries a lot of guilt about something.

"I saw my brother, and when I walked over to him, he took off running," Peaches explains. "I ran after him, and imagine my surprise when he went into a culvert that led outside the park with no security on either end of it."

I glance around in every direction, and there are no uniforms or anyone who appears to be security.

Peaches has a firm grip on his brother's arm. "Why did you run?"

Jasper shrugs. "I wasn't in the mood for a family visit."

"Did you tell anyone about that culvert?" Harding says.

Jasper smirks. "You gotta be more specific, sweetheart."

"Don't call her that," Peaches says.

"What are you going to do, brother?" Jasper shakes his head. "Nothing, because we both know you're a good guy. Now leave me alone."

Jasper turns to walk away, but Harding grabs him, turning him. She throws him against the wall. "I'm not a good guy, so you better answer his question."

Jasper hesitates.

Harding leans in. "If you don't, I'm gonna have to keep a closer eye on

you. And trust me, you don't want me involved in your life."

His lips curl up. "I'm not scared of any of you military fucks."

Huh, I guess Peaches hasn't introduced Harding to his brother yet.

Harding gets close. "I'm not military."

He stares at her for a moment, then his gaze moves to Peaches. Harding can be intimidating as hell when she wants to be, and frankly, Jasper should be scared of her.

The man finally puts his hands up. "Fine. There was this guy who came up to me this morning, asking if there was any other way into the park. I told him I might know a way."

Harding holds up her phone. "Did he look like any of these men?" She shows him the photos Carter had shown us.

Jasper's face lit up on one of the photos. "Yeah, he's one of those guys. One hundred bucks and I'll tell you which one."

Harding punches him in the stomach.

"What the fuck?" Jasper says as he falls to the ground. "Why can you punch so hard?"

Peaches takes a deep breath and stares down at his brother. "Did you show him this route?"

Jasper nods. "I did after I made him pay me. A friend of his showed up just as I was about to lead him through, so they both followed me."

"What time?" Harding asks.

The man frowns. "How the hell should I know?"

I step forward. "Was it before the air show started?"

He nods. "Yeah, it was, actually."

Well, hell. This is a cluster fuck to the highest degree at this point.

"Show us which way the men went after they exited this tunnel," Harding says.

"I'll show you." Jasper stands and turns to Peaches. "But then you owe me one."

No one responds, even though I think, at this point, we all want to slap the man. Peaches goes out of his way to help his brother, but sadly, his brother is an addict and can't seem to get control of his life. And he's clearly not grateful for the help, either.

We follow Jasper as he leads us back into the park through the culvert. Inside the park, it empties into a dry ditch. The Blue Angels fly above the water and the park, and as we've gotten closer, they have grown louder.

“We can only use this place in the summer. The rest of the year, there’s a river running through here,” Jasper yells.

“We?” Harding asks.

“Some friends. Which reminds me, other than today, you can’t just barge through there. Sometimes the guys use it for a place that’s out of sight.”

“What’s that mean?” Harding asks.

Peaches shakes his head. “They shoot up in there. Jasper, lead the way.”

As we climb out of the ditch, Bubba is walking our way.

Once he reaches us, he yells, “Got your message, Peaches. An unguarded way in?”

“Yeah, and my brother led in our suspects.”

“The two guys went that way,” Jasper points toward a building.

“The restroom,” Julia says.

The building we checked out the other day. “That building was locked down yesterday, so the SPD has no patrols over here,” I say.

With so many people here today, instead of relying on this small bathroom, the Seafair organizers brought in a lot of Honey Buckets they set up at each end of the park.

“How the hell would the Seattle PD not know about this culvert?” Harding shouts as she puts her phone to her ear. “Detective, we have a problem. Were you aware there is a culvert leading into the park?” She’s shouting, and I have no idea how she can hear any sort of response.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Jasper yells. “You can’t tell the police about it!”

Harding’s eyes widen as the detective says something to her. “The fucking culvert that leads into the park with no security!”

She ends the call. “This just got worse.”

“How the hell does a detective not know all points of entry into this park?” Julia asks. “Especially one in charge of security at this event?”

“Either he was paid off to keep it open for someone, or he’s incompetent,” Harding says.

“The police don’t know about it. No one’s been busted there,” Jasper says.

Harding turns to Peaches and me. “How long would it have taken you to find this if you were left on your own?”

That’s a good question. Technically, we didn’t find it on our own. We wouldn’t have because we weren’t tasked with finding entrances. We were

tasked with finding weaknesses in security within the park. If Peaches's brother hadn't stumbled upon us, would we have found it? I scratch the back of my neck and glance at Peaches. He's frowning and probably doesn't want to admit all this to his girlfriend.

"I can't say we would have found it," I admit. "We were searching for weaknesses within the park. SPD assured us they had taken care of all entry points. And this didn't show up on any map we were given."

Harding pinches the bridge of her nose. "I need to call Carter."

She steps away as Jasper gets in Peaches's face.

"Hey, what's going on anyway?" Jasper asks.

I glance at Peaches and wonder if he's thinking the same thing I am.

"There's been a bomb threat," he tells his brother.

I nod to let him know that's what I was thinking. We couldn't get them to cancel this event, but maybe if word spreads that there is a bomb threat, people will leave voluntarily.

"A bomb? Man, no. I got friends in there."

Peaches motions his hand to the park. "Go warn them."

Jasper glances back and forth between us, then takes off running into the park.

Peaches sighs. "No one will believe him."

I shrug. "They might after watching SWAT take out those three men."

Harding returns. "Carter is sending in more agents. The chief can't send any more officers because they are all out here or downtown."

Bubba stares out into the field. "They likely went that way." He points to a dark path between two trees.

Harding steps up beside him. "I agree. Let's go."

The path leads us through the trees. Harding stops and holds her hand up as we reach a clearing. That's when we spot it. A drone sitting on the ground with something attached. Two men are arguing about who will guide the drone. While they are distracted, we come up behind them.

Harding and Julia aim their guns at the men. "Hands up!" Harding yells.

Both men reach down, and that's when Peaches and I tackle them.

"He's got a gun!" I yell. My guy grabbed it just before I reached him.

While he's on the ground, he's trying to turn over and aim his gun at me. But I grab his lower arm and twist until he cries out in pain.

I glance at the drone, and the item attached to it looks like a bomb. "Where are the other bombs?" I ask.

The man frowns. “There are no other bombs.”

I twist harder, and he grimaces. “How many bombs did you and your men bring into this park?”

He grunts. “Just these five. Please let me go.”

His grip visibly tightens on the gun, giving me little choice. I twist until I hear a pop and he loses grip on the gun. He cries out.

“You son of a bitch!”

I glance over, and Peaches punches his guy. His gun is on the ground a few feet from him.

“Where are the other bombs?” Peaches asks.

The man shakes his head. “There are no more bombs. Just us. And three other men carrying backpacks. That’s it. Please don’t break my arm like that guy did.” He’s looking at me and his friend on the ground, who is rolling around in pain.

“This is my town you are trying to fuck up,” Peaches says as he swings his fist and knocks him out.

“Well, I’m not sure that was necessary,” Harding says. “But I did find it extremely sexy.”

Julia’s brows go up. She hasn’t worked with these two since they started dating. I’ve heard them say enough that I’m starting to wonder if they have some weird fetish. I’m not going to ask because I’d rather not know.

Julia cuffs the unconscious man first. I’ve watched her cuff men before, but somehow, today, it’s different, and it has my mind going places it shouldn’t. Not now. I need to stay focused.

But as she bends down and attempts to cuff the second guy, I realize the difference. She’s wearing shorts, and as she bends over, I can’t take my eyes off her long, lean legs.

“You need to do something about this. Soon,” Peaches says under his breath to me. “It will fuck with your focus until you do.”

I nod. “I know. I will.”

Peaches slaps my back.

“It hurts too much!” the second guy shouts as Julia secures the cuffs.

I’m sure it does, but considering what these guys were here to do, I have no sympathy for the man.

“We have five drones with bombs attached,” Harding says into her phone. “Uh-huh.” She walks around the drones and the remote. “It appears they may all be connected to one remote.”

The Blue Angels continue to fly overhead.

“This is their grand finale,” Peaches says as he stares up. “I’m certain that’s what they were waiting for. All eyes would be on the sky.”

Harding stares at her phone. “Ace and Phantom said there was nothing unusual on their end. They’re on the way to join us.”

Bubba nods. We watch the handcuffed men until, finally, the area is filled with FBI agents who take over. We give them a summary of what happened, then walk farther into the park.

It’s only Friday. Since we don’t know how many attempts will be made, we get to do this all over again tomorrow.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Julia

DESPITE EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED TODAY, we have been told we need to be back tomorrow to do it all over again. At least we don't have to sleep on the boat. It was decided we could all go home, but we had to be back by five in the morning.

Bubba picked us up at the dock after the Blue Angels flew away. He took us back to the mayor's house, where our cars were parked. I rode with Peaches and Harding here, but Fox asked me to ride back with him.

"Want to grab something to eat?" he asks as we head toward Pine Valley.

"Sure. As long as it's fast. I'm too tired to sit in a restaurant."

He chuckles. "Got it."

After we get out of the city, he finds a burger place and pulls through the drive-through. Once we have our order, he drives to an empty parking lot.

"Is it okay if we eat here?" he asks.

"It's fine."

He hands me my burger, and I devour it. Between the early lunch and all the walking around, I'm starving.

"I can't stop thinking about Detective Gordon," I say.

He turns in his seat to face me. "You find him attractive?"

My eyes move to his. Is he being serious? I guess I can play along.

"Well, now that you mention it, yeah."

His eyes darken, and he looks away. What the hell was that?



“Fox, no. What I was referring to is the fact he didn’t know about the culvert.”

“Oh.” Fox smiles, visibly relieved. Or am I reading into it?

Maybe I’m punch drunk from too much sun, but I feel like pushing the issue. “Would it be a problem if I found the man attractive?”

Fox shifts in his seat and stares out the front window. “No, of course not.”

“Uh-huh. Why do you appear so uncomfortable with the idea?” I watch him closely as he begins to breathe faster. “Fox?”

“I think you can do better.”

I wait, and he doesn’t say more. Maybe I want him to say more so badly that I’m imagining something more here than a nice friendship. My mind goes back to him not having had sex in two years. Well, hell, not back to. It’s been in the front of my mind since he told me. I want to ask more, but he didn’t seem comfortable really discussing it.

Maybe if I got him drunk, he’d tell me. But that won’t happen anytime soon, especially when we have this assignment we need to be ready for.

“Why did you date Dan?”

The question catches me off guard. “What do you mean?”

He shrugs. “He didn’t seem like your type. And the timing...”

“What do you mean by the timing?”

He turns and meets my eyes. The way he’s staring at me so intensely ratchets my heart up a notch or two.

“Why him?” he asks, avoiding my question.

The intensity of his stare nearly takes my breath away. Is he angry I dated Dan?

“When I met Dan, he made it clear he was interested. There was no doubt. And I guess I liked his directness.”

Fox nods, then turns in his seat away from me, and it feels like he’s closing himself off.

“We should probably head home and get some sleep,” he says as he starts the car.

I’m disappointed by his reaction, and I debate reaching out and turning him back to me. No, something is going on with him, and if he’s not ready to talk about it, I’m not going to force him. Maybe tomorrow, while we are walking around for hours, I can get him to open up a little bit. Right now, we both need to get some sleep.

He drops me off, and I get ready for bed, only to discover it’s only eight,

and I'm wide awake.

I grab my phone to text Fox but stop myself. No, I need to get my mind off of him. Instead, I send a text to my mom to check in. She doesn't reply. I don't expect her to. She's probably out looking for her next boyfriend.

Tomorrow will be a long day, so I climb into bed and read until I'm sleepy.

The next morning, Fox drives both of us back to the mayor's house. Since it's early, there isn't much talking. This time we don't wake the mayor.

Bubba drives the boat while the rest of us stare off, enjoying the early morning calm before it gets crazy. At least this morning, it's light out already. That's one of the things I love about the long summer days here. It's light out so early and so late.

"Are Phantom and Ace with the planes again today?" Fox asks.

Bubba shakes his head. "No, there are a couple of local officers assigned to that. They will meet us at the park."

Bubba pulls up to the dock next to the log boom, and Peaches helps him tie up the boat. Once secured, we all get onto the dock and walk into the park.

Harding is in the front, and she stops and turns to face us. "Today, we are going to keep an eye on any suspicious activity like yesterday but with a special focus on the areas away from the crowd where someone could set up a drone undetected."

"Has there been any more intel that leads you to believe another bomb is coming in today?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "After some intense questioning of the two men with the drones and the three others that we detained briefly who had backpacks, including Hart, we are certain there is no more threat."

"But not certain enough to call off our services," Bubba says.

"Correct," Harding says.

"Detain briefly? You let Hart go?" I ask.

"We had to. We had nothing to hold him on. Besides, his attorney contacted the SPD, so we couldn't risk holding him any longer."

Ace and Phantom walk up.

"I was wondering if you guys were going to show up," Bubba says, smiling.

After the guys do some hand-shaking and fist-bumping, Harding tells them what she told us. "It's going to be hotter today as well, so stay hydrated," Harding says.

I try not to laugh. Sometimes she comes across as such a badass. Other times, like now, she's almost motherly.

We divide the park into quadrants and each take one to patrol. Bubba takes one on his own.

"You sure you're good with that?" Harding asks.

Bubba nods. "Very sure. If I can avoid being surrounded by a bunch of half-naked women riding on floats, that would be great."

"Aw, did you get hit on too many times?" Ace asks.

"Not something I would complain about," Fox says.

No, he probably wouldn't. But the idea of him out there flirting with all those women makes me feel ill. I turn away, hoping he doesn't notice.

We are split into four teams. Team one is Harding and Peaches, team two is Ace and Phantom, team three is Bubba, and Fox and I round up team four.

Everyone goes their separate way, and Fox steps up beside me.

"Are you all right?" Okay, maybe he did notice my reaction.

I nod. "Yep. Let's start patrolling." Honestly, I'm not sure how else to answer. Starting off the day by professing my true feelings seems like a bad idea.

We purposely walk in a grid pattern, taking in all the spaces we can find. After many minutes pass in silence, Fox clears his throat. I glance at him.

"I've enjoyed getting to work with you again."

I laugh. "Wow, so formal." I turn to him. "And I've enjoyed working with you, sir."

His eyes darken, and he grins. "You can call me sir anytime."

I slap his arm, feeling lighter. I've missed being able to joke around with him. Maybe we just needed a little time to get it back.

Our conversation flows easily as we stroll and watch everyone.

Both our phones buzz in the early afternoon. It's a text from Harding telling us everything is clear, and we are now off the clock.

Fox's phone buzzes again, and he grins. Then he shows me the message.

*Stormy: The boat is rented for the rest of the day. Take the rest of the day off and relax on the water. Good job, guys.*

My phone buzzes, and I also have a message from Stormy.

*Stormy: McNamara, you were assigned to us for the weekend, so enjoy the rest of it. The boat has been rented for the entire day today if you want to stay there.*

I show Fox my message. "This is cool, but I want to know what

happened,” I say.

“Me too.”

We head back to the main dock and find the rest of our group.

“What happened?” Fox asks as we approach everyone.

I notice Carter is there now.

“We found texts from the five men we detained outlining their plan in advance. We’re confident we caught everyone involved. Nice job, everyone.”

“Since the assignment is over, we have to head back,” Ace says. “Hopefully, we’ll see you guys again.”

“It was great working with you again,” Bubba says. “And you should take this before I walk off with it.” He hands the boat key to Peaches.

We all say our goodbyes.

“What do you guys say?” Fox asks. “A day on the water sounds nice.”

Peaches glances at Harding, who smirks. “Actually, we are going to head home and enjoy our day off there. But you two enjoy the boat and everything.” Peaches gives Fox the boat key before they wave and leave.

“Looks like it’s just us,” he says. “Shall we?”

“Yes, but let’s eat first.”

Julia manages to find a taco truck among the vendors, and we enjoy lunch while people-watching.

By the time we get back to the boat, the sun is high in the sky, and it’s hot for Seattle.

“Any chance this cabin has air conditioning?” I ask.

He laughs. “Doubt it, but you can always check.” He lies down on the bench in the front of the boat.

I head into the cabin, and while I don’t find any air conditioning option, I do find cold water in a cooler. Returning to the deck, I offer him a bottle and drink one down myself. Now that I’m cooled off a little, I lie down on the back sun bench and enjoy the relaxing sways of the boat.

“We should put on more sunscreen.”

My eyes pop open, and Fox is standing above me.

“We forgot to when we first got back.”

I yawn as I sit up. “I think I fell asleep.”

He holds up a bottle.

I stand up and take off my T-shirt and slip out of my shorts revealing the bikini underneath. I didn’t know if I’d end up in the water for some reason so I came prepared. “Yeah, I need to get the areas I didn’t cover this morning.

Fox stares at me. Well, more like his eyes rake over my body, but he doesn't say anything.

"Is something wrong?"

He shakes his head.

"Fox, you're making me self-conscious. Stop staring like that."

He finally meets my eyes. "You have nothing to be self-conscious about, Julia. You're smoking hot."

"Oh, thank you." My cheeks warm at his words, and I'm on fire with the way he's still looking at me.

"Can you help me with the sunscreen on my back?"

He nods. I turn around and move my ponytail out of the way. He applies the sunscreen slowly. Almost sensually. Or maybe it's just me imagining those hands of his roaming more freely than they are. When he gets to my lower spine, his fingers slip just under my bikini bottoms.

"Okay, I think you're good."

I spin around. "Okay, let me do you now."

His shirt is still on, and beads of sweat are forming on his forehead.

"You're sweating. Take off your shirt."

"Not yet."

"Why not?" I reach for it, and he steps away from me.

"You're acting funny."

"No, just taking my time easing into this relaxing thing."

I don't care what he says; he's acting funny. I finish applying the sunscreen to my legs and move on to my breasts that aren't covered by my bikini top. A loud splash stops me.

I turn and find I'm alone on the boat, and Fox is in the water. He climbs up the ladder and back on the deck. "That's one way to cool off. That water is cold!"

I laugh. "You getting soft there, Mr. SEAL? Can't handle a little cold. Looks like they all can." I point out the large crowd in the water.

"Well, they're drunk, and I'm not."

I lie down across the back and soak up the warmth of the sun. "That's a sad excuse, and you know it."

"You think so?"

I close my eyes. "I do."

The boat sways, and I relax until some very cold water hits me. I sit up, shrieking. "What the hell was that?"

Fox is standing there, holding an empty bucket, grinning. “Told you it was cold.”

Oh no, he didn’t. I get up and go into the cabin, looking for any kind of container. I find another bucket and grab it. As I come out of the cabin, he wraps his arm around my waist.

“Not so fast there.”

“Hey, it’s only fair I get you back.” I try to push through him, but it’s like trying to move a large boulder. He doesn’t budge.

He wraps his arm farther around my waist, pulling me against him. Suddenly, I’m fully aware of every cell that is touching him. My body heats up, and I’ve never been this turned on in my life. I have to concentrate to keep my breathing calm. The man is my friend, and I need to control myself. But why is he holding me this way? This isn’t like him.

I dare to meet his gaze. It’s a mix of heat and mischief.

“I was already in the water, so it won’t bother me. Maybe you need to go in the water.”

He somehow gets the bucket out of my tight grasp and drops it. Then he lifts me and carries me up to the deck.

“No! Don’t throw me in!” I snake my arms around his neck, and when he lifts me a little higher, I wrap my legs around his waist. He keeps moving, so I tighten the grip my thighs have, and I swear I feel something move.

His mouth is at my ear, and his hot breath, along with his body being flush against mine, has me so turned on, and there is no mistake he is, too.

“Please don’t throw me in,” I whisper.

He stops moving, and his breathing picks up.

“Can you sit us down?” I ask.

To my surprise, he turns us and sits down on the back bench. My legs are still around him. I feel myself slipping, so I scoot myself closer.

“Julia,” he grits out, “I’m trying really hard here not to make an ass of myself.”

I pull back and stare into his eyes, confused. “How could you possibly make an ass of yourself?”

“Jesus.” He rests his forehead against mine. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

Well, I’m pretty sure I do, but I want him to say it. “No, tell me.”

He leans back and stares into my eyes. He pulls me tighter against his lap. He’s hard, and now I’m aching for him.

I swallow my moan and simply get out, “Oh.”

He pushes me off his lap. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have done that.” He steps past me and goes to the front of the boat.

“What if I wanted you to?”

He spins around. “Do you? Want that?”

“Do you?” I ask.

“Fuck, Julia.” Several expressions cross his face as if he’s in some sort of war with himself. “I’ve wanted you since the moment I met you.”

His admission surprises me. All this time?

“But all those times we hung out, you never said anything. Why?”

He steps closer. “I told myself it was because we work together, and I didn’t want to cause any problems.”

“But Peaches and Harding work together.”

He nods. “It was a lie I told myself because I didn’t have the balls to make a move. But when I finally did, you introduced me to Dan.”

I take a step closer and put my hands on his chest. Touching him now after this admission feels electric. “What about now? What’s holding you back?” I ask as I place my arms around his neck, giving him a clear invitation.

His arms move to my waist. “Nothing.” He dips his head until his lips meet mine.

And holy hell, can this man kiss. His tongue sweeps in, and somehow, he manages to turn me on even more.

When our lips part, he grins. “Wow. Better than I ever imagined.”

Yeah, I’m a goner for this man. I press up on my toes and meet his lips again.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Fox

I CAN'T BELIEVE I'm kissing Julia McNamara. Damn, I don't want to stop, but if I don't, we could end up naked. And I don't want to give her the wrong impression. This is more than just physical attraction for me.

Someone nearby whistles, and I'm certain we've drawn attention. I break the kiss and lean back to catch my breath. "We can't do this."

She frowns, then looks down at my shorts. "There is something wrong, isn't there? That's why it's been too long?"

Well, hell, why did I tell her about that? I don't want her thinking anything's wrong, so I might as well be honest. "Nothing is wrong. It's been two years because that's when I met you. I tried once when a woman came on to me in a bar, but every time I closed my eyes, I saw you. I walked away."

Her mouth falls open. "You thought of me?"

I sigh. "And I hope that doesn't make me sound like a stalker or something, but you're all I could think about. I meant it when I said I've wanted you since I met you."

She shook her head. "I had no idea."

"I finally got up the nerve and was going to ask you on a real date, but when I went into the station that day, Dan was there, and you introduced him as your boyfriend."

She pushes my shoulder. "That's why you reacted like that?"



“Like what?”

“Like you didn’t like him.”

I hold up my hands. “Wait. I was polite to him.”

She smiles. “You were, but I could tell by your expression you were not impressed with him.” She steps back and sits down. “I wish I had known what you were thinking.”

“Trust me, I wish I had said something sooner. When I found out Dan was going to propose to you after I’d missed my chance—”

She jumps back up. “Wait? You knew Dan was going to propose?”

Oops, I probably shouldn’t have said that.

“How?”

I blow out a breath of air. This isn’t something I wanted to admit. But here it goes. “He told me at Coff’s welcome party.” I wait for her to react, but she just stares at me and doesn’t say a word. “Julia, say something.”

She wraps her arms around her body. “Is that why you drank so much?”

I nod again.

Tears well in her eyes. “Dammit, Fox!” She pounds one hand against my chest. “Why didn’t you tell me what he told you?”

I blink a few times. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No, I’m not kidding. I thought we were friends!”

I wrap my arms around her. “I thought you really liked the guy. I wasn’t going to blow up your proposal for selfish reasons. But I did do you a favor.”

She huffs. “Oh yeah, and what was that?”

“He wanted to propose to you at your station in front of all your coworkers. I talked him out of that.”

Her mouth drops open. “Oh, my God. What if he’d done that?” She shakes her head. “Did I tell you he talked to Greenhow to get my weekend off approved when he took me on that retreat?”

I cringe. “What the hell? Why that asshole?”

“Exactly! He never listened to me about work. I guess he just assumed Greenhow was somehow a boss of mine. Of course, Greenhow made sure I could have those days off so he could have my case.” She shakes her head. “But we’ve gotten off topic. Why the hell are you pushing me away now?”

I lean down and give her a quick kiss. “I am not pushing you away. It’s that I want you to know I’m not looking for some hookup. It’s more than that with you.”

She grins. “Are you proposing to me, Fox?”

I pull her closer as I laugh. “Not yet. One step at a time, all right?”

And yes, I’m fully aware I said not yet instead of no. When I look into her eyes, I can see a future with her, a house, maybe some kids, some pets. Everything.

She moves her arms to my waist. “Does this mean we’re dating?”

“I hope so. And I don’t want either of us to be with anyone else.”

She squeezes me. “Me neither.” Then she pulls back. “I really hope you aren’t broken down there; otherwise, I might get very frustrated being exclusive.”

I tickle her sides, and she shrieks. “Don’t worry. Sometime soon, I’ll prove to you everything works great.” I bend down and kiss her.

“Julia? I thought that was you!” a blonde in a bikini that barely contains her breasts yells from a floatie.

“Lorraine?” she says. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Lorraine laughs. “Well, I told you I was going, remember?” She floats up next to the boat and grabs onto the ladder. “You said you’d be undercover.”

“Yeah, I was. It ended early.”

She climbs onboard without an invitation. “Well, I have to meet this man you have here.”

I take a good look at her. She’s definitely had a lot of work done. Despite the fact that she’s smiling, nothing above her nose is moving. And the way she’s roaming her eyes over my body tells me all I need to know about her. I wonder how Julia knows this woman.

“Fox, this is Lorraine. Lorraine, this is Fox, my, uh—”

“Boyfriend,” I cut her off and extend my hand to Lorraine.

Lorraine’s eyes widen, and she looks me up and down again. “Fox? What a fitting name. Well, damn, Julia, you move fast. Already got another boyfriend after being proposed to.”

The woman is pissing me off. Fortunately, I know all about Julia but she doesn’t know that and it isn’t Lorraine’s place to tell me. She’s a troublemaker.

“But if you’re offering this one up for me, too, I’m in.” The woman presses her fake tits against my chest and hugs me.

My body stills as I stare at Julia, trying to read what’s going on here. Finally, the woman backs up.

“What is she talking about?” I ask.

Julia’s cheeks flush, and I’m not sure I want to know now.

But Loraine doesn't mind explaining. "I met her for drinks, and she told me about how she'd broken up with this guy, Don, was it?"

"Dan," Julia corrects her.

"Anyway, she said I would like him. But I have to say, Julia, I think I'd like this one instead."

Loraine moves toward me again, and Julia steps in between. "No, I don't think so. When I was telling you about Dan, I thought you two might be good together because you're both into health and fitness."

I laugh but cough to cover it. This woman is not into health. I'd bet money on that. She is into plastic surgery, though.

Loraine tilts her head. "True, but he looks like he's into health, too."

I wrap my arms around Julia. "Sorry, Loraine, but Julia is the only woman I'm interested in."

Loraine arches a brow like she's having a hard time believing she's getting turned down. "All right." She looks back toward the water. "You two going to be back here tomorrow? I'll make sure to stop by."

"Sure will," Julia lies.

"Okay, I'll see you then," Loraine says as she makes her way down the ladder and back into the water with her floatie.

After she's out of hearing distance, Julia turns around. "I'm so sorry about all of that."

"She's your friend?" I ask, still a bit in disbelief.

"She was my best friend in high school. I've only seen her a couple of times since. She's changed."

"She didn't hit on your boyfriend in high school?" I ask.

Julia shakes her head. "I didn't have one, actually. But now that you mention it, our other friend, Catherine, did, and Loraine threw herself at the guy. She told me she was drunk and that she apologized to Catherine. All I knew was that those two never spoke to each other again. I didn't ask questions because I figured it wasn't my business."

"Why did you tell her we'd be here tomorrow?" I ask.

Julia smiles. "Because she'll spend a lot of time looking for us. After her rudeness, it's the least she deserves."

I kiss her. "Remind me never to piss you off." I brush some loose hair off her face. "Why don't we take the boat back and go out for dinner?"

She frowns. "Like a real date?"

"Exactly."

Her fingers trace along my chest. “I don’t know.”

My heart sinks. “Oh, are you having second thoughts about us?”

Her eyes meet mine. “No, not at all. It’s just Pine Valley is a small town, and if we go out to eat, someone might see us.”

“So?”

She shrugs. “We don’t know if this will work out yet.”

She doesn’t, but I’m certain.

“And if Rover finds out, he will tease us anytime he sees us.”

“You’re worried about Rover?”

“Not just him, but what will Stormy think? Will he get a different detective to work with you guys?”

I’d like to say he wouldn’t, but I don’t know. The only other couple who work together are Peaches and Cara. But Cara is not really replaceable as our CIA contact.

“I don’t know.”

She licks her lips. “Neither do I. Can we keep this between us until we have a better idea of where this is going?”

While I don’t like what she’s saying, I understand.

“Please, Fox?”

That pleading look in her eyes is turning me on again. Damn, I’ve had so many fantasies about this woman, and between her pleases and sirs, she’s doing me in.

“All right. We will keep this between us. But once you feel as certain about me as I do about you, we will tell everyone. Agreed?”

“Everyone?”

I arch a brow at her. “Everyone. I’ll pay for a billboard about it.”

She laughs. “All right, agreed.”

She presses up on her toes and brings her lips to mine. The kiss turns heavy as I spin us until her back is against the cabin. I press my hips into her, letting her know how she makes me feel.

“Dammit, Fox. I want to drag you into this cabin and rip off your shorts.”

I grin. “I never figured you for the aggressive type.”

“Well, you might be in for a surprise.”

I kiss her neck. “I might be.”

She pushes me away. “Now, since you aren’t giving me what I want, we better get out of here before I get myself off.”

“Yeah, and how would you do that?” I close my eyes. “No, don’t answer

that. Nope, we are going to take this slow.”

Her hands go back to my chest. “All right. We can take this slow. But that doesn’t mean we can’t continue what we were already doing earlier.”

Well, she does have a point. “That’s true. We can certainly keep doing that.”

I wrap my arm around her waist and crash my lips to hers. Her hands roam up and down my back, lighting up my body so much more than she realizes.

Remembering the small moan she gave earlier, I return to her neck, although this time, I don’t hold back like I did at the park. And I am rewarded with more of her sexy little noises.

Her hands move down inside my trunks, and she squeezes my ass as she presses herself closer. There’s no doubt she can feel my erection. I move to the other side of her neck, and she begins moving her body against mine— holy fuck, it feels good. Almost too good. She squeezes my ass as she moves. Finally, I step back to gain control before I come in my shorts.

“Something wrong?” she asks.

Based on that smirk she’s wearing, she knows exactly what’s going on.

I step back up close. “You’re about to make me come. That’s not exactly taking it slow.”

“If you step into that cabin with me, I can relieve that pressure.” She licks her lips, and damn, it takes everything in me not to drag her down there.

“Once we’re done going slow, I’ll have to spank you for this.”

Heat emanates from her eyes. “Yes, please.”

Fuck. She’s perfect.

She laughs. “Okay, let’s head back because being this close to you in those shorts is too much for me right now. Although it will make a nice addition to my spank bank.”

“You have a spank bank?”

She kisses my cheek as she steps past me. “I do. And it’s full of images of you.”

I groan as my cock throbs; it’s so damn hard. She unties the boat from the dock, and I start it up.

“How long do we need to wait?” she asks.

I turn to face her. “I’m pretty sure we can leave now. If anyone stops us, we can call Detective Gordon. He’ll clear us.”

Her lips curl up. “That’s not what I meant.” She rubs her hand up and

down my back. “How long do we have to wait until we can end your two-year streak?”

Damn, I love this direct side of her. I don’t want to wait, but it’s the right thing to do. She has to know I want so much more from her. Maybe we can compromise.

“Three dates?”

She nods. “I can handle that. This counts as one, by the way.”

I laugh. “We can discuss what constitutes a date at dinner.”

“Okay, but that dinner is date two.”

I throw my head back and laugh louder. This woman is going to make this very hard.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Julia

SADLY, we never got to have that dinner date. As we approached the restaurant, both our phones vibrated. I had a message from my chief. He had a message from Stormy.

And now we are all sitting in Harding's office in Seattle, trying to figure out what the hell happened. Bubba, Ace, and Phantom are here, too. Harding caught them before they got on a plane. At least someone ordered pizza so we aren't starving.

"You really think five drones, each with a bomb ready to take out the Blue Angels, was a distraction from something larger?" Ace asks.

Harding nods. "We know it was."

This is all we've been told so far. The entire Seafair bomb threat was a distraction from something else.

"And I will explain everything once Carter arrives."

Again, we are waiting for Carter. Finally, he walks into the room. "Sorry, I'm late." He sets down his briefcase and sits in the only chair left open. He glances up at Harding. "Have you told them?"

She shakes her head. "I was waiting for you since you have the details."

He clears his throat. "I was alerted this morning that the bombs on the drones weren't real."

Fox frowns. "They looked real."

Carter nods. "Yes, they were meant to. But the bomb squad determined

there was nothing inside that was explosive. If that drone had hit anything, it would have been as effective as if I threw a pen at the wall. Annoying at best.”

“Why would they go to all that trouble of having five fake bombs and guys running around with suspicious backpacks if they didn’t intend to cause harm?” Ace asks.

“Exactly,” Carter says. “I asked myself that very question until I was called on another matter.” Carter stands up and walks around the room as he talks. “The leaked intel about a bomb had the entirety of the Seattle Police Department working on some aspect of Seafair security, either at the park where you all were or downtown where the parade took place.”

I glance at Fox, who sighs impatiently. We’re all tired, and I want to know what we are dealing with. Carter likes to take his time getting to the point.

“What went down outside of those two areas?” I ask.

Carter stops and holds up two fingers. “Two things. First, we had reason to believe the men in the photos I showed you were flying into Sea-Tac Airport under aliases. Due to the level of risk we associated with those men, a choice was made for the Port of Seattle Police to have a large presence at the airport.”

Harding shakes her head. “Are you saying the docks had a lack of security?”

“No, they had the minimum patrols out for the cruise ships and the other waterfront areas. But there was another complication. It’s also Fleet Week.”

“Fleet Week?” I ask.

Fox tilts his head. “You know what that is, right?”

Based on how everyone is reacting, I should, but I don’t. “No.”

“The Navy is in town with some ships the public can tour,” Carter says. “Normally, the Port of Seattle would patrol that area as well. But because of this situation, the Navy called in contractors to help last minute.”

“Contractors?” I ask.

“Do you mean like our security company?” Peaches asks.

Carter nods. “Something like that, yeah. I’m still trying to get the details on which company was used.”

“Well, there aren’t that many in the area. We could probably call around and figure it out,” Fox offers.

Carter walks back to his chair and opens his briefcase. “I’m not sure if



you'll get straight answers. Sometime over the last twenty-four hours, a military weapon was somehow brought over on one of the ships and then moved to a truck that drove it away."

Bubba leans forward, and his grip clenches around his coffee cup. "What kind of military weapon?"

"It's one I wasn't even aware existed, to be honest. One that no one is supposed to know about, much less know enough to steal it," Carter says as he pulls out some papers and hands them to Bubba.

Bubba's eyes widen. "No, we have to stop this. Who has this?" He hands the papers to Ace, who is sitting next to him.

"Ah, shit," Ace says.

The papers slowly make their way around the table as Carter tells us everything he knows, which isn't much.

By the time the papers come to me, I read through them. I glance up. "A fusion bomb? I'm not entirely sure what that is." There are a lot of things I know, but advanced military weapons aren't one of them.

"It's more than a bomb," Bubba says. "It makes a nuclear bomb look like a firecracker."

I drop the papers onto the table, and Carter takes them back.

"How the hell would something like that get stolen? Wouldn't it have the highest level of security?" I ask.

"The Navy has no idea who would try to steal this?" Harding adds on.

"I have a meeting with a commander in an hour, and I'll be asking that question," Carter says. "In the meantime, we're pulling all the video camera footage from every camera in the area for the past twenty-four hours. We should have something soon." Carter turns to me. "Yes, it should have the highest level of security. Believe me, there are a lot of people being questioned on the Navy side right now."

I get up and grab a bottle of water from the pack on the counter and drink it down. Someone has a bomb that could blow up...hell, I don't even know, but I'm guessing an entire city, if not more. And we have no idea who has it or where it is? Carter must have some idea.

I return to the table. "How do you not know who? Haven't you questioned the men who had the drones? And why the hell would Aden Hart be involved in any of this? He's a killer. We never found anything that connected him to terrorism." I glance at Harding. "But you did. That's why I'm here. Aden Hart. You said so."

Carter's attention moves to her. "Harding, do you know something I don't?"

Harding's lip curls up. "Always Carter. But about this case, the only thing I didn't mention to everyone was that we suspected Aden Hart might be involved. I only told McNamara because she worked a case involving him and is familiar with him."

"What happened in that case?" Carter asks.

I explain the case and how Hart was acquitted because his attorneys convinced a jury an officer had planted evidence.

"Why did he kill all those people?" Peaches asks.

I shrug. "We never had a motive. And Hart never offered one. He denied he did it the entire time."

"And how did he come up on your radar?" Fox asks Harding.

Harding stretches her arms over her head, then leans back. "You know I can't tell you that. But I can tell you that his name came up as someone who might be involved with causing harm at Seafair."

Carter jumps up, and his chair falls backward. "Bullshit, Harding. This is an issue of national security, and we all need to know what Hart's connection is."

Peaches's jaw tics as the level of tension in the room just notched up.

Carter steps around the table close to Harding. "You need to tell us everything about this Hart person. Right now, we don't know if someone stole that weapon to blow up a city, start a world war, or figure out how to build more. We don't have time to waste playing the old 'it's classified' bullshit game." Carter storms to the counter and retrieves a bottle of water.

Harding remains calm and simply lifts a brow in reaction. "Carter, until you came into this room, I had no fucking idea that weapon was stolen. Now that I do, I will request clearance for all of you for that information."

Ace leans back. "I can't believe another weapon was stolen. How the hell can this happen? I thought the Navy was locking down hard after the last time."

"The last time?" I ask. "This happened before?"

Ace nods. "About a year ago, a military supply truck was run off the road, and its contents were stolen."

"Up near Whidbey Island," Bubba says.

"Oh, I heard about that," I say.

Phantom stretches his arms over his head, causing his shirt to move up,

exposing some chiseled abs. Apparently, all of these guys are built. I avert my eyes before it becomes obvious I'm staring.

"It's odd that another one has gone missing," Phantom says. "Someone should be looking at someone at the top."

A knock at the door has us all on edge. A woman walks in.

"Everyone, this is Agent Sam Morris. She works with me here in the Seattle office," Carter says.

She hands something to Carter. "We discovered this, and I knew you'd want to see it right away."

Carter pulls his laptop from his briefcase and plugs the USB stick from Morris into his computer. When the video file plays, he smiles. "Looks like we caught a break," Carter says as he turns the laptop around so we can all see it.

The video is grainy, but it shows a large container being removed from a boat. A boat that may be docked next to the Navy ships, but it's not military.

Phantom leans forward. "Why would a civilian boat be near military ships?" He squints as he leans forward farther. "Ah, that's why. That's a defense contractor. I haven't worked with them, but I've heard the name."

Carter turns the laptop back and presses a few keys. Then he turns it back to us. He magnified the side of the boat until the name was readable.

"Golden Defense," Ace says. "I've heard of them."

Morris pulls a manilla envelope out of her bag. "Here are stills from the video."

Carter takes the envelope and pulls out the photos, tossing them onto the table in front of us.

All the images are grainy, presumably because the video is low quality. But in one, I can make out four men carrying a large container on the deck of the boat.

"When did this occur?" Fox asks.

Carter turns the laptop around and stares at it, trying to figure it out.

Morris points to the screen. "This occurred a little after three in the afternoon when the Blue Angels were performing. As you can see, there are no officers around to ask questions."

We all make our way behind Carter, and he plays the video in its entirety. Four men carry the item off the boat and load it into the back of a moving company truck.

"Did you get the license plate?" Harding asks.

“Unfortunately, no. But I did get a list from the company just before I came in here. It includes all the trucks that size that are currently rented out from the Seattle area,” Morris says. “I emailed it to you, Carter, just before I walked over.”

Walked over. That’s one benefit to having an office in downtown Seattle; Harding is close to the FBI offices. Although I’m not sure she would consider that a benefit.

Carter pulls up the list, and Fox whistles. “Damn, that’s a lot longer than I hoped.”

“It is,” Carter says.

“The final list isn’t so bad,” Morris says. “I ran the list of the names of everyone who rented those trucks through our database, and there are three names that are on our watch list. If you scroll to the bottom, you’ll find them there.”

Carter turns to Harding. “Do you want to run your own search?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want to waste time. It sounds like your list is a good lead.”

“Is there any connection between them that you found?” I ask.

Morris smiles. “I did. They all rented trucks from the same location out of north Seattle all Friday morning.”

“That’s more than a coincidence,” Harding says.

“I agree,” Carter says.

Since one of the suspects is a woman, we decided Harding and I would team up to question her. Fox will be with us as well. Peaches and Phantom will locate the second suspect, and Ace and Bubba will find the third. Carter will return to his office to dig up more information on this defense company, and then he has his meeting with the Navy commander.

“Each one is staying at a hotel but not the same hotel. The hotel names and addresses are included in the email I sent Carter,” Morris says.

“I’ll send those to you now,” Carter says as he types on his laptop.

“The odds of them being at the hotel right now are slim,” I say. “Hey, can we have Trip run a credit card search? Maybe we’ll get lucky and get a hit on a gas station.”

Peaches steps away and makes the call. But he comes back a minute later, shaking his head. “Unfortunately, Trip is tied up with a case for Reed. It must be something big because he’s never said no to a request before.”

“I’ll call Tex,” Bubba says.

“Tex?” I ask.

“The one and only,” Bubba says as he steps away from the table.

Fox nudges me. “Tex does for them what Trip does for us. Essentially.”

I nod, then turn my attention back to the other guys who are still talking through everything.

“They aren’t driving that weapon over either border,” Peaches says. “A moving truck will be searched. It has to be.”

“Maybe the boat is picking it up from another dock. One with no security,” Ace suggests.

That thought makes me sick. “Do you know how much coastline here is not guarded?” I ask.

The realization that this weapon could already be on the water on its way to some terrorist hits us all, and we fall silent.

“Maybe the Navy put a tracker on it,” Phantom says.

Harding nods. “Carter, can you verify that in your meeting today?”

“Yes, I will,” he says.

Bubba returns to the room. “Tex is going to check for credit card activity on these three, and he has some other ideas. He’ll call us back soon.” He glances around the room. “Are we going to start with the hotels?”

“Might as well. I’m getting antsy just sitting here,” Peaches says.

“All right but keep an eye out for all three of those license plates if you see one of those moving trucks. Got it?” Harding says.

We all agree.

“I’ll forward you all whatever I find out from Tex,” Bubba says.

“Okay, let’s go find ourselves a weapon of mass destruction,” Peaches says as he claps his hands together.

We all stop and stare at him.

“No?”

“Maybe we’ll call it *the item* for now so we don’t elicit unwanted attention,” Harding says.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Fox

“MONICA SMITH,” Julia reads from her phone. “She’s on the FBI watch list because she dated a man who was involved in organized crime.” She sets down her phone. “Is this how all the information from the FBI reads? So generic?”

“Yes,” Harding says as she drives us to the hotel in north Seattle. “Especially with Carter. He holds information close even when it would serve him better not to. Frankly, he’s an infuriating man.”

I laugh. “You’re kidding, right?”

Harding glances over her shoulder at me since I’m sitting in the back seat. “No. Why would I kid about that?”

“Because you do the same thing,” I say.

Harding frowns. “No, I don’t. I only hold information back when I have to.”

“Bullshit,” I say as I cough into my hand.

“Name one time!” she says.

I laugh. “Every assignment we have had together. You always hold something back and say it’s classified. Or you can’t tell us. Or some shit like that.”

Harding sighs. “I guess we’ll agree to disagree.”

I notice Harding is still frowning, so to lighten the mood, I ask about my friend.

“How are things going with Peaches?” I ask.

She smiles. “Very good, especially after last night.”

“Uh, I’m not sure we want to hear about that,” Julia says, echoing my thoughts.

Harding laughs. “No, it’s not what you think. Logan hadn’t introduced me to his brother, and I thought it was because he wasn’t all in.”

“Logan?” Julia asks.

“Yeah, that’s Peaches’s real name. Sexy, isn’t it?”

Julia smiles and glances at me. “Yeah, it is.”

And even though she’s kidding, I can’t help feeling a twinge of jealousy.

“Anyway, after our confrontation with his brother yesterday, I realized why. We talked about it last night, and well, things are going really well.”

“That’s great. I’m happy for you two,” I say.

And I am. Peaches had such a thing for her for a long time and worried about stepping over a line at work.

Julia turns in her seat. “We’ve been friends for two years, and I don’t even know your real name. What is it?”

I sigh. It’s not that I don’t like my first name; it’s the reaction I get when they ask where it came from.

“Royce Davenport.”

Her eyes widen, and I know what’s coming. “Like the car, a Rolls Royce?”

“Yes.”

She tilts her head. “Were you named after it?”

I sigh. “Unfortunately, yes. My mom thought having that name would lead to good fortune.”

She bites her lip, drawing my attention and reminding me of earlier today on the boat. I can’t believe that was only a few hours ago. “You look like a Royce.”

I’m not sure what a Royce really looks like. “Thank you?”

She smiles. “It’s a good thing.” She cocks her head. “Why does everyone call you Fox? I don’t see a connection to Royce.”

Well, damn. This isn’t a story I really want to tell her.

“I haven’t heard this story,” Harding says. “But if I had to guess, it has something to do with your sly, cunning behavior.” She’s grinning in the rearview mirror.

Julia frowns. “Sly and cunning? I wouldn’t describe you that way.”

I take a deep breath. “No, that’s not where it came from.”

Julia stares at me expectantly, and it’s clear; I’m not getting out of telling her.

“Years ago, I was on a short leave with several guys and, well…” I scratch my cheek. “Well, that night, there was this older woman who wouldn’t stop flirting with me. I tried to be nice but not lead her on. She didn’t get the hint. All night she kept telling anyone within earshot that I was a foxy younger man. Back at base, the guys teased me about being foxy, and it just stuck.”

I finally glance at Julia, and her reaction catches me off guard. She’s grinning, then she laughs. Harding does, too.

“What’s so funny?” I ask, growing defensive.

Julia reaches back and grabs my hand. “It’s just not what we expected. That’s all. But it fits. You are an extremely sexy man.” She gives my hand a squeeze before turning back to face forward.

I’m stunned. Did she forget Harding is in the car with us? Harding grins at me in the rearview mirror. Peaches filled her in on my crush on Julia. He had to in order to explain why I was washing his minivan every week for a month. We had a bet that whichever one of us asked out the woman we wanted first won. And the other guy had to wash the other guy’s vehicle weekly for a month.

I would have won, but when I finally was ready to ask Julia out, that was when she introduced me to Dan. Shortly after that, Peaches went on an assignment with Harding, and they’ve been together ever since.

But I do need to be careful about how I act around Julia. She wants us to keep this a secret for now. I understand why, even if I don’t like it.

We arrive at the hotel. One perk of summer in the Seattle area, it stays light out till after eight in the evening, which helps us spot Monica sitting in a chair next to the outdoor pool. There is no Move It rental truck in the parking lot.

“She seems pretty relaxed for someone involved in something like this,” Julia says.

Harding sighs. “Well, if the weapon has already been moved off land, she would have reason to be. I’m going to let the others know we found her,” she says as she types on her phone. When she’s done, she turns to us. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Julia says.

I nod, and we all three get out of the car and walk toward the pool.



We come up behind her and then step in front of her. Once we are surrounding her, Julia shows her badge. “Monica Smith?”

The woman turns and tries to run, but Harding steps in front of her. “We need to ask you some questions. You can either cooperate, or we’ll bring you in.”

The woman’s shoulders slump. “This is about Sammy, isn’t it?”

At least she knows her ex is trouble.

“Why did you rent a Move It truck yesterday?” Harding asks.

Monica frowns. “Because I had to move some furniture.”

“Where is the truck now?”

“My ex borrowed it.”

“Why?”

“Don’t know. Didn’t ask.”

Julia steps between Harding and Monica. “You didn’t ask? You aren’t worried he might cause damage to the truck and you’d be responsible?”

She shrugs. “Not worried about that, no.”

“Where is your ex?” Harding asks.

Monica shrugs again. “He said he’d turn the truck in when he was done with it, so I didn’t ask where he was going.”

I study her and wonder if she’s actually telling the truth. “What location did you move the furniture from, and where did you take it to?” I ask.

The woman sighs, then rattles off two addresses. “I was staying with a man, but we broke up, so I moved my stuff back with my mom. You can check it out and ask them.”

“You moved your stuff to your mom’s? Why are you staying at a hotel?” I ask.

Her eyes widen as I’ve caught her in a lie, but she doesn’t answer my question. I glance at the lounge chair she’d been on. Her purse sits next to it and is wide open. Bingo.

“Uh oh, Monica,” I say. “Looks like we will have to bring you in.”

She turns around and follows my gaze. “It’s not mine. I swear.”

“You can explain that at the station,” I say.

Julia steps over and sees the drugs in her purse. She walks back to Monica, reads her Miranda rights, and cuffs her.

Now Julia doesn’t have jurisdiction in north Seattle, but Monica doesn’t know this. And we need to get her somewhere she can’t call and tip off her ex. The problem is, where are we going to take her?

“Let’s go,” Harding says.

Monica sits in the back seat with me.

She glances at me. “You aren’t police,” she says. “This is kidnapping!” The woman keeps yelling about whatever comes to her, but we don’t say anything. Frankly, I’m hoping she admits something.

Harding drives us to a police station. During the entire trip, Monica won’t shut up, but even with all her talking, she never reveals anything of importance.

“I’ll take her in,” Harding says.

Once they are both out of the car, Julia turns around in her seat. “Any chance this counts as date two?”

I laugh. “Having a hard time resisting this?” I ask, pointing at myself.

She shrugs. “Something like that.”

I lean forward and kiss her, and it quickly becomes heated.

But this time, she pulls back. “Okay, that kiss made it a date.”

Before I can respond, Harding gets back into the car. “I gave her another chance to tell us where her ex took the truck, but she’s refusing to say anything now. Here are your cuffs.” She hands the cuffs to Julia.

“They are going to have to let her go,” Julia says. “I didn’t have jurisdiction to arrest her.”

Harding grins. “I uncuffed her before going in, and she walked into the police station carrying her purse with the drugs. She’s not going anywhere soon.”

Julia’s eyes widen. “You’re ruthless.”

Harding shrugs. “I do what I have to in order to get the job done.” Harding calls in the two addresses Monica gave us to someone, I assume, at her office.

“Why don’t we check them out?” Julia asks.

“Because the truck won’t be at either location. Monica knows more than she’s letting on, and she’s not leading us to that rental,” Harding says.

My phone buzzes, and I check it. “Hey, Bubba heard back from Tex and sent us more information.”

Harding and Julia check their phones. Before we can read through it all, Bubba sends another text.

Bubba: *Golden Defense owns a private plane. Tex found they rent a hangar at an airport north of Seattle.*

“If they drove out of Seattle with that thing yesterday, they probably flew

it out yesterday, too,” Julia says.

I’m about to ask Bubba if Tex could access any flight plans when another text comes in.

Bubba: *Tex found a flight plan showing their plane flew to Crater Lake, Oregon, yesterday.*

“What’s in Crater Lake?” I ask.

Harding frowns. “Nothing that I know of.”

“Maybe they switched planes,” Julia says.

We both look at her.

“Well, they had to figure we’d track them down eventually. The more stops they add, the harder the trail is to follow.”

I type out a message for Bubba.

Fox: *Does Golden Defense own any planes that happened to be at that airport?*

Bubba: *No. But Tex is digging to see if he can find any connection with any of the other aircrafts.*

I pull up a map on my phone. “If they didn’t fly out of the Crater Lake area but drove instead...” I zoom in. “There is no logical route to take. They could go anywhere.”

Peaches: *The address for Richard was no good.*

Bubba: *Phantom just got back into the car. The address for Dennis wasn’t a hotel, but it is a cemetery, and no, he doesn’t work there. Turns out, Dennis has been dead for five years.*

Peaches: *Why the hell did the agent think it was a hotel?*

Bubba: *No idea. We’re going to check out another address Tex sent.*

Bubba: *Wait, Tex got a hit on Richard’s credit card in Eureka, California. He got gas just past noon today.*

I search the area on the map. “I’d bet they have a boat at the marina there.”

“Which could be halfway to Mexico by now,” Harding says.

“True, but if we can trace which boat they used, we can try to intercept them,” I say.

Peaches: *See if Tex can find if Golden Defense or any of its owners had a boat in Eureka.*

I grin. Of course Peaches is thinking the same as I am. We sit in the car, waiting, hoping Tex finds something. Our phones all buzz together.

Bubba: *Got it! The CEO lives in Eureka, and guess what? He has a yacht.*

Peaches: *If he's going to Mexico, we have time to intercept him.*

"How long would it take him to get from Eureka to Mexico?" Julia asks.

"Depends on the size of his yacht, but likely two to three days," Harding says.

Julia stares at her, and Harding shrugs. "I was on a yacht from San Francisco to northern Mexico. It took us three days, but we weren't going very fast. Now, we need a plan."

Harding: *Meet at the truck rental location. We need a plan.*

Peaches: *On our way.*

Ace: *Same.*

Harding drives us through a fast-food drive-through on the way to the meeting.

"I'm guessing everyone is hungry?"

"Yes," Julia and I both say.

By the time we get to the rental company, we've eaten all the food. Everyone is there waiting for us.

As we walk up to the guys, Bubba steps forward. "I spoke with my commander about this, and he wants to bring two other guys on. They're in San Diego now, so they have the best chance of intercepting the yacht."

Harding nods. "Good idea." Her phone rings. "I need to take this."

She steps away, and I can't hear any of her conversation with the traffic noise of the highway next to this rental place.

She pockets her phone and steps back over to us. "Since this is turning into a water-based mission, I trust you guys can handle it. I'll drive McNamara back to Pine Valley. Please keep me updated."

"Wait," Julia says. "I'm off the assignment, just like that?"

Harding cocks her head. "It's moving out of state. We're already out of your jurisdiction here. Also, the reason you were originally on this assignment, to help us spot Aden Hart, is now a moot point."

Julia sighs. "You're right. I guess I just wanted to see this through to the end."

"Yes, but these guys are much better trained for water missions than we are. And the FBI office in San Diego has a team assembled that will be working the Mexico border area. There are also a few CIA agents on this case as well who I can't speak about. Trust me, they've all got it covered."

Julia smiles. "Okay." She says goodbye to the guys. Then she turns to me.

"Come here," I say, nodding my head away from the guys. "I'll just be a

minute,” I tell them.

Julia follows me as we step out of hearing range but not out of sight of everyone.

“I really want to kiss you goodbye right now,” I say, hoping maybe she changed her mind about keeping us secret for now.

“Yeah, I wish we could.” Okay, she hasn’t changed her mind. She wraps her arms around herself. “Please stay safe. I really want that real date.”

I laugh. “I will. I’ll call you when I get back.”

She nods. “See you soon, Royce.”

My name on her lips feels good. “See you soon, Julia.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Julia

I'M NOT GOING to lie; this sucks. Although I completely understand why I'm not going with the guys, I hadn't realized how quickly Fox could be called away. Fox. Royce. I'm so used to calling him Fox. But I like Royce. Next time I see him, I'll have to try both.

But if we are keeping our dating a secret, I better stick with Fox for now.

"I hope you understand why we're not going with them," Harding says.

"I get it. I'm thankful I got to be a part of the assignment at all. While part of me is scared shitless that some assholes have a weapon that could destroy..." I think about it. "Actually, I have no idea how much of an area it could destroy, but that alone scares me. But I'm happy I got a chance to get out of my usual day-to-day routine."

She glances at me. "Do you not enjoy being a detective?"

I shrug. "It's not the job itself. It's some of the people I have to work with." Greenhow's face pops up in my mind.

"I understand that. Fortunately, in my line of work, I can fly solo most of the time. When I do work with others, it's usually the Morgan Thompson guys or the Reed Hawthorne guys. They're all pretty cool."

"Yeah, they are." I stare out the window as we drive over Lake Washington.

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

I turn to her. "Of course."

“You and Fox have been friends for a couple of years, right?”

I swallow because I have a feeling I know where she’s going. “Yes.”

“Have you ever thought of being more than that?”

I watch her. She shows no emotion as she asks. I wonder if she knows how Fox feels. “Why do you ask?”

She shrugs. “Just curious. I’d known Peaches for quite a while, and we were friendly.”

“Did you want more with him after you met?”

She continues to stare straight ahead. “I found him attractive, but I wasn’t open to dating anyone. I’m glad he finally got me to open my eyes because I can’t imagine not having him in my life the way he is now. I never knew he had a crush on me, either. Not until he told me.”

*Either.* Interesting choice of words to use. I get the feeling she’s trying to give me a nudge toward Fox. “Are you saying Fox has a crush on me?”

Her eyes widen, and her cheeks flush. “What? No. I didn’t say that.”

Busted. She does know.

“I just wondered what you thought of him. He’s a great guy, and I think you two would be good together.”

I bite my cheek to hide my smile as I go in with another question that will throw her off. “He is hot. But I’d hate to ask him out and find out he has no interest. That would make things so awkward.”

She frowns. “It would. But my gut feeling tells me that’s not what would happen.

God, I want to tell her so bad. She might have some insight since she’s dating one of the guys.

“Can I tell you something in confidence?” I ask.

“Of course,” she says.

“When we were on the boat together earlier today,” I have to stop for a moment because it feels a lot longer ago than a few hours ago.

“You mean this morning when Bubba drove us to the dock?”

I take a deep breath and just spit it all out. “No, when it was just me and Fox, he admitted he had feelings for me, and I told him I felt the same way. We kissed, and it was unlike any kiss, and I wanted to have my way with him right there, but he said we have to wait for three dates first. And we were going to go on a date, but we got called in, and dammit, this assignment just keeps going on and on.” I take in another deep breath, but I don’t say another word. Instead, I turn to Harding.

She's smiling and glancing over at me. "Really? You two are dating?"

I shrug. "Well, we're trying."

She nods. "I'm happy for you. I really am. But I have to tell you, if you think this assignment is going on and on, you might be in for a shock. You need to ask yourself if you can handle it if Fox is gone for weeks, hell months, at a time on an assignment."

Any good humor I felt is gone. "Months? He's been gone for a few weeks before, but he's never been gone for months."

She nods. "It's possible. But as you noted, it isn't common. I just want to make sure you are aware of what you're getting into."

I turn in my seat. "You were the one just saying we would be good together."

"Yes, and I stand by that. But after what you just said, I want you to be certain. Is it something you can handle?"

"I am. And yes, I can handle it. It's worth it to be with him."

"Good. Now what do you mean by you wanted to tell me this in confidence? Are you talking about the fact you wanted to get him naked the moment he kissed you?"

She has me laughing again, and I really appreciate that. "No, we aren't telling anyone we are dating yet. I'm worried Stormy might decide he wants to work with another detective, and I really enjoy working with you and the guys."

Harding frowns but doesn't say anything. Her silence has me worried that I'm right. Finally, she glances over at me. "I understand your concern, but I don't think Stormy would do that. It might be nice if you two kept this to yourselves at first, though. The guys are going to tease Fox once they find out."

"Why would they do that?"

"Because they all know he's had a thing for you for a long time. And because it's what they do." She glances at me. "Hey, you wouldn't, by chance, know who keeps changing Logan's ringtone? I'm amazed at how many songs there are about peaches, but I'm afraid it's driving him a bit crazy."

I laugh. Whoever is doing it has kept it going the entire two years I've worked with the guys. "No, I don't. It was already going before I met the guys."

She sighs.



“Don’t you have ways of tracing it?”

“I tried. It all led to dead ends.”

We drive the rest of the way in our own thoughts, and she drops me off at my house.

“I hope we get to work together again,” she says.

“Me too. Thanks for the ride. And for the advice.”

I walk inside my house, and immediately I sense something’s wrong. Cupboards are being slammed open and shut in my kitchen.

Reaching for my gun, I inch my way down my entrance hall. Just as I’m about to round the corner and confront my intruder, she speaks.

“Dammit! Where’s your liquor?”

I sigh and put my gun back in its holster as I step into the kitchen.

“Hi, Mom. You need to tell me when you’re coming over. I thought you were an intruder.” I’m curious how she got in because the last time I saw her, I took my house key back but didn’t tell her.

“Sorry, I just needed to go somewhere *he* wasn’t.”

“Oh, yeah?” I don’t bother trying to remember the name of her latest ex, although he did last longer than the last one.

“Yeah, when I threw him out, I should have tossed his stuff on the lawn. Unfortunately, I didn’t. He showed up an hour ago, whining about wanting his crap back. I figured I’d go back after he’s gone.” She goes to the next cupboard. “Do you have any liquor?”

“No, I don’t. Remember, you asked that the last time you were here?”

She laughs. “You’re right. I should bring you some so you have something.”

I lean against the counter. It’s rare that I see this side of her. She’s sober and happy. I want to ask her if she’s taking her medicine again, but there’s a fifty-fifty chance that will end in a screaming fight, so I don’t.

“Aren’t you worried he might do something to your stuff?” I never understood why she trusted the men alone in her house after they broke up. Maybe I’m jaded from what I’ve seen with my cases.

She turns to me, smiling. “Not worried at all. He’s fully aware of what I’m capable of. He knows not to mess with me.”

I bite my lip to keep from smiling. Unless she’s been taking some sort of fighting lessons on the side, she wouldn’t stand a chance physically against most anyone.

“But enough about me. I haven’t talked to you in so long! What’s going

on with you?”

I bite back my initial response. She never talks to me when she's with one of her men. She doesn't talk to anyone. Maybe it's different this time, though, because she never asks me about my life.

“Working. I broke up with Dan.”

“Dan?” she asks.

“Yeah, the guy I was dating for nearly a year.”

She frowns. “Huh, I can't picture him.”

No, you can't. You never met him. I learned a long time ago not to bring a boyfriend to meet my mom.

“Well, let's make coffee,” she says, opening the cupboards again.

“Mom, it's after nine. It's too late for coffee.”

She arches a brow at me. “Maybe you can't handle it, but I can.”

The cupboard doors begin to slam, and I know what's coming. The calm, happy mom will soon be replaced by the angry one.

“Mom, I'm sorry, but I'm really tired. I just finished an assignment and —”

“Assignment? Another one with those security guys?”

One time I told her I sometimes work with the guys from MTS, and ever since, she questions me about them every time I see her.

“Yes, it was with them.”

She stops searching for coffee and leans against the counter. “Was that friend of yours part of it?”

Yes, she met Fox once. Fox and I were having lunch at Kelly's in Pine Valley, and my mother walked in. I was surprised to see her since she lives about an hour west and usually doesn't hang out here. Thankfully, she was feeling well that day.

“I did work with Fox, yes.”

She smiles. “You two would make a lovely couple.” She tells me this every time she sees me, too. While I was with Dan, I found her comments annoying. But now, I smile.

“I think so, too. Maybe I'll talk to him about it when he returns from his assignment.”

She pats my shoulder. “Good for you. Go out there and get what's yours.”

I frown. “What's mine? I wouldn't call Fox mine.” Although I really want to now that I think about it.

“How are the rest of the guys?”

I've always found it interesting that she's curious about the guys at MTS, but she never asks me about anyone I work with at Pine Valley PD. Maybe she figures it's better if I date that it's not someone in the same station.

"Good."

"And the two owners?"

The same questions each time. I'm convinced she saw a photo of Stormy somewhere and developed a crush because her questions always pinpoint to him.

"They're good. And yes, Stormy is still single." I frown. "I think. He's a pretty private guy."

She laughs. "I'm not sure why you are telling me all that. I just got out of a bad relationship. The last thing I'm looking for now is a single man."

I smile back, even though she'll be living with someone within two weeks. I yawn. "Sorry, it's been a long couple of days."

"Okay, I'll get out of your hair so you can sleep. The asshole should be done packing by now." She leans in and hugs me.

It's these moments I enjoy and miss because they are becoming more and more rare.

"Thanks for stopping by," I say. "But I'm curious. Where did you get the key?"

She pulls back, brow arched. "I wondered why your key was missing from my ring." She shakes her head. "You took it?"

I shrug. "I told you I was dating Dan. I was afraid you'd walk in at an embarrassing moment."

It's a lie because the only times I was intimate with Dan were at his place. Actually, he rarely stayed at my place. I sleep better in my bed alone.

"Understood. Don't be a stranger now," she says as she storms out the door, not answering my question.

Maybe this time will be different. I always hope she won't latch on to some loser again, but each time, I find myself disappointed.

I get ready for bed and check my phone before I turn off the light.

*Fox: I really wanted to kiss you goodbye. Be ready to make up for that when I get back.*

I smile, staring at his message.

*Julia: I'll be ready. I can't wait until you get back.*

I send it and crawl into bed. I'm almost asleep when my front door opens.

Dammit, I forgot to try to get her new key from her when she wasn't

looking. Well, not that there was a lot of opportunity.

I quickly get dressed, and just as I'm buttoning my pants, my bedroom door flies open.

But it's not my mom staring back at me.

"Julia, I'm so glad I caught you. Alone."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Fox

I RUB MY EYES, then stare at the screen again, trying to focus on anything that could be that yacht. We flew to California and met up with the other two men the Navy added to this mission. Fortunately, it's Rocco and Gumby who we all know and trust.

It's dark, but it's a nearly full moon which helps light up what the drones see. In a couple of hours, the sun will rise, and while that will give us a better view, it also means those onboard are more likely to see us as well. We want to catch these guys off guard; otherwise, they will see us coming in a helicopter. But we might be too far south of the Golden Defense yacht. After running several calculations, we decided to start south of where we think they are.

"Got it!" Rocco yells through the radio.

He sends us the location of the yacht, and we get on the chopper. As we approach, it becomes clear the cabin of the yacht is dark. It was already confirmed the yacht is anchored and not moving, which also indicates everyone is sleeping. Although, it's odd they would sleep. If I had a weapon on board, I'd want to get it delivered as soon as possible.

Bubba, Ace, Rocco, and Peaches drop down onto the boat, and I follow last. Phantom and Gumby remained on land watching the drones. They are our eyes from above.

"No one is on the bow," Phantom says into our ears.

We quickly fan out and each take our own area. A woman screams, and a man yells. Two on board confirmed. Whoever else is here has now been warned they aren't alone. I make my way through the cabin. There's no one in there or the bathroom.

"All clear," Bubba says, indicating his area has no other people in it.

"Got two," Rocco shouts.

Peaches and I also shout out that our areas are clear. Only two people on board with a large weapon? A knot in my stomach forms. We search every part of the ship, and there is no weapon.

I find Rocco and shake my head.

"Mr. Wilcox?" Rocco asks the man.

"Yes, what do you want? Please don't hurt us!"

The woman next to him is crying.

"We're not going to hurt you as long as you tell us where the weapon is," Rocco says.

The man blinks. "What are you talking about?"

And that knot keeps growing.

"Where were you yesterday?" Rocco asks.

Wilcox takes a few breaths. "I was getting ready for this trip with my wife. We went grocery shopping, and I got fuel for the boat."

"Where are you heading?" I ask.

"San Diego. We have family there. You can call and ask them," he offers and nods to his phone.

I grab it and check his recent texts. The first one is to some guy named Tom, and he's very excited they are finally coming down for a visit. The next guy, Pat, tells Wilcox not to worry and that he has everything handled at work.

"Who from your company knew you had a yacht in Eureka and about this trip?" I ask.

Wilcox shakes his head. "Pat is the only one there who knows the details. He's my partner. I only told the others I would be gone for a few weeks."

"Shit," Rocco says under his breath, and I'd bet we're thinking the same thing.

"Does Pat own a yacht?" I ask.

Wilcox nods.

"Is it in Eureka, too?"

"No, he lives in San Francisco."

Rocco calls in what we learned about Pat. The other guys step into the room, and Rocco fills them in on what Wilcox has said.

“Is Pat in trouble?” Wilcox asks.

“How long have you known Pat?” I ask.

Wilcox stares past me. “I met him a few years ago at a party. I mentioned to him I had an idea to start this company. Since he was a former military man, he said he had contacts and could get us work. Everything fell into place.”

“How well do you know Pat?” Ace asks.

Wilcox shrugs. “I mean, I see him several times a week at the office. He’s the one who travels and gets us new clients. He doesn’t have family and said he doesn’t mind.” The man stares at each of us. “What has he done?”

Bubba pockets his phone. “We believe he stole a military weapon from the Navy with the intent of selling it to a foreign nation.”

The woman next to Wilcox gasps.

Wilcox falls onto the bed. “Oh my God.”

My gut says they have no idea who they are in business with.

“Pat has contacts in the Navy. Hell, he said he served for ten years, so he has a lot of contacts. We provide security when weapons are being transported from one location to another. I’m usually the one on-site overseeing what needs to be done, but the job we had in Seattle was a large one, so Pat oversaw a team as well.” Wilcox shakes his head. “If I thought for a minute he was a traitor, I would have turned him in myself.”

Now that we know who we really need to be looking for, Bubba steps away to call Tex. Rocco alerts Phantom that it’s time to send the chopper back to collect us. Ace agrees to stay behind in case Pat tries to contact them. And in case we read the situation wrong. Wilcox tries to contact Pat.

The chopper ride back to shore is a silent one. This Pat guy played us, and we fell for it. Once we get back, Bubba checks his phone to see if Tex was able to dig up information on Pat yet.

“Tex sent all he could find on Pat Whitworth, which isn’t much. He owns no boats or houses.”

“But Wilcox says he owns a yacht,” I say.

Bubba nods. “I’m guessing it’s not in his name.”

“We’re back to having no idea where that damn weapon is!” Phantom shouts.

“Wait,” Peaches says. “I sent Harding a message about Pat while we were

on the boat. An agent from San Francisco had been tasked with investigating the officers of Golden Defense. He went to Pat's home last night and discovered multiple IDs." He reads more, and his eyes widen. "Fuck, you have to be kidding me. Pat Whitworth is Aden Hart. And Aden Hart bought a boat according to the paperwork found at his place."

I step up next to Peaches and read over his shoulder. "Hart? How the hell did he manage to start a security company? Wilcox said he met Pat a few years ago. It must have been right after he was acquitted for the murders up near Pine Valley."

I stare out the window. "Why would he keep a bunch of IDs, including one that was real, at his house? He had to know we'd investigate him."

"Maybe he wasn't planning on coming back," Bubba says.

"Or he's flaunting it in our faces that he can get away with crimes," I say.

"Either way, he's still an asshole," Bubba says.

Phantom puts his hand on Bubba's arm. "An asshole with a yacht. We need to find out where it's moored."

"I bet Harding can help us with that." Peaches calls Harding and puts it on speakerphone.

"Logan?"

"Hey, you're on speakerphone. Did you dig up anything on the boat owned by Aden Hart, aka Pat Whitworth?"

"I did. There was a bill of sale filed showing Aden Hart paid just under ten million for it. Looks like cash. It was used with one prior owner. I have one more thing I will check on once it's not too early to call that private owner."

"Ten million? How big is it?" I ask.

"I'm reading the report now, and there it is. One hundred twelve feet," Harding says.

I whistle. "That's not a boat; that's a ship."

"What's the one more thing?" Phantom asks.

"I'll tell you once I confirm it," Harding says. "Carter's calling me. I gotta go."

Aden Hart. He seems to be involved in every piece of this, so if I had to guess, he's the mastermind behind it. "I'm going to call Julia and see if she has any more information about Hart that might help."

I step away and call. It rings and rings before going to voicemail. Damn, it's five in the morning, and she's probably sleeping. But she'll understand. I



call back three more times, and each time it goes to voicemail.

That's odd. I call Trax, hoping he's up for his usual morning run.

"Fox?"

"Hey, I need a favor."

"Aren't you on an assignment?"

"I am. I called Julia for information on a suspect, and she's not answering her phone. I think something's wrong. Can you check on her?"

Trax chuckles. "Wow, you do have it bad. But what if I find her in bed with some guy?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. I know we said we wouldn't tell anyone, but I need Trax to take this seriously. Glancing back, I'm out of earshot of the guys. "Look, we aren't telling anyone, but we're dating now. I can explain more later, but trust me, she's not with some guy. Can you go to her place and check on her? Please?"

"You're dating? Holy shit! Congratulations! Yeah, I'll go now. I'll have her text you once I find her."

"Thanks. I really appreciate this."

"Okay, but just know when you get back, I expect a full explanation."

I laugh. "Fine. Just go." I end the call, wondering if I'm being a creep by checking up on her like that.

She's capable of taking care of herself, and hell, maybe she's a deep sleeper. That's something I don't know about her. Well, hopefully, she'll find it endearing when Trax shows up.

I walk back to the guys. "I couldn't reach her, but Trax is going to find her for us."

Peaches arches his brow. Yeah, this isn't for us; it's for me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Julia

“REMEMBER ME?” the man standing in my bedroom door asks.

He’s not someone I’d ever forget. The last time I saw him, he forced me onto a plane. A plane that almost flew me somewhere I’d never be found.

He stepped off the plane for some reason, and that was when Fox rescued me. Fox placed me in a car, and a few moments later, the plane exploded.

I had hoped this man had died in that explosion. But he didn’t. He came back and tried to kill Fox for rescuing me. And that didn’t work, so now he’s here after me again.

“Doogan,” I say. “How are you here? You were arrested.”

The man smiles. “I got lucky and the guard didn’t see it coming.”

Didn’t see it coming? He killed a guard? I can’t focus on that now. Instead, my eyes move around the room, trying to figure out a plan to stop this man. They land on the burn scars on his right arm.

He follows my eyes. “Oh, you noticed.” He holds up his arm. “Yes, these are from your boyfriend.”

I frown at his use of the word.

“Good, I’m glad you aren’t going to deny it. Because I saw you two today on that boat. Imagine my surprise. I was hanging out with a friend when I looked up and saw the two of you having a grand time at Seafair.”

“You were there? If you escaped, aren’t the police looking for you?” I need to buy time to figure out how to get out of this situation. I have a gun in

my nightstand. My service revolver, I left in the bathroom. If I make any sudden moves, he'll likely shoot me. No, I need to figure out another way.

"What better place to hide than in a crowd? It worked out the for the best because it brought us together. As I was waiting outside your place, I was pleasantly surprised when a woman came by. I was fascinated when she unlocked your door using a key from her pocket. Her car keys were in her other hand. I wondered why she kept them separate. But it doesn't matter, really. What matters is that when she was leaving, I bumped into her, and it was so easy to get that key from her back pocket."

Dammit, Mom. When Doogan ran into her, she probably looked at him with hearts in her eyes. The first time I saw a photo of the man, I thought he was attractive. Now that I know who he really is, I don't. But all my mother would see is a younger, attractive man, likely smiling at her with his hands on her. Fuck, she's an easy mark.

"I was quite disappointed when it was only you returning home. I hoped to finish the job with your boyfriend."

Well, he likes to talk. I slowly inch toward the head of my bed. My phone is next to my pillow. If I can distract him, I can grab it and make a call.

"Why do you want to kill him?" I need to keep this guy talking.

He stares up at the ceiling and yawns. I take the opportunity to slip the phone into my back pant pocket.

"Julia, I'm getting bored explaining this to everyone. He blew up a plane I borrowed. Do you have any idea how expensive planes are?"

I shake my head, wondering who else he has explained this to.

"Very. And paying off that debt took every cent I had. Now you owe me."

I clasp my hands behind my back. "I don't owe you anything."

He steps toward me, and I step back.

"Wait, you were waiting for me outside? You didn't follow me here?" I'm not sure why that little nugget took a moment to sink in.

He smiles. "Ah, just now figuring it out? Yes, I knew where you lived." He steps closer.

"What do you want with me?"

He laughs, then he bends over, laughing in an exaggerated fashion. I pull the phone out of my pocket and, from memory, do my best to call CT. He's not on assignment, and I hope he answers. I use my other hand to make sure the volume is down. My phone vibrates lightly as it rings.

The vibration stops as Doogan stops laughing.

To cover up any more vibrations, I talk and don't stop until I have to take a breath. "Doogan, what do you want with me? I'm sorry Fox blew up your plane, but he isn't here. And why break into my home, my bedroom, when you could have grabbed me off the street?"

Doogan frowns. "That is a lot of very specific questions."

He lunges at me, and I back into my wall. He spins me around and grabs my phone. Please let that be enough and that CT heard.

The man laughs again as he holds the phone up. "Now, why would you call your voicemail?" He holds the screen up, and it says voicemail, not CT.

I close my eyes. It's night, and no one will notice I'm missing until the morning. If I survive that long.

Doogan spins me around again, and metal cuffs secure my wrists. "I brought these. I thought you might appreciate them. They may not be as cool as what the police department issues, but they'll do. Now let's go."

He grabs my arms and pushes me out of the bedroom. My eyes are on the front door. As we draw closer, I plan my escape. He pushes me outside. It's dark, but my neighbors across the street will still be awake.

He guides me to his car, and on the way, we pass one of my garden gnomes. Before he can tighten his grip on me, I swing my leg back and manage to get my foot under the gnome, sending it flying through the air. I wince because that hurt with bare feet. But we both stop walking as we watch the thing fly in the air toward my neighbor's car that's parked on the street. It crashes into the window. It's loud. Not as loud as it would have been had it smashed the window, but the crushing of the ceramic draws attention. My neighbor's lights go on, but before anyone comes out into view, Doogan swings me around to face him.

"You bitch!" I see his fist too late as it comes at me.

\* \* \*

I BLINK and then shut my eyes. My head is pounding. I try again and manage to keep them open. Cigarette smoke fills the air, and bright sunlight is coming in at me. I turn on my side and discover I'm in the back seat of a car. My hands are still cuffed, and my foot throbs.

The driver's door opens, and Doogan sits down. He looks back. "Ah,

you're awake now. I didn't appreciate that little stunt you pulled."

It's coming back to me. "My neighbor. Did you hurt him?"

Doogan laughs. "Well, if I knew you cared, I should have. No, I was able to get us behind your car and out of sight. The man opened his door, looked around, and went back inside. So, your scheme was for nothing."

Dammit! I need to get out of this because whatever this man has planned, it's not good.

"What are you going to do?" I ask.

Doogan turns in his seat to face me. "Well, I was going to sell you to the men I originally had planned to. But before I do that, I can use you to lure that boyfriend of yours to me."

He still wants to hurt Fox, and that pisses me off. "You really hold a grudge, don't you?"

"Oh Julia, it's not a grudge. I want revenge."

"How are you going to lure him to you?" I ask.

"I'm not. You are." He holds up a phone. "Call him."

I debate what to do. If I tell him he's out of town, he might decide to sell me now and deal with Fox later. I don't want that. But maybe I can call someone else.

"Oh, do you not remember his number? That would be a shame."

Fox made sure a while ago that I had the MTS office number memorized. It usually rings to Stormy, but sometimes he puts one of the other guys on phone duty.

I take the phone and type in the number. Please, please let whoever answers it hear in my voice I'm in trouble.

The phone rings. "Maverick," he answers.

I take a deep breath and hope this works. "Hey, Fox, it's McNamara. I'm so glad I reached you." Please play along.

"What's going on?"

Thank you! "I'm with Doogan, and he wants you to join us." Maverick knows Doogan's name. Everyone does after he nearly killed Fox.

"Got it. Where are you? Our friend, Trax, went by your house this morning, and you weren't there," Maverick says.

I bite back my smile. Maverick just let me know that somehow they have already figured out something is wrong. Wait, how could that have happened so quickly? "What time is it?" I ask.

Doogan continues to glare at me.

“It’s nine in the morning,” Maverick says.

Why would anyone know I wasn’t home? Maybe Harding came to find me for something more on that assignment. But she wouldn’t find it odd I’m not at home. She doesn’t know me that well.

Doogan takes over the conversation. “You need to meet us at Alder Road and Baker Street. There’s a field there with an abandoned barn at the back of the property.”

I sit up and look around. We are right where he just said. But what is his plan?

“I’ll be there,” Maverick says.

Doogan ends the call. “Time for the show.” He gets out of the car and opens the back door. He hauls me out until I’m standing on my feet.

“Move.” He pushes me into the field.

My foot hurts, but I don’t think anything is broken, fortunately. The field is part of a large property, and in the distance, I see the old barn. He leads me in until we are about halfway to the barn.

“Sit and don’t say a word,” he says.

I sink into the overgrown grass. He walks away but not back to the car, making his way to the side of the barn, where he stands behind a large tree.

I watch him, and he doesn’t move again. This man is seriously hiding behind a tree, thinking he will outsmart anyone? Last year, when I worked on a case involving him, I wondered why he left so many clues behind. Now I’m thinking he’s not that bright. Although he was able to follow Fox to the bar that night without him noticing. Or was it me he followed?

“Doogan?” I shout.

He doesn’t move.

“Doogan!”

He comes out from the tree and tosses his hands up. “Don’t talk to me! Don’t look at me!”

I ignore his demand. “That night at the bar, did you follow Fox or me there?”

He shakes his head. “What does it matter?”

“It matters to me.”

He laughs. “You don’t like that this is about him, do you? I get it. But don’t worry, I was after you that night. The fact that he walked out of the bar was just a bonus. Now shut up!”

So, he wasn’t following Fox. As he hides behind the tree again, I wonder

who he thinks Fox is. Didn't he question how the hell he had the ability to blow up a plane? I guess it doesn't matter. The guys know something is wrong and who is involved. They will come in with a plan.

"I've changed my mind," Doogan says, stepping up to me. He grabs me roughly. "Let's go."

He leads me back to the car.

"I thought you wanted to see Fox."

After he shoves me into the back seat, he gets into the driver's seat. "My plan of a surprise attack won't work with you staring at where I'm hiding. I'll take care of him after I've dealt with you."

The car whips out onto the road, causing me to fall onto my side. He drives out of Pine Valley, and I wonder if he has a destination in mind. From what I've seen, the man doesn't have a plan and improvises as he goes.

My hands are bound, but my feet aren't. However, I don't see a way to escape without causing him to wreck the car. I lean forward. He's driving sixty miles per hour. I don't like my odds with a collision at that speed. Besides, I'm not sure if I'm as flexible as I was during basic training all those years ago, which I need to be for the move I'm thinking about.

Instead, I wait. He pulls down a driveway to a dilapidated house. We're outside Pine Valley but not far. He yanks me out of the car and shoves me up to the house as he unlocks the door.

"You live here?" I ask.

He barks out a laugh. "In this hellhole? No."

"But you have a key."

He turns to me. "For someone who's in cuffs, you sure as hell ask a lot of questions."

I shrug. "I'm a detective. It's in my nature."

He rolls his eyes. "Yeah, I see that. Get in." He shoves me through the door.

Immediately, I cough. The stench of animal urine and cigarettes is strong. I'm not sure why there was a lock on the door. The smell alone would keep anyone from entering.

He takes me down the hall and through the kitchen to another room. It appears to be a sunroom, and the odors aren't as bad in here, but there is mold on the lower walls.

He shoves me onto a couch. "I'll be right back."

While he's gone, I scan everything in this room and the kitchen, which I

can see from here. I don't spot anything that will help me. But even if I could escape, my options are limited since I'm still handcuffed and have no car keys.

He returns, frowning.

I shift but can't get comfortable. "Could you take these cuffs off? My arms really hurt."

He laughs. "I'm not stupid."

I sigh. "Could you move them to the front, at least? Please?"

The man stares out the back window. Finally, he turns to me. "Fine, you are going to be in them for quite a while. Stand up."

I'm surprised he's telling me any part of his plan. I stand, and he turns me around. He unlocks one of the cuffs but grips my arm tightly, likely leaving bruises. He spins me back around and secures the cuffs on me once again.

"There. Now sit down and shut up. I need to think."

I sit and wait. Now that my cuffs are in front, I can get him in a chokehold. I just need the right opportunity to arise.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Fox

“GOT A LOCATION,” Tex says through the speakerphone.

That other thing Harding was looking into turned out to be a tracker. She found out the prior owner had installed one on the yacht because he had two teenage sons he didn't trust. It's great news for us. If only the weapon had a tracker on it, this could have been over already.

Tex rattles off the coordinates, and Rocco steps into the bathroom, where it's quieter to call it in to his commander.

The rest of us are waiting in a motel room in San Francisco that Peaches rented for us. Since we got here in the morning, the management insisted we pay for two nights. Peaches didn't argue because we failed to mention to the manager there would be seven of us in the room.

It doesn't matter to us because we only need the room for a place where we can all meet up and talk freely while we wait for our next move.

Rocco and Gumby just arrived moments ago. The tracker device places Hart's yacht just off the coast here.

Rocco steps to the middle of the room, holding his phone. “They are sending up a drone to gather intelligence. Once they have the information, it will be relayed to us, and we will devise a plan.”

One thing I've always been impressed with is drones. They can get in and out of an area undetected and provide us not only with intel on how many men are in an area but also bird's-eye-view photos. I doubt a drone will

capture a photo of the weapon since the last place it would likely be is on deck. But we can possibly narrow down the areas from the information it provides.

“It’s going to be at least an hour, so we should get something to eat,” Rocco says.

We all agree on pizza and find a place that’s open early to deliver.

Rocco’s phone rings as we finish up. While he’s on his call, my mind wanders to Julia and how I can’t wait to get back to her. It’s the first time I can recall having something to look forward to when I return home. Not that I don’t like my place or friends, but this is different.

And I’m happy Trax was willing to check on Julia. Since I haven’t heard anything, I suspect Trax found her sleeping and she wasn’t happy about it. I smile, imagining her chewing out Trax. I’ll owe him for sure.

Rocco is taking notes on the room’s small notepad, and Bubba and Ace are watching over his shoulders. When he ends the call, he sighs.

“Well, not surprisingly, the yacht is well-armed. The drone took some photos that the commander says he will send me shortly.”

“How many men?” I ask.

“Fifteen,” Rocco says.

We’ll need to take down two to three each. The first group we can get with the element of surprise, but we will have to ensure the others don’t know we’re there.

“We must keep any noise to a level below the motor,” Rocco says. “None of those men can see or hear us coming. I’d bet money not all the men on board are aware of the weapon they are transporting.”

He doesn’t have to say what we’re all thinking. If there is any gunfire near that weapon, we’d all be done.

Peaches stands up and stares out the window. “We will work in teams of two and move as quickly as possible.”

We work out the details and teams, then head to the chopper.

“And why can’t we just kill the men?” Ace asks on the way. “These men are transporting the deadliest weapon likely to terrorists.”

“Commander says they want them alive. They believe they are part of a much larger smuggling organization,” Rocco says.

Of course, they are. It is never something small or easy in our line of work.

By the time we get to the airport, the helicopter is waiting for us.

We fly out, and the yacht comes into sight. Damn, that thing is huge.

“Positions,” Rocco says into his headset.

That’s our warning that we will be dropping to that ship in two minutes.

I check my gear, and everything is secure.

The chopper flies toward the ship from behind. Thankfully, the three men on the ship’s bow don’t hear it over the yacht’s engines.

Rocco gives us the hand gesture. It’s time to go, and one by one, we rappel down to the ship. We fan out. Rocco, Gumby, and Ace are tasked with taking down the three men on deck.

Bubba and I go into the cabin and find three guys. We each knock one out just as the third man turns and sees us. Fortunately, Bubba gets to him before he yells. After disarming them, we zip-tie their hands and feet, then move on to the next room. It is some sort of bar with an assortment of liquor. Two men are snoring while leaning back on the couch. In front of them on a table are empty glasses. They are likely drunk and easy targets.

After we take care of them the same way, we move on to the next room and find Peaches and Phantom.

“How many did you secure?” Phantom asks Bubba.

“Five. You?”

“We only found three.”

We continue to move through the ship until we meet up with Ace, Gumby, and Rocco.

“How many did you secure?” Phantom asks.

“Six,” Ace says.

That’s only fourteen.

“We missed one,” Rocco says. He pulls up the layout of the yacht the commander sent him.

We each point to the areas we covered. It becomes clear what room we missed.

“The engine room,” Rocco says.

The room we hoped the weapon might be in because it would be the most protected should there be a need for gunfire. But it’s also the one room where we’ll be seen coming.

We move quietly toward the room and divide ourselves to stand on either side of the door. I hold up my fingers and countdown from three. Then I quietly turn the knob. The door swings open, and we all stand back.

Ideally, if someone is in there, they will grow curious about the open door

and come out. But unfortunately, this isn't an ideal situation.

After several minutes, I carefully peer into the room. I spot a man, but his focus is on his phone. It appears he's playing a video game. I retreat from the door and pretend to punch something into a phone to tell the guys what's going on.

From the angle the man is at, we can't sneak up on him without him noticing us. Opening the door wasn't enough to lure him out.

Rocco holds up his hand to get our attention. He points at himself and Bubba and mimics steering a ship. He points to the rest of us and then to the room.

I got it. Those two are going to redirect the yacht toward San Diego, and we will stay here, hoping this guy comes out soon.

The goal is to get this ship to the Navy base in San Diego, where all the men on board will be interrogated. Once this ship is docked and handed over, Peaches and I will be free to go back to Pine Valley.

The yacht turns inland a little, but it's enough that we can feel it.

"Are we turning?" the man in the engine room asks himself. "Why the fuck are we turning?" His voice grows louder, indicating he's walking toward the door. The moment he steps through, I grab his arms and try to pin him against the wall.

"Stop him! Stop him!" the man shouts.

"The men are all detained. There's no one to shout to," Ace says.

Gunfire erupts from the doorway, and we all jump back. I lose grip on the man before I'm able to get the zip tie on his wrists, and he runs away from us.

"I'll get him," Ace says, then takes off after the guy.

When the gunfire stops, I look at all the guys. They are all hunched over.

Except Peaches. He's lying on the floor. Shit, he's been hit, and I can't get to him. Phantom moves to his side and rolls him over. Blood covers his shirt, and his eyes are closed.

No!

"We have two men loose on the ship. One is in the engine room, and one might be heading your way," Gumby says into a radio.

"Two? Did someone get loose?" Rocco asks.

"The drone was wrong. There were two men in the engine room," Gumby says. "And Peaches has been shot. We need a medic now!"

Phantom finds the bullet wound on Peaches and applies pressure.

Whoever is in the engine room, we need to get him out of there.

“All of you, toss your weapons into this room!” the man yells.

When none of us complies, he yells again, “There are three of us in here, and we are going to come out shooting unless you do it!”

Shit. If the drone missed one person, it’s possible it missed more. Or he’s lying. Either way, it’s a risk we don’t want to take. But odds are, this guy doesn’t know we’re each carrying more than one gun. We each toss one near the entrance to the room but not inside.

A man appears at the door with wide eyes, holding a gun and taking turns aiming it at all of us. He steps out of the room. “Don’t try anything. My friend behind me will shoot you.”

As he moves past us, he spins until he’s walking backward. He’s almost clear of our area when I spot Ace behind him. Ace disarms him, knocks him out, and zip-ties him in under a minute.

No one runs out of the room. I carefully peer in and don’t see anyone.

“I’m going in,” Ace says as he passes me. A moment later, he shouts. “Clear. And the crate with the weapon is here.”

With the okay that it’s clear, I run to Phantom and Peaches. His eyes are closed.

“He still has a pulse,” Phantom says. “It looks like the bullet went just above his heart. It might have pierced a lung.”

He needs medical help immediately.

“The chopper is back for Peaches,” Rocco says through the radio.

“Okay, bringing him up now,” Gumby says.

Phantom looks at me. “Let’s do this together so he doesn’t have to be upside down over my shoulder.”

I nod. Phantom grabs under Peaches’s armpits, and I grab his legs. We make our way to the open deck, where we landed on the ship. The chopper is overhead, lowering a rescue basket.

Bubba is at our sides, helping us load Peaches onto the stretcher. Once he’s buckled in, Phantom waves up to the chopper. Slowly Peaches is reeled up and inside.

My eyes are on the chopper as it pulls away from the boat and turns to go inland.

As much as I want to go with him, my duty is to stay here and finish this mission. But dammit, Peaches, you better hold on. He lost a lot of blood, and if the bullet punctured his lung... No, I won’t let my mind go there. He will be fine. He has to be.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Fox

After the boat was docked in San Diego and I was debriefed, I caught a flight to San Francisco. That was where Peaches was taken. Thankfully, the bullet missed his heart, as we suspected. But it did puncture his lung. According to the doctor, he will be fine, but he will need time to recuperate.

The moment they let me back to see him, I go. He's hooked up to several machines. While I wish this was the first time seeing a teammate in this condition, it isn't. Unfortunately, risk comes with our jobs.

As I walk up to the bed, he opens his eyes. "Hey, you're supposed to duck away from the bullets, not into them," I say.

He tries to chuckle but frowns.

"Sorry, you probably shouldn't laugh."

He shakes his head. "Has anyone told Cara?"

"Harding called me once I got to the base and asked how everything went. I told her. She's on her way."

Peaches nods. "Figured she'd come."

I smile. "Yeah, I have no doubt she'll always be there for you when you need her. But I'm curious how she knew I had just gotten to base."

Peaches smiles. "She is always one step ahead of us."

"That she is. Did the doctors talk to you about the surgery?" I ask.

He frowns. "No, did something happen?"

I take his hand in mine. "Yes. I thought they would have told you."

On the one hand, I feel bad messing with him like this, but on the other, he messed with me in a similar fashion years ago after an assignment went wrong. I swore to him I'd get him back. And that day has come.

“Fox, you’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

I look into his eyes as seriously as I can. “During the surgery, there was a complication, and one of your appendages didn’t get enough oxygen. It was a four-hour surgery, and they didn’t notice it. I’m afraid they had to cut it off.”

His eyes widen. He holds up his hands and then wiggles his toes, which he can see under his sheet. “Do you mean a toe?” he asks, trying to pull the sheet up to expose his feet.

“No, I’m sorry, but they had to cut off your dick.”

He stares at me, but I remain serious, and I can see his mind go from the idea that I’m fucking with him to it could be real.

He reaches under the covers and checks. “You asshole.”

I laugh. “Told you I’d get you back.”

Peaches closes his eyes. “I told you they cut off one ball. How does that compare? You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“Well, you’re in the right place for that.”

The door bursts open. “Logan!” Harding runs to his side. “What happened?”

Peaches nods at me, and I fill her in.

She holds his hand. “All Fox told me was that you were shot and rushed to the hospital. I’ve been so scared.”

“That’s all I knew at the time. He just got out of surgery not long ago.”

Harding turns to me. “Thank you for being here with him.”

“Well, I’m not so sure we should be thanking him,” Peaches grumbles.

“The plane I flew down is waiting to take you back to Seattle.” She grabs her phone. “I’ll send you the address for the airfield.”

My phone dings as her message comes in. “Thank you. I really appreciate this.”

She nods. “I called in a favor to get down here and figured you might as well get a fast ride home because of Julia’s situation.”

I tense. “What Julia situation?” I ask.

Harding frowns. “Shit, I’m sorry. I forgot Stormy has that policy of not telling you anything while on assignment.”

I clench my jaw. Something is very wrong. “Assignment’s over. What’s going on?”

Harding glances at Peaches, who is also now frowning.

“Please tell us, Cara,” Peaches says.

Harding licks her lips. “She’s missing.”

The air whooshes out of my lungs as I begin to imagine the worst. Someone took her. “What do we know?”

“Trax went to her house earlier this morning, and she wasn’t there. The door was open. Her phone was on the floor of her bedroom.”

“Fuck!” I shout. “Who took her?”

Harding shakes her head. “You will need to ask Trax. The only reason I know anything is because he called me to find out when I last spoke to her. I’m sorry, Fox. I would have stayed and helped, but I got the call that Logan was shot.”

I nod. “I understand.”

“But the plane is waiting for you. You should get back there and find her.”

She’s right. I need to get back and find Julia. On the way to the airfield, I call Trax.

“Fox?”

“Harding told me about Julia. What do you know?”

“Unfortunately, not much. But we did call her chief to find out if it could be related to any of her cases, and he had some bad news. Doogan escaped.”

My frustration turns to anger. “What? When? Why weren’t we told right away? Dammit, she was a sitting duck!”

“I’m still working on getting all the details on that.”

If he has her, I know exactly what he’ll try to do. “When did she go missing?”

He doesn’t answer right away.

“Trax? When the hell did she go missing?”

“When I checked her bedroom just after five this morning, the covers on her bed were down, but it didn’t look slept in. I’d say since last night.”

I clench my fist and take a deep breath to try to remain calm. “Doogan has had her since last night?”

“I think so. We are tracking down anything we can on Doogan, but he doesn’t have his credit cards or phone, so it’s taking time. Stormy asked Trip to help on this, and he said he had a few hours to spare. He’s searching for any cameras near Julia’s that may have picked up Doogan.”

I’ll have to tell Trip later how much I appreciate this. He’s been working on some major case for Reed Hawthorne Security that has taken all his time.

“Hey, I’m doing everything I can, and Stormy is on it, too. Once you land, call me, and I’ll update you on what’s going on.”



I sigh. I hate being so far away and not being able to do anything. “Keep an eye on flights. That asshole might try to take her out of the area again.”

“We are on it.”

“Thanks for everything. I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

I close my eyes and take several deep breaths. The last thing I need now is to lose focus, but dammit, this is Julia. I can’t lose her. No, Doogan will pay.

Once I’m on the plane, I close my eyes. I’m exhausted, and I need sleep. But every time I close my eyes, all I can see is that damned man’s face.

The moment the plane’s wheels hit the tarmac, I call Trax. It goes to voicemail.

“Dammit!”

A notification comes in that I have voicemail. It’s Trax.

“Julia called Maverick but called him Fox. Doogan was with her. He agreed to meet us in a field outside Pine Valley. We’re headed there now. Rover and CT are in a separate car. We don’t know what his game is. It’s just past eleven.”

There are no more messages. That was left ten minutes ago. I’m in Seattle and well over an hour away from Pine Valley if the traffic is good. As I walk off the plane, I pull up my Uber app.

“Fox?” a man asks.

I glance around, and there is no one else in the area. “Who is asking?”

The man smiles. “Stormy sent me. He wants me to drive you. He told me you would be in a hurry.”

Thank you, Stormy. “Yes, thank you. Let’s go.”

My phone rings. Trax. I answer it as I follow this man to the car and get in. “Hey.”

“Stormy said he sent a car for you.”

“Yes, I’m in it now. What’s going on?”

“Mr. Fox, where do you want to go?” the driver asks.

I debate trying to meet up with them but decide I want my car. I rattle off my address, then turn my attention back to my phone.

Trax sighs. “Rover and CT drove by the field, and there is nothing there. No cars nearby, no people visible, nothing.”

“Maybe he’s running late.”

“They are going to watch the area. Trip found something Maverick and I are going to check out. Doogan inherited a house from his grandfather ten

years ago. According to the records, Doogan still owns it, and it is not too far from the field.”

Doogan lives in Pine Valley? No, that can't be right. Has he been watching us for some time? That would explain why he grabbed Julia once I was out of town.

“I'll call you back after we're done here.” Trax ends the call.

I stare out the window, happy to see there isn't too much traffic on the road. I sit back, trying to figure out why Doogan would ask to meet anyone in a field. It has to be a setup. Hell, he probably has Julia somewhere else. Hopefully, she's still in town. If he did fly her somewhere, I'll find her. No matter where she is, I will find her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Julia

“YEAH, she’s here and ready to go. Let’s meet at the airport. You know the one,” Doogan says into his phone.

The airport? Is he really back to that? There is no way in hell I can let him get me on a plane. I know what will happen if he does.

“Of course, we’ll get payment upon receipt. I understand. Look, what happened last time wasn’t my fault.” His jaw tenses as whoever he is talking to raises his voice. “Don’t worry, that guy won’t find us.”

Doogan paces as more yelling comes through the phone. Finally, it stops, and Doogan smiles. “You keep her in one piece, and we’ll have the funds by tonight.”

Well, I guess he’s going to try to get me on a plane today.

Doogan pockets his phone as he turns to me. “We need to go. Now.” He yanks me up and pushes me out the door.

“Wait! I thought you wanted Fox, too.” I try to dig in my heels, but with bare feet, I can’t seem to get any traction.

“I’ll come back for him.” He drags me to the back of his car and opens the trunk. “Get in.”

“No, I’m handcuffed. It’s not necessary.”

He laughs. “I don’t care whether it’s necessary.”

There are some old grocery bags in the trunk, along with a tire iron. That’s when the idea comes to me.

I nod to the trunk. “You want me to get in there with a tire iron? Sure, that will be helpful when you open the trunk back up.” I step toward the trunk.

“Wait!” He stops me. “You sure have a smart mouth on you.” He turns to grab the tire iron, and that’s when I make my move.

Lifting my arms, I step up behind him, then force my arms down over his head until I’m applying pressure to his throat with the metal of the cuffs.

He grabs for my hands as I dip down, bending my knees, lifting my feet off the ground, causing the cuffs to press against his throat with my full body weight.

Doogan drops to his knees, relieving some of the pressure as he thrusts his elbow back at me, hitting me in the side. I don’t relent as I apply as much pressure as I can. He swings his body to the left, trying to loosen my grip. But I hold on tight. We struggle like this for what feels like an eternity but is probably only a few minutes before Doogan falls to the ground. I lift my arms and stand up. Carefully, I check his pulse.

He’s alive, just knocked out. I search his pockets and locate the key to the cuffs. I get them off as he starts to wake. My plan was to put the cuffs on him, but if I try, it might become a wrestling match. Dammit, where are the car keys? They must be in another pocket.

He groans and starts to move. Without a gun, I don’t have a lot of options here, so I drop the cuffs and run toward the road.

Without shoes, I’m not running as fast as I want, but I get to the road and look both ways. No cars. It’s not exactly a busy highway, but I’d hope to see at least one car. I head toward Pine Valley. Farmland covers both sides of the road, and unfortunately, the crops have been harvested, and there is no place to hide. Up ahead, it looks like a farmer is growing corn. I push harder despite the pain in my feet and lungs.

Pain spears my foot, and I’m forced to stop. I hold my foot up and find a cut on the bottom. Glancing back, I see shards of glass on the ground. As much as it hurts, I need to keep going. I’m only one hundred feet to the cornfield.

With one last push, I make it and run into the corn, then squat down. A car is coming. If I jump out for help and it’s Doogan, it won’t end well for me. But if it’s not Doogan and I wait until I see the car, it will be too late to make it to the road. I stare up at the sky. The sun isn’t at its high point yet, so maybe it’s still morning. Sadly, since it’s Sunday, I wasn’t expected to be

anywhere, so no one will miss me until tomorrow. I stare at the corn. I could sit here all day and night if I have to. But based on Doogan's call, he promised to have me on a plane today. Which means he will be frantically looking for me, and I'm still too close to that house.

No, I need to get farther away. I walk through the cornfields, keeping an ear toward the road in case any cars come. When I reach the end of the field, I spot another cornfield in the distance. It must be another farmer's land.

I leave the safety of the corn, but three steps out, another car comes. Retreating back to the tall husks, I wait and watch. The car is driving very slowly. It's Doogan, and he's staring into the field I'm in. I squat as low as I can and don't move.

His window is down, and he's partly leaning out as he stares toward me. *Please don't see me.* When his car keeps going, I breathe a sigh of relief. Well, for now. Because he knows I'm on foot, and this is the first tall field I could hide in. He'll be back.

Instead of trying to make my way toward Pine Valley, I head farther away from the road toward the barn. I get to another edge of the crop and stare out. There is a house to the left and a barn straight ahead.

Then the door to the house opens.

"Joyce? I'll be waiting in the car," a man calls out.

A man in a suit steps out of the house, whistling, and goes to the car. He gets in and starts it. I wait for Joyce to leave as well.

A good three minutes or more pass, and I'm growing impatient, wondering why this man didn't wait inside for Joyce. Finally, a woman in a summer dress steps out of the house with two toddlers in tow.

My eyes move to the man in the car, who is staring at his phone while this woman is trying to herd the two kids to the vehicle. The two toddlers are dressed nicely, too.

Oh, it's Sunday. They are probably going to a church service. Once they leave, I walk to the house instead of the barn and knock on the door.

As expected, no answer. I try the door. Locked. I look under the mat for a key, none. But there is a frog figurine next to the door. Sure enough, there is a key under it.

While I feel bad breaking into their home, I have to. I'm hoping they have a home phone, and I can call for help.

The home is not quite what I expected by their appearances. There are toys everywhere and dirty dishes piled high on the counter. Scanning every

space, I do not see a phone. On my way out of the kitchen, I grab a banana and eat it, hoping it quiets my hunger for a while. After checking every room, there is no home phone anywhere.

Before I leave, I go through the closets until I find one for the woman. Bingo, sneakers. I hold them up, then toss them back. Why does she have such tiny feet?

Voices outside startle me. I run to a window.

Shit! The family is back, and Doogan is with them. His car is parked a few feet from theirs.

I slowly open the window so I can hear better.

“You’re welcome to look in the fields and the barn,” the man says.

Doogan smiles. “Thank you. I’m just heartbroken that she ran away.”

Joyce puts her arms around her toddlers. “I can’t imagine if one of my kids ran away. I’m so sorry.”

The man leads Doogan to the barn, and the woman walks toward the house.

I run to where I remember seeing a back door and make my way outside before she enters the house.

I move to the side of the house farthest from the barn and toss the banana peel I’m still holding. The backyard is fenced in with six-foot fencing beginning at the midpoint of the side of the house. There is no gate. It must be on the other side.

“Well, thank you for your time,” Doogan says.

Wait, he’s leaving already? I find a crack between the fence boards and look toward the front yard. I can’t see them since they parked directly in front of the house.

A car door closes. Is Doogan leaving? Tires crunch on the gravel as it makes its way toward the road.

“I feel for the guy, but blocking us from getting out of our driveway was rude,” the man says.

“His daughter is missing, and he’s desperate. I would probably do the same thing,” Joyce says.

I want to yell to them to see if I can use their phone, but I’m not sure what lies Doogan told them.

“Well, shall we go? It looks like we’ll make it in time for brunch hours,” the man says.

“All right, kids, get back into the car,” the woman calls out.

After their car makes its way down the driveway, I go to the other side of the yard and find the gate. Hopefully, Doogan was satisfied and moved on to the next farm.

If he stops at the next farm and is distracted by the homeowner, I might be able to make it to the next cornfield.

As I come around the house, I peek and make sure the family really has left. And they have. Quickly, I make my way toward the tall husks I came out of. My foot hurts like hell as I cross the dirt and gravel roadway that makes up part of their long driveway.

A car comes tearing up the driveway, and when I turn to see who it is, Doogan is staring back at me. I run for the field but don't make it. His car clips me, and I'm tossed to the ground, hard.

The car stops, and he gets out. "I knew you were here."

"How?"

I glance up at him, and he grins.

"There was a trail of blood near some broken glass on the road just a few feet from this place. That trail led to the cornfield."

"Why did you think it was mine?"

"It was fresh. And look what I found here." He points to a few feet away from us.

I'd left a trail of blood for him to find me.

"Now, I'm afraid you haven't given me much choice here." His fist comes at me, knocking me out.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Fox

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, she wasn’t there? That’s our only lead!” I shout into the phone as I’m driving to the house Doogan owns.

“We went over every inch, and I’m positive they were here, but they aren’t now,” Maverick says. “We’re heading out.”

“To go where?” I ask.

“Well, we know he was here, so we’ll start with the nearest airport.”

I pull over. “I know where it’s at. I’m heading there now.” I make a U-turn.

There is a small regional airport not far from here. It’s the type of airport Doogan used last time. You can’t exactly get someone you’ve kidnapped through security at a large airport.

As soon as I pull into the parking lot, I call Maverick.

“Hey, we’re on our way to the Harrison Regional Airport,” Maverick says.

“I’m already here. I’m going in,” I say.

It would be better to wait for them to arrive, but I can’t risk it. What if he already has her on a plane? They could be on the runway now.

It’s the first time I’ve ever stepped inside this airport, so I’m not familiar with the layout. I’m surprised to find a restaurant inside. I guess more people come here than I thought.

I walk through to the back and spot Doogan standing outside the



restroom. His back is to me, and he's talking on his phone. I storm up to him.

"Yes, I'll have her to you by tonight," he says.

I tap him on the shoulder, and he spins around.

His eyes widen with surprise. Good, he's in shock and not fast enough to block my punch. He goes down hard. But then he rolls over onto his back, laughing.

"What's so fucking funny?" I ask. The only reason I'm not pummeling him into the ground right now is because I don't know where Julia is.

"We meet again!" He laughs harder. "Are you going to blow up another plane? Maybe try to kill me? Don't bother. We can't kill each other no matter how hard we try!"

Has this guy lost his mind?

"Where is she?"

He sits up and wipes his nose with the back of his hand. There's a lot of blood. I hope I broke his nose.

"Well, she's resting comfortably."

He doesn't stand up but stays on the floor. Of course he does. He knows I'll knock him out again.

"You better tell me, Doogan," I seethe.

"Or what? You'll kill me?"

"Yes."

He laughs again. He's trying to buy time. I haul him up by his shirt and drag him out the back door to the small runway. I spot a plane and drag him to it. The engine is off, and no one is in there.

"Fox!" Maverick calls out.

I turn, still holding the piece of shit. "He won't tell me where she's at, and he's stalling." I drop him in front of Trax and Maverick, who jogged over to me.

"I'll watch him. You two search all the planes," Trax says.

Maverick and I split up and go to each plane. Each one coming up empty. After we circle the place, Maverick and I meet up where we started.

"Do you think he flew her out without him?" Maverick asks.

I stare at the man. "It's possible, but I hope to hell he didn't."

"I'm going to ask inside," Maverick says.

"I'm coming with you," I say.

Maverick stops me. "I think I'll get further without you. No offense, but you look a little crazy right now."

I close my eyes, trying to keep myself calm. “I haven’t slept in a long time, and Julia might be on a plane sold off to some pervert. Yeah, I’m a little crazed right now.”

“Let me handle this,” Maverick says before he walks into the restaurant.

I return to Trax and Doogan. When he sees me, he points and laughs. At this point, I’ve had enough. I grab onto his hand and spin him around, then force him to the ground.

“Shit, that hurts!” he yells.

“Tell me where she is, or I’ll break your arm,” I say.

He takes a couple of deep breaths. “I’ll tell you. She already flew out of here.”

I apply more pressure. “Where to?”

“I can’t tell you that,” he says.

I break one of his fingers. He howls in pain.

“Try again.”

“I swear, I can’t tell you. If she doesn’t get to him, he’ll come after me.”

Get to him? Something in me snaps, and I apply more pressure until I hear the crack.

“Fox, you need me to take over?” Trax asks, and when I turn my gaze to him, I see worry in his eyes.

He nods to the restaurant. The windows are darkened from out here, but it’s possible there are several witnesses to what’s happening. But this man kidnaped a member of the Pine Valley Police Force and nearly killed me. I’m not worried if someone reports this.

Maverick runs out. “No planes have left from here in the last three hours, and I confirmed he arrived about thirty minutes ago.”

“Someone remembers him coming in?” I ask. “Can we trust their memory of the time?”

Maverick nods. “We can because she showed me the video they keep of everyone who walks in the front door. I saw it for myself. And Julia wasn’t with him.”

I turn back to Doogan, but Maverick holds me back. “Find his keys. She’s got to be in his car, and it’s getting too hot in there.”

Trax searches the man, finds his keys, and tosses them to me. I run through the building to the parking lot and press the fob. One car beeps, and I race to it, opening the doors and trunk. But the car is empty. She’s not here. Where the hell are you, Julia?

Maverick steps up and is already on his phone. “Trip, we need your help. It’s an emergency.”

While Maverick fills Trip in, I stare into the back seat then the trunk. It’s too clean. “Wait,” I say as I make my way to the passenger side. I open the glove box and find the car registration. Charles Nichols. “Maverick!” I run around to the back of the car. “This car doesn’t belong to Doogan.” I hold up the registration. “This is one of the guys from the alley that night. I bet they swapped cars.”

Maverick takes the paper from me and gives Trip the information. He ends the call. “He’ll call us back as soon as he has something.”

No, I can’t wait here while Julia is God knows where, and I have no idea if she’s hurt. Although, I don’t think Doogan would kill her. No, he’d try to sell her off again.

Maverick’s phone rings. He answers and puts it on speakerphone. “Trip,” he says.

That was fast but I’m thankful Trip is putting his full attention on this.

“Charles Nichols has quite the rap sheet. And after a quick call to a contact I have with the Seattle Police Department, this man is known to associate with Doogan. While I was talking to her, I ran a search, and Doogan actually has a car registered in his name. And right now, I’m looking for any hits on your toll bridges out there for his license plate. I’ll call you right back.”

The toll bridges are north and west. If he went south, we won’t find him on any camera.

A sheriff’s car pulls into the lot and parks. Two officers get out and walk into the airport.

“I hope they’re here for Doogan,” I say as I step toward the building.

Maverick grabs my arm. “If they are, the last thing you want is to be there when Doogan claims you assaulted him.”

He’s right. And Trax is there. He’ll make sure Doogan is held until he’s arrested.

A few moments later, Trip hasn’t called back, but our attention turns to those officers as they lead Doogan out the door. Trax follows behind. Doogan’s eyes meet mine, and the son of a bitch smiles at me.

“He’s trying to piss you off. Don’t let him,” Maverick says.

Trax splits away from the officers and heads our way. “I told them he was the man who tried to kill you. They arrested him right away and aren’t being

too gentle. Have you guys found any leads?"

I nod. "This isn't Doogan's car. Trip is searching for that asshole's car now. Doogan met one of the guys who attacked me and likely swapped cars."

Trax frowns. "Why? It would have made more sense to use this guy's car. He had to know we'd be searching for his car."

Maverick's phone rings again, and we all turn to him. "Go ahead, Trip," he says as he turns on the speakerphone.

"Doogan's car was photographed going over the five twenty bridge about ten minutes ago. It's heading westbound."

I step back, and I run my hands through my hair. "Fuck, they could be going anywhere. Seattle or north."

Everyone falls silent. We still have no idea where she is.

"I think I know where they're going," Trip says. "While waiting for a photo hit, I looked deeper into Charlie Nichols. He has a brother who also has a record but only for drug offenses. The brother owns a large piece of property south of Marysville. From the aerial view, there appear to be a few outbuildings. My guess is he's taking her there."

Marysville? That doesn't make any sense. "If Doogan is trying to sell her again, they'd take her to an airport, not the middle of nowhere," I say.

"It's our only lead right now," Maverick says. "Let's check it out and see if Doogan's car is there. In the meantime, maybe Trip will find something else."

"I'm on it," Trip says. "I've sent you guys the address. Talk soon." He ends the call.

Maverick slaps my shoulder. "We have to check this out."

I nod. "Let's go."

Trax holds up his phone. "Stormy wants us to go to the office to work out a plan. I'm sorry, Fox, but I have to head out in an hour."

"Why?"

"Assignment."

Damn, I trust Trax and hate to be down a man. We drive the short distance to MTS and go straight to Stormy's office. He's on a call when we enter. He nods to us as we wait.

"Anyone want coffee?" Maverick asks.

"Yeah, that'd be great. Thanks," I say.

"No, thanks," Coff says as he walks to the water cooler. "Looks like I'll be joining you guys."

“They’re here now. What time will you be there?” Stormy nods as I presume whoever is on the other end of that phone call talks.

Maverick returns and sets two mugs on the conference table.

Trax leans in. “I’m heading out now. Fox, I’m sorry. I’ll check in when I can.”

I nod. “Don’t worry. I got these guys. We’re good.”

He gives me a weak smile before he leaves.

“Thanks,” I tell Maverick as I sip the coffee.

We all watch Stormy.

“I’ll let them know. Thank you.”

I take another drink of coffee. We won’t be here long, so I better chug it now.

Stormy stands and walks to the conference table. “Please sit.”

Despite my impatience, I know we need a plan, so I sit.

Stormy clears his throat. “Trip sent me everything he sent you once he had an address where Julia could be. I called the sheriff’s office up near this property. They’ve suspected the man who owns the property stores large amounts of drugs there, but they’ve never had probable cause to go in and confirm.”

I jump up. “Until now? No, they are not using Julia for their case. They’ll be careless!”

Stormy nods. “Yes, I agree, and it’s not a chance I’m willing to take. That’s why you three are going in before they arrive.”

I swear my mouth hits the floor. Stormy usually likes to appease law enforcement, since we need them often.

“This isn’t how we normally operate, but I’m not willing to risk Julia’s life because some officer has a hard-on for a promotion.”

I sit back down, appreciative of Stormy’s choice.

“When do they think they’re meeting us there?” Maverick asks.

“They insisted we wait until just after sunset. Which means we have time to come up with a plan.” He gets up and walks to his desk. “I printed an aerial view of the property. There are two points of entry.”

As he sets the paper on the table, Coff’s stomach grumbles.

“Something’s wrong,” he says. He sets down his cup of water.

We all turn to him.

“What’s going on?” Maverick asks.

“I don’t feel—” his eyes widen, and he runs out of the room.

We don't have to guess what's going on. The bathroom is next door, and we hear him heaving.

"Do you two feel sick?" Stormy asks.

We both shake our heads. Coff returns to the room.

"Sorry, guys, but I don't feel right." He spins on his heels and rushes back to the bathroom.

Dammit, I feel for Coff, but we need to get going.

"The other guys are all gone on assignment except for Peaches."

"Where's he?" Maverick asks.

Stormy glances at me.

"He's still in California. He was shot on our assignment. Harding is with him. Dammit, I should have checked in, but I've been focused on Julia."

"He'll be all right," Stormy says. "But Coff is another matter. You need at least three men for this one, so I'll go with you."

I turn to him, surprised. "You?"

Stormy nods. "McNamara is part of our team. She's one of us. I want to go and make sure whoever is holding her—Charlie Nichols or someone else—knows they fucked with the wrong people. Now, I need to check on Coff, then we head out."

I stare after the man, surprised. After he's out of earshot, I turn to Maverick. "Have you ever worked with Stormy out there?"

Maverick nods. "I have. I had an assignment a couple of years ago, and he came in and saved me."

"Huh, I guess I always just viewed him as being here in the office."

"Yeah, don't let his age fool you. He's fast on his feet."

"What's this age bullshit?" Stormy says. "I'm not that much older than you assholes."

Before we can respond, he pulls his phone out. "I need to call Coff's girlfriend so she can be here with him. Or take him home."

After the call, we all stare down at the photo of the property again.

"Here are the two entry points for vehicles," Stormy continues. "But it looks like we can park here and then make our way onto the property. From that angle, we can check out the barn first."

"Sounds good," I say.

"Hello?" Delaney calls from the front door.

"Back here," Stormy yells.

She comes into view. "Where is he?"

Stormy nods toward the bathroom. “Sorry to take off on you, but we—”  
“Stormy, I get it. Go. I’ll take care of Coff.”

“Feel better,” I shout to Coff.

As we step outside, my eyes immediately look for that damn peacock. Fortunately, he’s not around. Maybe he’s decided to terrorize someone else’s rooftop.

“We can take my truck,” I offer.

“No,” Maverick says. “They’ll hear us coming.”

I stop mid-step. “It’s not that loud.”

“Maverick should drive,” Stormy says, ending the discussion.

“There’s more room in my car anyway,” Maverick says as we all climb in.

I don’t bother arguing. Instead, I stare out the window, trying not to think of the worst when it comes to Julia.

“Hey,” Maverick says.

I glance at the rearview mirror as he looks into it.

“She’s fine. You heard Doogan. He doesn’t get paid until she gets delivered. As long as we get to her before then, she’ll be okay.”

“Yeah, and what if this isn’t where they took her?”

Stormy turns to face me. “We’ll question everyone on the property.”

“Have either of you heard how Doogan escaped? He should have been under extra security.”

“I got a call with the details about an hour ago,” Stormy says. “He was being transported from the jail to the courthouse for a hearing. He knocked out the officer transporting him, got out of his cuffs, and ran away from the scene to a car waiting for him.”

“Officer? Only one officer was transporting him?” I ask.

“Yeah, only one.”

“Well, that’s bullshit,” Maverick says.

We ride a while in silence, and I force myself to think of other things so I don’t stew on this news. I have no idea what’s going on with the team. That’s not like me. “Where are all the guys?”

Stormy glances back. “Cody is on an assignment in New York. Trax is heading out of the country. And I sent Rover and CT to go with Rocco and his team.”

“What’s going on with Rocco?”

“That’s right, you haven’t been briefed. That yacht you brought to the

Naval base in California didn't have the weapon. We believe that large box in the engine room was there to make you think it was the weapon. Aden Hart was not on board, so we haven't been able to question him to verify. The Navy got a lead that sent the guys back up this way, and they asked for two of our men to help."

"Didn't realize I was out of the loop for so long," I say.

Stormy chuckles. "You know how it is. Things move fast around here."

Everything is moving fast. I hope we are, too. Hold on, Julia.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Julia

MY HEAD HURTS, and the loud buzzing sound won't stop. I open my eyes, but it's so bright it sends a searing pain through my head. I close them again. Where the hell am I? I think back to what I last remember.

Doogan. He found me, and he punched me. Dammit, he knocked me out again. When I get out of this mess, the chief is going to force me to take time off for recovery. While most might enjoy forced time off, I don't. It gives Greenhow more time to weasel into my cases, and frankly, I don't have any hobbies I particularly enjoy.

Damn, when did my job become my life? Dan had a lot of hobbies—running, nutrition, going to health retreats, and crocheting. Not one of those interests me.

I wonder what Fox is into besides going to the gun range. Oh, there's a hobby I enjoy. Okay, one so far. But all this time I've known Fox, I have no idea what he does in his free time other than the gun range every other week with me. Well, it used to be every other week. It slowed down when I dated Dan.

I don't know where Doogan thinks he's taking me, but I won't be staying. There's too much I still need to do. And I have to find out what Fox does for fun.

I move my hands and feet, and they are bound with something. I open my eyes and force myself to keep them open. I'm lying across a thick layer of

hay. In front of me is a box fan turned on high. It's aimed only at my feet.

I push up but don't make it very far. My hands are handcuffed together and tied to a post. As I stare up, it's clear the post is one of the supports for the building. The building appears to be a barn. Where the hell am I? Did the house he had me at have a barn? I don't recall seeing one, but I wasn't exactly focused on the landscape.

And why is that fan on? I try to stand but discover my ankles are handcuffed, too.

"Good, you're awake," a man says as he walks into the barn.

Something about him is familiar. I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. "Who are you?"

He laughs. "There's no need for us to get to know each other. You won't be here long."

A loud engine draws closer. My captor steps out of the barn, turns, and comes right back in.

"He's here. Let's get you up to meet him."

"Who?" I ask.

He doesn't respond as he retrieves keys from his front right pocket. He squats next to me and unlocks the cuffs on my ankles. Then he unties my wrist cuffs from the post.

"There, now you can walk on your own." He stands back up. "Go ahead and get up now."

I do as I'm told since I have no plan yet. He puts the keys back into his pocket and nods toward the door. "Let's go."

Funny, he isn't holding my arms or touching me in any way. I wonder if Doogan told him about my handcuff trick.

We step outside, and I immediately shield my eyes from the sun. It's high and bright. But as I blink, I can see more clearly. Another man steps out of an Escalade. While they talk, I look for any possible escape routes. There is one road in, and the property is bordered with blackberry bushes all around. Damn those sticker bushes. I can't see behind the barn, but hopefully, there's another way out because I don't think I can get through all those stickers with bare feet. But I do see what appears to be a trail or opening I can get through.

"You have the money?" my captor asks.

"Hold on there. You're going a little fast," the other guy says. "I need to make sure she's a good fit first."

The second guy walks up to me. He reaches a hand toward my face, and I

flinch. “It’s all right. I’m just moving your hair. It’s covering your face.” He reaches out and moves my hair back.

“Shit, Charlie. What the fuck?”

Does this guy recognize I’m a detective?

“What?” Charlie says.

Wait. Charlie? That was one of the guys with Doogan the night Fox was stabbed. This asshole might have been the one to stab him.

“She has a black eye! You know I can’t have that. Dammit, Charlie.” The man stomps back toward his car.

“It will heal!” Charlie says. “She’ll be great for you after that.”

“I need someone tonight.”

Charlie runs in front of the man, cutting him off before he reaches his vehicle. “Think long term. I’m telling you, she’s worth it. But you have to act fast. Doogan has a buyer coming in tonight.”

The man’s hands go to his hips. “You’re trying to sell Doogan’s property? Fuck, Charlie, that’s even worse.” The man sidesteps Charlie and gets into his car. “Don’t call me again. It’s clear we have different business ethics.”

Ethics? Is this guy serious? He did give me the information I needed. I have until tonight to escape. And based on Charlie’s desperation, I don’t expect him to have anyone else coming by. But I could be wrong, so I need to move fast.

The man backs down the long driveway while Charlie watches him go. I glance around for anything to use as a weapon, but all that I see is hay. Why the hell is there so much hay when there is no evidence of any barn animals?

“Okay, let’s get you back inside,” Charlie says after the car is out of sight.

I stand there, staring at him, unsure if he wants me to walk or if he plans to drag me in there.

“Go!” he yells.

All right, he wants me to lead. I walk into the barn, keeping a watch for anything I can use. He ushers me over to the box fan. I stare at it, trying to figure out how it might help me.

His phone rings, interrupting my thoughts. “Hello?” he answers.

Whoever called sounds angry. While I can’t make out the words, he is yelling.

“What the fuck? He called you?” Charlie spins around to stare out the front door, putting his back to me.

This is my moment; I can feel it. I just need to find something.

“Oh, you’re loyal to Doogan now? That asshole didn’t pay me anything for stabbing that guy. So yeah, if I can get something for this woman, then I will.”

I spot a shovel about twenty feet away. Slowly, I step toward it.

Charlie shifts slightly, but he still can’t see me. “That’s not necessary. I don’t need a fucking babysitter.”

I move a few more feet.

“Seriously, you don’t need to come here.”

I continue to take small steps and am almost there.

Charlie ends the call. I’m out of time.

“Fuck!” he yells.

I run to the shovel, grab it, and run at him as he turns around.

“What are you—”

Whack!

I hit him hard against the head with the shovel. He goes down. I stand there, ready to swing again if he gets up. But he doesn’t. And the blood pooling under his head tells me he might not get up again. I drop the shovel and reach into his front right pocket. Yes, his keys are still there. After I get the handcuffs off my wrists, I grab the keys. I plan to drive his car the hell out of this place. But as I reach the door, there’s another car pulling in.

I run from the door. The barn is one large open space with nowhere to hide. But there is a loft. I climb the ladder and spot a few boxes. I duck behind them.

“Charlie? Where are you?” a man calls. “Look, you said you don’t need a babysitter, but I think you do. You don’t want to get on Doogan’s bad side.”

This is the guy on the phone moments ago? He must have been nearly here at that time.

“Charlie?” He’s inside the barn and likely found his friend on the ground. “Ah, shit. She outsmarted you, didn’t she?”

I slow my breathing to make sure I’m not making any noise.

There’s a clang from below. “I see you got out of your handcuffs. But Charlie’s car is still here. Why didn’t you take it? Oh, I know why.” The asshole laughs. “Because I pulled in, thwarting your plan.”

Well, he did arrive faster than I expected.

“Which means you are most likely hiding in here somewhere.”

If he searches, he will find me. And I have no weapon. Unless there is

something I can use in these boxes. But if I search, he'll hear me.

"It doesn't look like you're down here. I'm going to guess you are in the loft."

Maybe it doesn't matter if he hears me. I carefully open one box, miraculously not making a noise. But I'm disappointed by the contents. Inside are thousands of clear quart bags. There isn't much I can do with that.

"Julia, am I getting closer?"

I freeze. The man must be near the top of the ladder. Once he's up here, he'll find me. I open the second box, no longer caring about being quiet. Thousands of clear sandwich bags.

"Hello, Julia."

I glance up and into the eyes of Doogan's other goon holding the handcuffs.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Fox

The property is right off a fairly busy highway with nowhere to pull over. Maverick slows down as we pass the driveway. I spot a car pointed the other way.

“It looks like they enter from here.”

Maverick drives to the location where we agreed to park on the north side. But once we get out, we are confronted with an entire wall of blackberry bushes blocking off the property.

“Let’s check the other point of entry,” Stormy says.

We all climb back into the car for the short drive. Fortunately, there is a dirt pull-out that is out of sight from the driveway. We park and exit the car.

“Oh, you don’t want to park here.”

I turn to see a dark-haired boy of about ten on a bicycle staring at us. Well, so much for being stealthy.

“Oh, no?” Stormy asks.

The boy shakes his head. “No, the man who lives here is mean. If he catches you here, it won’t be good.”

“Thanks for the warning, but we’re going to see that man,” Stormy says.

“He’s not here.”

“But you just said he’ll get mad if we park here,” I say.

“He’s not here now, but he might come back,” the kid says before pedaling away.

“Let’s go,” Maverick says. “Before he comes back.”

The three of us quickly make our way down the driveway. I feel like a sitting duck with no cover. The only brush is the blackberry bushes that line

both sides. The back of the barn comes into view.

We run to it, staying out of sight just as a car drives in from the other direction. Maverick and I walk around the north side of the barn while Stormy watches the car from the back corner of the south side.

“Charlie?” a man calls out.

We make our way to the front corner. The man is now speaking from inside the barn, so we quickly move around to the front. Stormy comes around on the other side and is now across the doorway from us.

“Julia, am I getting closer?” the man says.

My heart races. She’s here, and she’s alive. I peek in and see the man on the ladder climbing to the loft. A quick scan of the barn reveals nothing more than hay and a fan. I motion for the guys to follow me.

As we slowly approach the ladder, I spot movement in the loft. Then I see her. Julia. She’s digging into a box.

The man is almost at the top of the ladder as I pick up my pace.

“Hello, Julia,” he says.

But before he can step off the ladder, I climb a few rungs and grab the back of his shirt. Catching him off guard, I’m able to throw him to the ground. Maverick and Stormy take control of him while I go straight to Julia.

As I climb up to the loft, she runs to me. I wrap her in my arms. She’s safe with me now. I hold on tight. She’s shaking.

“I’ve got you.”

She nods into my chest. “He was close, and I didn’t have anything to hold him off.”

“There are two cars coming down the driveway!” Stormy yells from below.

“We need to get out of here,” I say. “You’re injured.” I spot dried blood on her leg.

“My foot.”

“Can you get down the ladder?”

She nods. We make our way down, then I bend to pick her up.

“Stop,” she says. “I can walk.”

“There’s no other door than the front one,” Stormy says. “There are some serious code violations here.”

The man who’d been going after Julia is on the ground unconscious, but Maverick must have found handcuffs because his wrists are bound with them.

“They’re in the barn!” someone yells.

Gravel crunches as several people run toward the barn.

“How the hell do they know that?” I ask.

“This way!” Maverick yells.

Stormy and I run over to discover a small opening Maverick is shoving himself through.

Stormy goes next, then Julia. As I’m pushing myself through, shots ring out. I jump out, and we sprint to the back of the barn.

“Run!” Stormy yells.

We all pick up our pace. The only way out of here is the road, which is a straight shot, which also means they will have a straight shot at us. Everywhere else, all I can see are blackberry bushes.

“Wait,” Julia calls out, and we all stop and turn to her. She points back the way we came.

Fortunately, the men who showed up don’t care to be quiet, and we can hear them running out the front of the barn and around the side where we exited.

“They killed my brother!” a man shouts from inside the barn. He runs out of the barn to join the other men.

This is why I love gravel. We can hear exactly where they are because they’re careless.

We quickly follow Julia as she leads us around the other side of the barn.

“There is an opening in those bushes over there.” She points to the other side of the cars. “We can get through there and then hide.”

We move to the front of the barn. I peek around the corner to see if the men are walking the perimeter of the building. They aren’t. All the men are going up the driveway, and it doesn’t appear any are looking back.

“Let’s get moving,” Stormy says.

I keep an eye on the men. They are far enough up the road that, hopefully, they won’t hear the gravel beneath our feet.

“Let’s go now!” I take off running, and they all follow me.

We cross the driveway and get to the opening Julia pointed out. It leads us onto someone else’s property.

“Check the barn again!” someone yells from the other side of the bushes.

Slowly, we make our way toward the road. Hopefully, we can get to our car unseen.

“Get off my damn property, you junkies!” a man yells.

We all turn back to find a white-haired man aiming a gun at us. Julia



stumbles, but Maverick has her.

“Sorry!” Stormy says.

But instead of accepting it and letting us go on, the man fires.

“I’m hit!” Stormy yells right before he falls to the ground.

“I got him! Keep going!” I yell.

Stormy is down, and it looks bad. But we don’t have time to lose, so I toss him over my shoulder and run for the road.

And I do. I run as fast as I can.

“There they are!” I hear behind me.

They must have heard the old man and followed the path we took.

I hit the road and turn left to the car. By the time I get there, Maverick and Julia are in the front seats. I throw open the back door and lay Stormy across the seat.

“I’m not going to make it,” Stormy says.

“I don’t want to hear that bullshit,” I yell at him. “You will make it. Even if I have to beat the life back into you.”

But Stormy’s body goes limp, and he doesn’t say another word as I jump in with him.

“Go!” I yell to Maverick.

The men run onto the road and fire at us.

“Get down!” Maverick yells to Julia, but she’s already down.

Maverick tears out onto the road. My focus is on Stormy. He’s pale, and there’s blood everywhere. I apply pressure to the wound as his eyes roll to the back of his head.

“Stay with me!” I yell. “We need a hospital now!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Julia

RELIEF. No, disbelief. That's what I felt when I saw Fox's face as he climbed that ladder. I knew he was going to get me out of there.

And we are almost to the road when I hear the gunshot and Stormy yells he's hit. I turn to run back. Maverick stops me. But I'm hard to stop, so he picks me up and tosses me over his shoulder.

"Let me down!"

Maverick never slows down. "If you go back, you'll be shot. We've got to get you safe."

As I bounce on top of Maverick's shoulders, I keep my eyes trained behind us. Once Stormy went down, Fox went to help.

We reach the car.

"Get in, now!" he demands.

I get in and keep my eyes trained on the road in front of us. Please, Fox, I need to see you and Stormy round that corner now.

But they don't.

What's taking so long?

I'm about to jump out of the car when Fox runs onto the street toward us, carrying Stormy. He gets Stormy into the back seat and jumps in. The guys were right behind them, and they are now firing at us.

Maverick gets us out of there, and I turn around to see if they are following. No sign of them.

“We need a hospital now!” Fox shouts.

I stare at Stormy. The man’s skin looks bluish, and his breathing is very shallow. Fox is applying pressure to his wound, but he’s right. We need to get him to an ER immediately.

Maverick tosses his phone into my lap. “Get me the directions for a hospital.”

I find one close by. “Turn left here!” I shout.

“Stormy, hold on. We’re getting you help,” Fox says.

I’ve never seen Stormy sick, much less hurt. He’s always seemed invincible.

“Right at the stop sign,” I say.

Maverick follows my directions, and we pull up at the emergency room. This place looks small, but I have to hope they can help him.

Maverick jumps out and helps Fox carry Stormy as we all run inside.

“He’s been shot and has lost blood. We need help,” Fox yells.

A doctor and nurse run to our aid. “A gunshot? We’re an urgent care facility and not set up for this sort of thing,” the doctor says.

“If you don’t operate, he will die,” I say. “Do you know how?”

The doctor nods. “Yes, let’s get him on a gurney. Nurse, get his blood type. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

A third person brings a gurney, and we all help to get Stormy on it. The doctor and nurse rush around and wheel him back.

Another nurse walks up to me. “You can’t have bare feet in here. I’ll get you some socks.”

“Wait, I cut my foot on glass.”

The nurse bends down and takes hold of my ankle. “Lift your foot.”

I do, and the nurse examines it.

“Wait here. I’ll get a wheelchair so we can take you back and clean that up.”

A moment later, the nurse returns with a chair. Fox tries to follow us but is stopped by someone asking for my insurance information.

Once we are in a room, the nurse turns to me. “What happened to you?”

“It’s a long story. I was kidnapped, then I escaped and cut my foot on glass.”

“I’ll call the cops.”

“No,” I tell her. “I’m a detective, and I just want to get fixed up and make sure Stormy is all right.” I don’t tell her I don’t have time right now to be

detained for what happened on that property.

“Did one of the men out there hit you?”

I realize how this looks, but I need to clear this up fast. “No, they actually saved me.”

She nods. “I’m going to clean your foot. This will sting,” the nurse says, but I’m too focused on what’s going on with Stormy.

A sharp pain on the bottom of my foot has my attention. “Holy hell, what is that?”

The nurse winces. “Told you it would hurt. Now I’m going to give the area a shot of lidocaine before I stitch it up. This might hurt, too.”

And it does hurt, but I close my eyes and try not to focus on the pain. I’m worried about Stormy.

“All done,” the nurse says.

I open my eyes.

“You’ll want to use crutches and keep your weight off that for at least three weeks to let the cut heal. Otherwise, you’ll rip your stitches open. Do you have any questions?”

“Where do I get crutches?”

The nurse smiles. “We have a couple of pairs here. I’ll get one for you.”

As she leaves, Fox and Maverick enter the room.

“Looks like they got you fixed up,” Fox says.

“Yeah, looks like I’ll be on crutches for a few weeks.”

Maverick winces. “A few weeks? Guess it was a deep cut.”

The nurse comes back into the room with the crutches, followed by another woman.

“You’re here with the gunshot victim, right?”

We all nod.

“We have a problem. We don’t have enough of his blood type here. It’s rare. I can call around, but frankly, we don’t have time.”

“What’s his type?” I ask.

“AB negative. But he can also accept O negative. Unfortunately, we have run out of it.”

I can’t believe our luck. “I’m AB negative. Let me donate.”

The nurse frowns. “You’re sure?”

“I am, but you can test me.”

“I’m O negative,” Fox says.

“Both of you, come with me.”

I grab the crutches and follow them to another room. The crutches are a little short, but they get the job done.

After a quick test, she confirms my blood type, then Fox's.

As we lie there, having our blood drawn, I turn to stare at Fox. His eyes are glassy.

"Hey, he's going to be all right."

Fox nods. "He has to be. He's like a father to me in a lot of ways."

I laugh.

"What's so funny?"

I shake my head. "Sorry, I was just thinking he would have been ten when he had you."

Fox arches a brow. "Either you think he's younger than he is, which I doubt based on his graying hair, or you think I'm older."

I think back to all our conversations. Our ages never came up. "Honestly, I have no idea how old you are. But to have enlisted and been a SEAL, I figured you must be in your mid-thirties or so, right?"

His eyes widen. "Or so?" He frowns. "Wait a minute. Do you think I'm some older guy pursuing a young woman?" He leans back and covers his eyes with his free hand. "Please say no."

"I never thought that. And who are you calling a young woman?"

He opens his fingers and peeks out of his hand at me. "I'd say you're twenty-five. When I met you, you had just been promoted to detective, and I overheard someone saying you were the youngest one Pine Valley ever had."

My stomach flutters, knowing he remembers everything about when we met. "Well, you are close. I'm twenty-six. What about you?"

He stares up at the ceiling. "Thirty. I had to leave the service earlier than I planned to."

"Do you want to talk about what happened?"

His eyes meet mine. "Not today."

I nod. "Hmm. Thirty. That's a little young for my tastes."

He laughs. "Well, apparently, I look older, so it should be fine."

"Stop it. That's not what I meant. Although you do look older with your facial hair."

His free hand rubs his beard. "Trust me, without this, I look younger than you."

"Hello, how are you two doing?" the nurse from before asks.

Another nurse follows her into the room.

“Fine,” we both say.

“Good, I’m here to collect the blood. They are on their last unit.”

The other nurse, who has a name tag that says Stan, removes the needle and places a band-aid in its place as the other nurse, who isn’t wearing a name tag, takes the containers of blood.

“Will that be enough?” I ask.

Stan turns to me. “I hope so. They are doing the best they can. The doctor can explain more later.”

*I hope so* isn’t the most reassuring response.

“You two can rest here for a bit if you’d like.”

They both walk out of the room, leaving us in our thoughts.

When I turn to Fox, his brow is furrowed, causing the worry line between his brows to stand out.

“Hey, thanks for saving me,” I say.

He gives me a weak smile. “I’ll always save you.”

Deep down, I know that’s true.

“How did you find me, anyway?”

He sits up. “Well, Trip did all the work. We found Doogan at a local airport, and I thought he’d gotten you on a plane. Once we confirmed that didn’t happen, we discovered he was driving Charlie Nichol’s car.”

“He’s the man who stabbed you.”

His eyes widen. “I think so. How did you know it was him?”

When Fox gave his statement after being stabbed, an officer showed him mug shots that included two men known to associate with Doogan. He pointed them both out but wasn’t sure which one stabbed him.

“He called Doogan and said he didn’t get paid for stabbing that guy. I knew he was talking about you.”

Fox stands up. “Well, at least he isn’t an issue anymore. But back to how we found you. Trip discovered Charlie has a brother with a big piece of land, and that’s where we found you.”

I sit up. “He could have taken me anywhere. Why risk taking me somewhere I could be found?”

“As far as he knew, no one was looking for him.” Fox nods his head toward the door. “Hey, follow me.”

I stand up, and he hands me the crutches. “Where?”

He grins. “I’m not sure yet.”

We walk down the hall, and he stops at a closed door labeled “Supply”

and opens it. I step in, and he takes my crutches and sets them aside.

Inside is a large metal shelving unit with boxes of paper towels, toilet paper, latex gloves, and many other supplies. The room is small, and we barely fit in here together.

There's a click, and I notice he locked the door.

He wraps his arms around my waist. "I just needed a moment alone with you. When I found out you were taken by Doogan, all sorts of really bad things went through my head."

My hands move to his chest. "I'm fine."

He pulls me close. "Thank God. But the man tried to kill me. I thought he would do the same to you or sell you to someone who would harm you."

I wrap my arms around his neck. "Fox, I'm fine. I really am."

"I'm sorry I waited so long to tell you how I feel about you, and when I finally did, all this happened. I can't lose you now."

He snuffles, and I lean back to stare at him. I've never seen Fox emotional until today. He's always so stoic.

"I'm not going anywhere," I say.

He reaches out and gently touches my face. "I'll kill him for what he did to you."

I caught my reflection in the mirror in the bathroom, and even I have to admit, my face doesn't look good. Doogan punched me twice. I have a black eye and a bruised cheek.

I take his hand from my cheek and hold it tight. "No, don't kill him. I want him to go to prison. Once the inmates find out he's part of a trafficking scheme involving children, they'll take care of him."

He nods. "You're right. I just don't know if I can control myself if I see him again."

"Hey, I'm going to be fine. You know that, right?"

He nods again but doesn't say anything. I go up on one tiptoe and kiss him.

The moment our lips meet, his grip on me tightens. He deepens the kiss, and it's like he's trying to communicate everything he's feeling. Or maybe the reality of what could have happened hits me. But my eyes well with tears, and I grip him tighter, too.

His phone buzzes, causing me to startle and pull back.

He glances at who is calling. "Sorry, I need to check this."

"Of course."

“It’s Maverick. He wonders where the hell we went.”

I laugh. “We should go find him.”

Fox leans down and kisses me one last time.

We find Maverick in the waiting room, rubbing his eyes.

“Hey, any news?” Fox asks.

Maverick nods. “He’s stable, but they want to transfer him to a hospital in Seattle right away. He’ll be medevacked there. The chopper is almost here.

“Did they get the bullet out?” I ask.

Maverick shakes his head. “It’s too close to his heart. And they don’t normally do surgery here. The doctor said all he could do was stabilize him so he’d survive the flight to Seattle.” His voice cracks, and I know he’s struggling right now.

Stormy is the heart of MTS, and we can’t lose him. We just can’t.

“Are you going with him?” I ask.

“No, I asked to, but I’m not allowed in the helicopter. I called Cowboy and told him what’s going on. He’s driving to Seattle now and will be there for Stormy. Fox and I have been ordered to return to Pine Valley. We are now on assignment looking for Aden Hart,” Maverick says.

“Okay, I can help you guys find Hart.”

Maverick looks at Fox, then steps back. “I’ll wait at the car.”

Fox takes my hand. “Actually, you are going to rest and heal your foot. I’m afraid you aren’t going to be much help to us in your condition.”

“But I know what Hart looks like.”

Fox squeezes my hand. “We do, too.”

Dammit. He’s right. “I hate that we’ll be separated again.”

Fox brushes the side of my face with his hand. “Me too. But think how sweet that dinner date will be when we finally get it.”

I grin. “At the rate we’re going, we’re not going to hit date three for months.”

He lowers his head and presses his forehead to mine. “Well, if that’s true, we might have to refine our rules about that.” He gives me a kiss that may not be fully appropriate for the public.

“While you’re out looking for Hart, keep an eye out because Doogan will probably be looking for you,” I say.

He grins. “Sorry, with all the chaos, I forgot to tell you. He was arrested at the airport. We don’t have to worry about him anymore.”

Two officers walk in and go to the front desk. “You called about a



gunshot?”

“We need to go now,” Fox says.

Despite being on crutches, I make great time out the door. Maverick must have seen the officers because he’s waiting for us right outside.

We will need to answer questions, but now is not the time to be interviewed by the cops. They’d take one look at me and detain Maverick and Fox.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Fox

I HATED LEAVING Julia at her place, but I don't have a choice. Rocco needs us.

Fortunately, I've been able to steal a nap here and there. A short one on the drive back to Pine Valley and another one as Maverick drove us to Rocco and the team's location.

I wake up just before we arrive and stretch as best I can inside the car. The sun has set, and it's dark out.

"How long have you and Julia been an item?" Maverick asks.

I choke on air. "What are you talking about?"

He rolls his eyes. "Don't. I saw you two kiss."

I told Julia I wouldn't tell anyone, but I guess neither one of us is really hiding it at this point. "We admitted we have feelings for each other and decided to try dating, and then we got the call that we had to fly to California and intercept a yacht with a weapon. And well, you know all the shit that went down since."

He laughs. The asshole laughs.

"It's not funny."

"Sorry." He wipes his eyes. "But I thought I had a tough time when I first tried to date Madison."

I turn in my seat to stare at him. "That's different. She was a suspect, and you dated her anyway."

His smile drops. "Hey, I knew she was innocent. I never would have put

the investigation in jeopardy.”

“I know. Sorry. I guess it’s just how things are for guys like us.”

He turns into the parking lot of a motel, and the guys are there waiting for us, leaning on two cars. “It gets better. Trust me.”

I hope he’s right. We get out of the car and walk over to the group.

“What’s going on?” Maverick asks.

“Hart made us,” Rover says. “No idea how, but he did.”

I frown. “Made you? What do you mean?”

Rocco pushes off the car. “Let me start from the beginning. After you left us in California, we got a tip about the weapon’s location.”

“A tip?” I ask.

Rocco grins. “Hart got desperate and tried to recruit a couple of former sailors he met in a bar to help him move a “heavy item.” He uses air quotes. “Not realizing what was going on, the guys agreed, thinking they’d make a fast buck.”

“I’m guessing they were surprised by what the item was.”

Rocco nods. “More than surprised. It was just the three of them, and when the two guys realized what it was, they suddenly weren’t so strong anymore. So, Hart left the room to call in a fourth guy. That’s when these guys took photos and sent them to their former commander. They didn’t know what was in the crate, but they knew this guy shouldn’t have it.”

“Did a fourth guy show up?” Maverick asks.

“He did. And at that point, they helped move it so as not to give away they knew what it was. It was loaded onto a white truck. One of the guys snapped a photo of the license plate. The truck was spotted on camera going over the Tacoma Narrows Bridge. We raced across the bridge and went west, figuring they were heading to the coast. But then Tex spotted the truck on a traffic camera in the next town over.”

“Here’s where it gets weird,” Rover says. “Based on their location, we were certain they were stopping for dinner.”

“As all terrorists carrying illegal weapons do,” CT says dryly.

Rover smirks. “Anyway, CT spots Hart sitting in a booth in the restaurant. It wasn’t even a good restaurant. I mean, of all the places to stop, he chose that place?”

I rub my temples. “I haven’t slept much in two nights. Please, just tell us what the hell happened.”

CT steps away from the car. “Gladly. We spotted Hart, so we parked and

got out of the car. The truck was nowhere to be seen. We decided to go in and talk to Hart, but as he saw us walking toward the door, he jumped up and ran out the back.”

I stare at both men. Neither is wearing anything to indicate they might work security or be law enforcement. Both give off military vibes but so do a lot of people in this area since it’s between the Naval base and the Army base.

“You think he knew who you were?”

“I do,” Rover says. “But how?”

That is a good question. After a leak where the identity of some of the MTS men was revealed, Stormy tightened security. Our website gives little information, and if you search MTS, you will not find any names or photos associated with it.

“That’s something we’ll have to ask him once we find him,” I say.

“Speaking of finding him, we’ll have to catch him off guard because he already knows who we are,” Bubba says, “from the Seafair chase.”

“I was there, too,” I say. “He will recognize me, too.”

“And since I’m in uniform, I won’t get too close. That leaves Maverick,” Rocco says. “Want to single-handedly bring in a weapon of mass destruction before it’s in the wrong hands?”

Maverick chuckles. “No pressure or anything, right?”

“Nah, no pressure,” Rocco says.

“If you didn’t see the truck at the diner, how do you know it wasn’t driven somewhere else by now?” I ask.

“We saw it,” CT says. “When Hart ran to the back of the restaurant, we chased after him. He ran out the back door, and there was the truck. He got to it and drove off before we could reach it.”

“By himself?” Maverick asks.

“Yes. He was in the restaurant by himself, too,” Rover says.

Why is he alone? He was alone when he approached the sailors in the bar. “He’s desperate,” I say.

The guys are now all staring at me.

“He had this elaborate plan using Seafair as some kind of decoy to throw us off. Then he had another plan to get the weapon on a plane and then on a yacht, which we know he didn’t do. Maybe something went wrong, and he’s now stuck not very far from where he stole the damn thing.”

“Or this is a second ruse to throw us off,” Rover says. “Do you really

think he'd have such an elaborate plan up until that point and then screw it up?"

We all fall silent as we process that.

Maverick shakes his head. "But if Fox is right and something went wrong, why would he eat in a restaurant and leave something so valuable to him parked in the back? It was out of sight from him. He could have just gone through some drive-through for dinner."

"Ah, shit." CT sighs. "You're right, Maverick. Instead, he eats in a diner, and even though he's alone, he sits in a booth right next to the window." CT turns to the other guys. "Come on, guys. He wants us to chase him."

"But how did he know it was us looking for him?" Rover asks. "The moment he saw us, he ran."

"That's a good question, since you two weren't at Seafair," Maverick says.

"What bothers me is why he asked two random men he'd never met in the bar to help him," I say. And it hits me. "I'll bet money whichever one of them drove to the bar has a Navy bumper stick or something that identified him," I say. "He wanted that truck reported."

Rocco stares up at the sky. "He moved the weapon to another truck last night."

"Bingo," I say. "He knew someone would be looking for him so he's still making more false trails."

Ace pushes off the car. "We've lost time. We need to find the other truck. He probably got them at the same time, so I'd bet money it looks the same. Same model, make, year."

Rocco has his phone to his ear. "Tex, we need your help."

While Rocco is explaining everything to Tex, I turn to Bubba and Ace. "Even if Tex finds the truck and gives us the license plate, it might not help. Yes, this first truck was on two cameras, but now we know he did that on purpose."

Ace nods as he pulls up a map app on his phone. "Right here is where the truck was loaded, according to the guys. Now, where would you go?"

That's when I see it. "It's on a train."

"Why would you think that?" Rover asks.

I point to the map. "It's near that train station. If he gets it on a train, he can get all the way to San Diego, where I'd bet a willing buyer is waiting for it."

“A willing buyer who knows how to pay their way back and forth across the border,” Ace says.

Maverick shakes his head. “Was this his plan all along, or does this guy have contingency plans for his contingency plans?”

“Let’s catch the asshole and ask him,” I say.

Rocco rejoins us. “Tex is working on finding the truck.”

“Forget the truck. We need to find a train,” Ace says.

Rocco frowns. “I was only gone for a minute, and now you need to find a train?”

He explains everything to Rocco, who agrees we are likely on the right track. No pun intended. Damn, I am tired if I think that’s funny.

Rocco called Tex back and explained the new urgent need. Fortunately, he’s able to get us a list of all the trains that ran through the area heading south. One passenger train and five freight trains are all possibilities. All are heading south. The first will arrive in San Diego in twenty-five hours. Rocco talks to his commander, who will contact him once he decides how to best handle this.

I yawn. “So, we head out tomorrow?”

“We won’t know until our commander calls.”

I nod and yawn again.

Rocco slaps my shoulder. “We have a room here. Why don’t you try to sleep? I have no idea how long it might be before my commander calls.”

“Sounds good to me.” At this point, I don’t care where I go as long as I can lie down and rest.

I’ve had back-to-back missions, but it’s been a long time since I’ve gone this long with so little sleep. The moment I lie down, I’m out.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Julia

I PULL the blanket tighter around me from my perch on the couch. After I got home, I couldn't bring myself to sleep in my bed. The fact that Doogan has keys to my place and has been in my bedroom prevents me from relaxing. Even though he was arrested, thanks to the guys, my house key was not found. Which means he could have left it somewhere for someone else to pick up.

That meant I slept on the couch with one eye on the door and my gun next to me. Not surprisingly, I didn't sleep well.

As soon as the chief was in this morning, I gave him a call and filled him in on everything that happened. He agreed with me that my cases could wait one day until I can come in tomorrow.

Although to be honest, they've been waiting since last week. But I don't have any pressing deadlines. Greenhow trying to jump in has nothing to do with the good of the department—like he wants everyone to believe—and everything to do with his stepping on me as he tries to climb the ladder.

Now, I need to get myself to the hardware store. I can't sit here and wait for someone Doogan sends to come after me.

My stomach grumbles. It's lunchtime. I call and order a sandwich from Kelly's. Since I know the staff, they agree to bring it out to my car when I arrive. That's one thing I love about this small town; we all look out for each other.

I get a shoe on one foot and grab my crutches. When I open the door to leave, my mom is standing there with her hand held up as if she was about to knock.

“Mom?” I swallow back the anger that rushes to the surface.

She’s the last person I want to see, well, aside from Doogan. I don’t have the energy to yell at her for all she caused with her key drama.

“So, you are alive,” she says and pushes past me, entering my house uninvited.

I close the door, but before I can say a word, she’s ready to pounce.

“If you didn’t want me to have the key, fine. But to steal from me? Twice? That’s cold. And you’ve ignored my calls! I thought I raised you better than that!”

Somehow she hasn’t noticed I’m on crutches or the bruises on my face. Or maybe she doesn’t care. Sometimes I’m not sure which it is. I move toward the couch and sit down.

“What are you ignoring me now, too?”

I guess I do have the energy to yell at her because the more she goes on, the more my rage builds. “For fuck’s sake, Mom. Have you looked at me? I’m on crutches, and I have a black eye. Did you think that maybe something happened?”

Her eyes widen. “You never talk to me like that.”

“No? Well, maybe I should. Because you made a copy of my key—without my permission, mind you—a horrible man was able to get in here easily. He kidnapped me, punched me a few times, and then took me to some barn to wait until the man he sold me to came by to get me. It was a miracle I was found and saved.”

She crosses her arms. “Being a little dramatic, are we?”

I stand up, using my crutches to get close to her. “Look at me! Really look at me. I’m not being dramatic. It’s what happened.”

She throws her hands in the air. “And it’s all my fault. It has nothing to do with the fact you went into the police force. Which, for the record, I thought was a terrible idea.”

That part is true. She’s never been particularly supportive of what I want to do. Usually, it was because she was too caught up in her own life. But when I joined the force, she told me daily for two weeks it was a mistake. Then she met Carl or Kyle; I lost track.

“And now I just wanted to stop and check on you, and you’re yelling at



me.”

Check on me? This is what she does. Anytime she thinks anyone is coming after her in any way, she pulls the victim card.

“It is not always about you! This is about me and the harm your actions caused *me*. You didn’t come here to check on me. The first words out of your mouth were to yell at me.”

She sighs. “When you can talk to me nicely, give me a call.” She storms out the door.

It would be nice to have a mom who was actually concerned about me, but sadly, I learned long ago that she only thinks of herself. It’s best I let her go and try not to dwell on it. But even as I say the words, I can’t tamp down the anger and hurt she causes me.

But I force myself to push it aside and run the errands I had planned. By the afternoon, I’ve eaten a fantastic Reuben sandwich. It’s really one of Kelly’s specialties. And I’ve installed a new lock on my door. Even after all that, I don’t feel safe here. And I’m pissed at Doogan for doing that. This was always my escape from everything going on in my life.

Despite my agitated state, I manage to fall asleep on the couch. When I wake, it’s dark outside. I grab my phone. It’s four in the morning? How the hell did I sleep that long?

I have a missed text from Fox telling me his assignment is going longer than expected and he’ll be in touch when he can. I also show a missed call from him, too. Damn, I’m sorry I missed that.

I push the button to listen to my new voicemails, forgetting Greenhow left one that I was purposely avoiding. As much as I want to delete it, I listen to it despite my better judgment. If he’s up to something, I need to be aware.

“Hey, McNamara, heard you might be out for a few more days. No worries, I’ll just keep working your cases until you return from your adventure.”

This man has grated on my nerves from the moment I met him. His desire to become chief one day is widely known to everyone. Somehow he got it in his head that I’m his competition, which couldn’t be further from the truth. I love my job and have no desire to lead the force. It’s about time he learns that.

I listen to Fox’s message, and while it should soothe me, it doesn’t. I need to get to the station and set that asshole, Greenhow, straight.

Why now? I think after dealing with Doogan, I’m all out of patience for

assholes.

I spend the next few hours stewing over his voicemail while I get ready and have breakfast. Finally, once I'm sure he's going to be at the station, I head over.

I storm into the building and march up to Greenhow's desk. Well, that's how it looks in my head. In reality, I slowly swing myself one step at a time, trying not to appear winded while I do so.

The asshole leans back and smirks as I approach. "You're back already?"

"You asshole," I say loudly, causing everyone in the office to stop what they're doing to look over at us.

Greenhow's smirk falls.

"I was kidnapped in my own bedroom two nights ago. After finally getting free and making it back home, I get a voicemail from you about how you're happy to take over my cases while I'm out on another adventure."

There's a gasp from one side of the room.

"Adventure? I'd like to take you on an adventure like that."

His brows shoot up, but I press on.

"Of course, you want to take over. You always want to get your hands on my cases any chance you get, thinking somehow that will propel you to the position of chief faster."

Greenhow stands up. "No, that's not what I mean. I just meant I'd help out."

I play his voicemail on speakerphone. Honestly, this isn't like me, but something snapped, and I'm done dealing with this guy. Maybe if everyone else hears who he really is under his fake smiles, he'll leave me the hell alone.

"The chief has been well aware of my location this past week. And I can assure you, none of it was an adventure."

He smiles. "It was just a term I used."

"Stop," I say. "We all know exactly what you were doing. And I'm here to tell you to knock it off. Stop playing games with me because I'm not having it."

"McNamara, are you all right? Maybe you need some time to rest," he says, taking a different approach.

"Fuck off, Greenhow." I spin, surprised to see the chief standing there.

He doesn't say a word, so I walk—well, swing slowly—toward the door because, at this point, I need air.

I'm surprised when several people start clapping. I turn back, and John, one of the officers, steps up to me.

"I thought it was only me he was stepping on," he says.

"Me too," Raymond, another detective, says.

Well, this is interesting. He's stepping on everyone to get to the top. But this is a small precinct. He had to know it would get out. Although, if I hadn't come in here angry, it might not have.

The chief steps up to Greenhow's desk. "Is this how you treat your colleagues?"

"Chief, no. There's been a misunderstanding," Greenhow says.

"In my office. Now."

The chief marches to his office, and Greenhow scrambles behind him. I jump when the office door slams. For ten minutes, the chief yells. I catch a few words, including that's not how a prospective chief is supposed to treat his future subordinates. Shit. Greenhow is in line for a promotion.

I've never seen the chief this angry. Maybe we'll all get lucky and Greenhow will be transferred to another station. Unlikely, but I can dream.

"Hope he doesn't make chief," John says as he walks up to my desk. "Because he'll really be gunning for you after this if he does."

Dammit. He's right.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Fox

MAVERICK SHOVES me out the door. “It’s go time!”

For the second time in a couple of days, I’m rappelling from a chopper. But this time, we are descending onto the middle of a freight train.

From the six trains that met the timeline of traveling through Seattle on their way to San Diego, we narrowed it down to two that could possibly have the weapon on board.

Of the other four, three didn’t stop in Seattle and one was a passenger train. It was ruled out first due to the fact there are more points of inspection and too many witnesses with everyone on board.

Maverick, Rocco, Bubba, and I are dropping onto Train One, as we are calling it. Gumby, Ace, and Phantom are dropping onto Train Two.

The Navy brought out their best drones again and narrowed down the cars that are candidates for holding the weapon. Our mission is to locate it and call it in.

Maintaining balance on top of a train going seventy miles per hour is not the easiest task. Rocco signals that he and Maverick will work their way to the back of the train, and Bubba and I are to work our way forward. We all nod in agreement and get to work.

Out of the one hundred and ten rail cars on this train, fifteen are freight cars and most likely where the weapon would be.

The sun is up, and it’s a new day which helps us see. But it also means we

need to be careful whenever the train turns because the engineer might see us, too.

Bubba leads the way, and we make our way up five cars. There is no ladder, and as Bubba prepares a rope to shimmy down, I step a foot on one freight car, lean out and put my other foot against the other freight car. From there, I grab the lock rods on the front container and manage to step down onto the coupler that hooks the cars together. Once secure, I check the lockbox on the door of the freight car, and sure enough, there's a lock. I nod up to Bubba, then I clip myself to the lock rods with the carabiners attached to the vest I'm wearing.

The experience reminds me of a time I went rock climbing. I wonder if Julia would want to go. I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head. No, stay focused.

Bubba hands down the bolt cutters. I cut off the lock and hand the tool back up to Bubba. I disengage the crossbar locks. Yeah, this isn't the first time I've broken into a freight car. Or even a moving one at that. It's sticky, but I force it, and the door starts to come open. Unfortunately, so does the one I'm hooked on. I swing out to the side of the train as we are about to head into a tunnel with very little room on any side.

"Tunnel!" I shout at Bubba.

His eyes have been trained on me, but as soon as he glances up, he makes himself flat. I reach up and grab the freight car and pull the door closed, saving myself from the cement wall of the tunnel we are now passing through.

My heart is pounding as I realize how close that was. As I step back down on the coupler, I grab my flashlight from my back pocket and shine it into the freight car.

Empty.

Not a damn thing inside. I close the door and secure the crossbar locks, and climb back to the top of the train once we're out of the tunnel.

We make our way to the next freight car on our list.

"I'm not doing that Jackie Chan shit you did," Bubba says as he hooks his rope on a bar across the top of the car we're on. He lowers himself down. Once he's stable on the coupler, I hand him the bolt cutters. He proceeds to do what I did, except he doesn't fly out to the side for the near-death experience.

The door opens, and he shines the flashlight inside. He frowns and then

walks in. From my perch on the roof of the car behind it, all I see is darkness and some shadows. He sticks his head out the back door.

“Bingo!” he shouts. “I’m calling the guys.”

He steps back into the car. I turn my attention to where we’re going, and I spot another tunnel up ahead. I lie flat. By the time we get closer, I see it’s quite long, which puts us in total darkness.

Once we’re out of the tunnel, Bubba steps out of the car and locks it back up. Then he joins me back on top of the train. We lie back and stare at the sky.

“We’re going to have to ride this until it gets stopped at the next station,” he shouts.

It’s too loud to make any real conversation, so instead, I get lost in my thoughts. I wonder what Julia is doing now. She is likely at the station, but I hope she’s at home relaxing.

My mind goes to Stormy. This morning, Cowboy updated us that Stormy had made it through surgery yesterday and had woken up cranky. I laugh, imagining the poor staff at the hospital dealing with a cranky Stormy. I’m sure he’s pissed off he got shot.

Loud brakes squeal as the train slows when it approaches the station. Since we’re about thirty cars from the front, we can’t see exactly what is going on. But once the train stops, we make our way down from the top and onto solid ground.

Rocco and Maverick jog to meet up. Rocco has his phone to his ear, directing the team at the station to where we are. Several armed Navy sailors arrive as we step out of the way and walk over to what appears to be the man in charge.

“You must be Rocco,” the guy says. He holds out his hand. “Agent Folger. Glad to meet you.”

We all shake hands, and Folger stares at Maverick and me for a little too long. I realize why.

“Folger. You’re Coff’s brother,” I say.

He nods. “How’s he doing up there?”

“He’s good. He and Delaney are happy.”

Folger nods. “That’s good. Also, great work here. I understand you’ve all been going in circles trying to locate this thing.”

“Going in circles about sums it up,” Rocco says.

“Where’s Aden Hart?” I ask. “Is he in custody?”

Folger sighs. "I'm afraid not. We believe he's still up somewhere near Seattle. The Seattle office is working on that now."

One of the sailors steps up. "Sorry to interrupt, but we can't extract the item from the freight car. This other freight car is in the way."

Folger stares at the cars. "I'll call in some equipment to help." He turns back to us. "I'll let your commander know we no longer need you here. Thank you again." He takes off toward the train station with his phone to his ear.

"Time to go home?" Maverick asks.

"I hope so," I say.

\* \* \*

AS SOON AS my plane lands in Seattle, I check in with Cowboy to see how Stormy is doing. He's stable and resting, which is good. He's also requested no visitors. I suspect he doesn't want the guys to see him as weak.

I call Julia, but after my third yawn, she tells me to get some sleep. I take her advice and go straight home. I sleep through the night and awake the next morning to my phone buzzing. Five missed calls from Cowboy. I jump up and call him back.

"What's going on?" I ask when he answers.

"Hey, Fox. Can you come into the office as soon as possible?"

I rub my eyes as I force myself to wake up. "Sure. Is this about Stormy?"

"No, he's fine."

"All right. Can I take a shower first?"

"Please do." He ends the call.

I laugh and toss the phone onto the bed.

By the time I make it into the office, it's still early. Cheeto is on his perch on the roof, but for some reason, he leaves me alone today.

When I walk in, Maverick, Rover, and CT are all in Stormy's office with Cowboy. I glance at the water cooler. The water jug is gone, and I haven't heard anything about Coff.

"How's Coff doing?" I ask as I take a seat.

"He's fine now. But he had the water tested and confirmed there was something in it."

"What?" Maverick asks.

Cowboy stares at me.

“Fox, have you come into the office after hours in the last week?”

I laugh but stop when I realize he’s serious. “You’re not kidding?”

He shakes his head. Does this man seriously think I’d try to hurt Coff or anyone here?

“No, I’ve been on one assignment after another and haven’t been in town most of the time.”

I’m used to keeping Stormy apprised of my location. Cowboy is not normally in the loop because he’s usually more of a silent partner. He owns a ranch where he lives with his wife and kids. But something tells me that I should have checked in with him.

Cowboy leans back. “First, Rover and CT reported to me that Aden Hart made them as they approached him in a restaurant. I thought perhaps that could be related to the break-in last year when the identities of several of you were leaked. The test results for the water Coff drank came back, indicating someone had tampered with it. It seems too much of a coincidence those two things happened so close together.”

“Are you saying someone broke in again?” CT asks.

“Yes. I checked the front door log, and someone used Fox’s code to come in on Saturday night at three in the morning.”

All eyes are on me. I sit back and cross my arms. “I was zip-tying men on a yacht that night.”

“That was the night before we were made,” CT says.

“Exactly.” Cowboy turns to me. “Fox, I never thought this was you, but we do need to figure out if whoever broke in has any connection to you.”

“I understand,” I say. My mind races, trying to think if anyone I know would have any reason to sabotage this place. I come up empty.

He nods. “I pulled up all the video footage for that night, and the person who broke in spent time in Stormy’s office.”

“Not again,” Rover grumbles.

Last year, someone used Stormy’s code to get in and steal important financial information.

Rover turns to me. “Please tell me you don’t use the date you lost your virginity as a code, too.”

“No, of course not,” I say defensively.

Cowboy leans back and rubs his chin. “No, unfortunately, it looks like he used a date.”



“Come on, man!” Maverick says.

“So amateur,” Rover says.

“Really?” CT says, shaking his head.

“Wait a minute, it’s a date, but it’s not related to me.”

Cowboy continues to stare at me, waiting for more.

“It’s Julia’s birthday.”

Rover stands up, shaking his head.

“What?” I say defensively. “Why would anyone in the outside world think I’d use Julia’s birthdate for a door code?”

CT points at me. “You’re right. Who all knows about your crush? Besides all of us guys.”

Cowboy stands up and leans on the table. “You have a crush on McNamara?” Then he waves his hand. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Did the camera get the person as they entered?” I ask.

Cowboy scrolls on his phone and turns it around. It shows a person sitting at Stormy’s desk. The figure is wearing a dark hoodie, and it’s too dark to even determine if it’s a man or a woman. “As you can see, the person went to Stormy’s desk, but we can’t make out any identifying information.”

“Hey, there are cameras inside now?” Rover asks, looking up.

“Yes, several.”

“Where?” Rover asks.

“Don’t worry. There aren’t any in your office,” CT says.

I bite back a smile. One time Rover and Connie had sex in his office thinking no one would be able to hear them. Everyone heard them. Well, except Stormy which was for the best.

Cowboy frowns at CT’s statement but continues. “This person was careful. Based on the ease with which he flipped the water cooler, I’m certain it’s a man. His back blocks his actions, but we now know he put something in the water. Then he went to Stormy’s desk. This morning I checked, and unfortunately, Stormy still writes things down.”

Rover stands up and walks over to Stormy’s desk. There are a few papers I can see from where I sit.

He holds up a piece of paper. “Hart matter. Rover and CT.” His eyes move back to us. “This is just our names. Did he have photos of us somewhere?”

Cowboy shook his head. “No, but if this is the same person who broke in last time, he already has photos of everyone.”

Rover drops the paper. “So, some guy knows both the date Stormy lost his virginity and Julia’s birthdate. And this person broke in here, saw two names on a list, and somehow is also friends with Hart and showed him photos of us that he had stored from last year?”

“That can’t all be related. That makes no sense,” Maverick says.

“I spoke to Trip, and it’s possible this person is using some kind of technical device that figures out the codes and opens the door. Then he wouldn’t need to know those dates,” Cowboy says.

Maverick glances at Cowboy. “But it still doesn’t make sense. This means the same person tipped off Hart and came after our financial records last year.”

Rover sits back down at the conference table. “It does make sense if the person is going after Stormy. The financial assault didn’t work. Now he’s trying to undermine our cases.”

“Or get us killed,” CT says.

We all go silent as that sinks in.

“What other information was on Stormy’s desk?” I ask. “Are we all at risk?”

Cowboy sighs. “I’m not sure, but until we know, everyone needs to be on guard.”

CT reaches for a pad of paper and pen in the middle of the conference table. He writes fast for a few minutes, then sits up and stares at us.

“What if the person who broke in twice is also the person behind the fire and the maggot candy? What if one person is behind all of it?” CT says. “What would your gut tell you?” He stares each one of us in the eye.

“That it’s personal,” I say.

Rover leans forward. “Very personal.”

“But who is the real target?” CT asks.

And we’re back where we were. We don’t know. But we will find out.

“It has to be Stormy or Cowboy,” I say. “Think about it. The financial document leak, the fire, hurting employees with tainted water, maybe getting employees killed by outing them—it all leads to one thing, hurting MTS. So, either this person has a grudge against MTS, or they want to hurt Stormy or Cowboy.”

Cowboy tosses a pen onto the table and leans back. “The number of people who might have a grudge against one of us or this company is quite long.”

Rover leans forward. “Maybe Trip can help us narrow it down?”

I lean back and scratch my cheek. How can you narrow down a pool of people you can’t even define?

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Julia

ONCE I CLOSE the door behind me, I finally relax for the first time all day. I'm home, and while I don't want to think about work, it's all that floods my mind.

After my incident with Greenhow yesterday—"incident" is the chief's word, not mine—he was given some time off.

Without the man at the station, I should have been able to relax. But I couldn't because I kept imagining him coming in and blaming me for ruining his career. Which is crazy because he probably will only get a few days off. They will call it a vacation, and he'll manage to get promoted whenever our current chief retires. Stevens hasn't said he plans to retire, but there have been rumors. And he's stated many times that once he retires, he plans on doing a lot of fishing. Three months ago, he bought a new boat. I suspect his announcement will be soon.

Someone knocks on my door after I settled down on the couch. Please don't be my mom again. I haven't called her or responded to her text. Yes, she sent a text, but all it said was to call her when I'm ready to apologize.

I make my way to the door and peer out the peephole. My entire body lights up when I see Fox.

I open the door, and he steps in, wrapping his arms around me and lifting me up. I drop the crutches. He kicks the door closed and carries me to the couch, where he sits down and arranges me next to him. Then he kisses me,

and it's everything I need right now.

Finally, he pulls back, grinning, "Hi."

"Hi." I grin back. "I really needed that today."

His smile drops, and he strokes my cheek. "What happened?"

After a deep breath, I tell him everything that's happened the last two days.

"Do you think Greenhow will come after you?"

"I was worried at first, but I doubt it. I suspect this will all get swept under the rug, and he'll be just fine."

Fox frowns. "I'm happy your chief is calling out problem behavior, but from what I've known of him the last few years, I'm a bit surprised. Why now?"

"I think he's about to announce his retirement, and Greenhow is the likely candidate to replace him. My guess is that he wants to have a smooth transition. Although no one likes Greenhow, so I don't see that happening."

"Are you going to apply for chief?" he asks.

I snort. "No. I like working on cases, not babysitting."

"Good. Because I like working with you."

I lean into his arms and stare out the window while his hand strokes my back. "How are Peaches and Stormy?"

He kisses the top of my head. "Peaches is doing much better and was released this morning. He and Harding flew back home. She was able to get some time off to take care of him. As for Stormy, he's still in the hospital, but he's going to be all right. He FaceTimed us at MTS this afternoon since he refused to let any of us visit. He looks good."

The news about Stormy is like a weight being lifted off my shoulders. He was shot trying to rescue me, and I couldn't help but feel responsible.

"I'm happy they will be fine. But why doesn't Stormy want visitors?"

He shrugs. "My guess is he doesn't want to appear weak, but honestly, I'm not sure." He tightens his arms around me.

"Did you find the weapon?"

"We did. But not Aden Hart."

I sit up to stare into his eyes. "Does this mean you're heading out again soon?"

He shakes his head. "No, the FBI is taking the lead on finding him. MTS has something else we have to figure out."

"What?"

He purses his lips and doesn't answer.

"You know, I'm in the loop about a lot of what goes on at MTS, so it's not like you're talking to some random person on the street. You can talk to me."

He blows out a breath and leans his head back on my couch. "You're right. I'm so used to keeping everything close, but you might have some ideas on this one."

"Sounds intriguing."

He lifts his head. "We think someone is trying to sabotage MTS or one of us. We aren't sure who is being targeted, but it looks like it could be Stormy or Cowboy."

I sit up out of his embrace. "Why do you think that?"

"Well, a lot of random things have happened. The most recent was someone broke into the office using my passcode. They put something in the water cooler, which made Coff really sick."

"Coff? Is he okay?"

Fox nods. "He's better, but he's been at home with stomach cramps. The vomiting finally stopped yesterday."

"I didn't hear about this. Did he file a police report?"

"No, we are handling it ourselves."

"They used your passcode?" My brow shoots up. "Is it also the date you lost your virginity?"

He frowns but avoids my eyes. "No, of course not."

"But it was something that someone guessed?"

He nods and blows out his breath. "It's your birthdate."

I'm surprised by his response. "Your code is only four digits? Because you didn't know my age until recently, so you wouldn't have known my birth year."

He shakes his head, and his cheeks turn pink.

"Was this a new code?"

He shakes his head again. The man has grown very quiet.

"Fox, how did you know what year I was born?"

"Don't be mad." He licks his lips. "At one point, I searched for any information I could find about you."

I sit up taller. This is either really charming or possibly creepy.

His hands go up in defense. "Trust me, I wasn't stalking you. It's just after I met you. I really liked you, but I wasn't sure if you were single. I

started searching for you on social media but couldn't find anything."

I cross my arms. "I'm a detective. I'm not going to risk social media."

He nods. "That's what I finally figured. So, then I..." He winces as he looks out the window.

"Fox?"

He turns back. "I ran a search on you that gave me your address and date of birth."

"Wow. You stalked me?"

He meets my eyes. "No! I never drove by or did anything with the address. As for the birthday, Stormy asked us to change our codes after the fire, and for some reason, that was what came to my mind."

I relax back on the couch. "Let me get this straight. You were obsessed with me?"

With a grin, he leans over and kisses me. "I am. But there was more than someone putting something in the water."

My smile drops. "What? Is everyone else all right?"

"They are. But this person was seen at Stormy's desk going through his files. It was the night before Rover and CT were made by Hart on an assignment. We believe this person somehow got to Hart and warned him that Rover and CT would be coming for him."

Someone who knows Hart broke into MTS? "Wait, you said there were a lot of random things. What else?"

He rubs the back of his neck. "Well, remember when someone broke in and stole the financial information last year?"

"Of course, I worked that case. We never figured out who it was, but it had to be someone who knew Stormy personally because of the date. "

He laughs. "Yes, that date." His smile falls. "We think that person left chocolates with maggots in them."

I hold up my hand. "Wait, you are saying one person broke in, stole financial records last year, left chocolates with maggots, and this year poisoned the water and took new information that they somehow gave to Aden Hart?"

He shrugs. "Yeah, and the fire. Don't forget that."

"You think one person is behind all of that?"

"You don't?"

No, I don't. "I can see one person being behind all of it except the Hart part. What are the odds that someone sabotaging you in the past also knows

the very man you are all working to find now? A man, keep in mind, who hasn't been in this area until recently."

He intertwines his fingers in mine. "Are you sure about that? Do you know for sure Hart hasn't been lurking around all this time?"

Am I? "Well, I haven't been keeping tabs on him, but I was briefed that he was a big part of the Golden Defense company based in California."

But the more I think about it, the more it makes sense he has been here for a while at least. That's how he knew all the ways into the park for Seafair and what local airport to use.

Fox squeezes my hand. "That's where we are stuck. Who would want to hurt Stormy or Cowboy and also knows how to find Hart?"

"Ah, shit." I close my eyes. Please don't let this be true.

Fox turns to face me. "You know someone who fits all that?"

I do, but I have to be wrong. "Do you remember Detective Jeanine Hone?"

He blinks a few times. "Yes, she worked with us before you did. Why would you suspect her?"

I tell him about the strange conversation I'd had with her one time after Fox had left the station. "She was warning me not to become involved with anyone over there. But the way she was talking, I had the impression something had happened between her and someone."

"Her and Stormy?"

I nod.

He stands up and has his phone to his ear before I can ask who he's calling. Although I already know.

"Stormy, hey, sorry to bother you." He turns on the speakerphone.

"Bother? Hell, I'm bored out of my fucking mind over here. What's going on?"

"I have to ask you something personal, but it might be related to the fire and the break-in."

"Okay, ask."

Fox widens his eyes as he stares at me. "Did you date Detective Hone?"

Stormy grunts. "You think she could be behind all that?"

"It's a hunch."

"Hmm. Well, we did see each other for a while, but damn, this isn't something I wanted to talk to you guys about."

Fox drops his head. "I'm sorry. I wouldn't ask if I didn't think this was a



real possibility.”

“Yeah, I get it. We worked together quite a bit and became friends. One night over too many drinks, we decided to give the friends-with-benefits thing a try. Well, it worked great for about two weeks. Then she started to get clingy, so I ended it.”

I’m surprised because I always had the impression Stormy was searching for *the one*.

“I’m guessing she didn’t take it very well?” Fox asks.

“No, she took it fine. Or at least I thought. Things were awkward for about a week, but she started dating some other guy. Are you sure she could be behind the fire?”

“Not sure yet, but I’m going to dig a little deeper. I just needed to confirm something happened between you two.”

Stormy sighs. “I’d like to say don’t tell the other guys about this, but something tells me they will need to know. I guess I should be glad I’m not in the office.”

“Maybe we can solve this before you get back.” Fox winks at me.

“Please do.”

“Okay, I’ll let you know if this leads to anything. Take care.” Fox ends the call, and we stare at each other for a moment, letting it all sink in.

“There’s one issue,” Fox says. “The person who broke in a few nights ago flipped a nearly full water cooler. Is Hone strong enough to do that?”

I stare at him, wondering if he’s being serious. When he doesn’t smile, I realize he is.

“Jeanine can flip a man, so yeah, she can lift a forty-pound water bottle.”

“And when you worked on that prior case involving Hart, was she involved?”

“We were all involved in that case. It was the biggest murder investigation in our area.” My mind goes back to Hart walking out of the court, smiling.

“She was just as upset as I was that an officer had planted evidence leading to his acquittal.”

Fox frowns. “Was she that officer?”

I shake my head. “No, he was new and worked with the county.”

“Well, we are showing a connection to both Stormy and Hart. Clearly, we’re still missing pieces to this puzzle,” Fox says. “Someone should talk to Hone and see if she says anything incriminating.”

“If anyone talks to her, it should be me. I can bring up the advice she gave me and go from there.”

“Are you up for that?”

I grab my phone from the coffee table. “I can be. I’ll see when she’s available.” I send her a message that I’d like to talk sometime soon, and before I can put my phone down, she replies.

“It’s on. Tomorrow. Happy hour.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Fox

“If you’re meeting Hone tomorrow, it looks like we might both be free tonight. I was thinking we could have our dinner date,” I say as I hold Julia in my arms.

“Do you mean out at a restaurant? Or here?”

I’m thinking on her bed, but instead, I say, “Which would you prefer?”

She leans back and smiles. “I would prefer to have you strip naked now, and later, we can order pizza.”

I chuckle.

“It wasn’t a joke,” she says, frowning.

“No, it’s not that. It’s just that you say whatever is on your mind. I really like that.”

She grabs my shirt. “Good. Because what’s on my mind is getting you naked and into my bedroom.”

“Well, I guess we technically have had three dates now. The boat was one, the kiss in the car later was two, and this is three.”

I help her finish taking off my shirt, then I reach for hers. She yanks it off, revealing a red lace bra.

“Good. I can’t wait any longer to be with you,” she says.

The urgency I felt a moment before is now gone because I want to take my time. I stand up, and with one arm wrapped around her waist, I pull her until she’s lying on the couch.

My other hand moves up her stomach to her breast as I lean down and kiss her. Her fingers tangle in my hair, and as our kiss deepens, she pulls a few strands. Not hard but enough that it turns me on even more.

Her hands go to my pants to unbutton them. I stand up and remove them but leave my boxer briefs on. She removes her pants, and that's when I see that her panties match her bra.

"Fuck, you are so sexy," I say.

She spreads her legs, and I position myself between them. Right now, I'm thankful she has a deep couch because I don't want to stop to move. I press my cock to her core, and her nails rake down my back.

"Press harder," she says.

I do, and she wraps her legs around me as I keep going. Her hands go to my cheeks as she pulls me down for a kiss that turns frenzied fast.

I can't remember the last time I made out like this, grinding like a high school kid, but I love every minute of being with Julia. I've never been so turned on in my life.

Her hands move into my briefs as she pulls them down. "Take these off," she says.

I stand, but instead of taking mine off, I slowly remove her panties, and I settle between her legs. "I have fantasized about making you come on my tongue so many times," I say.

She props herself up on her elbows and watches me. I don't tease her but instead dive in, licking her entire slit, causing her to jump.

"Oh God, yes."

I lick again, focusing on her clit, and I watch her until I find a pattern that leaves her panting and pulling my hair. I suck, and she bucks against me.

"Right there! Don't stop!"

I don't. I keep up the pattern and insert two fingers inside her. She clenches against my fingers, and my cock aches, wanting to be inside her.

She rides my mouth and fingers, moaning until I feel her quivering. "Oh God, I'm coming!"

I continue to suck as she screams through her orgasm, squeezing my fingers until she goes limp. I sit up and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Fox, that was incredible." She leans up and pulls down my boxer briefs.

I step back and step out of them, and then it hits me. "Fuck, I don't have a condom." How the hell am I not prepared? "I'm so sorry. It's been so long, and I didn't think to go to the store."

She stands next to me. "I'm on the pill and clean. If you want to go without."

Go without? I haven't done that, but I've also never trusted anyone the way I trust Julia. But she takes my pause as hesitation.

"If you're worried about Dan, we always used condoms."

I frown. Not a visual I want right now. Instead, I lean down and kiss this woman. As our tongues explore each other's mouths, I unhook her bra. When she removes it, I sit on the couch and pull her onto my lap. I line myself up with her, and she sits down hard and fast, causing me to be fully seated and ready to explode.

My hands grip her hips. "You feel so fucking good," I grunt out as I go to lift her hips.

But she takes over and moves in a circular motion, yet also moves up and down, slamming me into her again and again.

"Oh, Royce, I love your cock." She slams down on it again. "I feel so full."

I never took Julia for a dirty talker, but I love it. "Yeah? You think you feel full now?" I pull her off and move until she's on her hands and knees on the couch. I move behind her. "Don't use your arms to hold you up. I want this ass in the air," I say as I smack it.

She does what I ask then I line up and slam into her. I nearly come right there.

"Royce, yes!"

I reach around and find her clit, rubbing it as I slam into her again and again. It doesn't take long, and she screams as her pussy clenches around me. I thrust in one more time, and I'm a goner.

Once the blood returns to my head, I realize what I've done.

"Julia, I'm sorry. Are you all right? I didn't mean to get that rough."

She stands up and turns around, smiling. "Are you kidding me? Holy shit, Fox. I had no idea this sexual beast was hiding out in my friend. If I had, I would have attacked you a long time ago."

I'm relieved she liked it. "You bring it out of me. I've never been so turned on in my life." I kiss her before I go to the bathroom and grab a washcloth.

After I clean her up, I pull her into my arms, and we lie together. I've had countless fantasies about this woman, but nothing came close to the reality of being with her. And right now, I can't wait to do that all again.

Julia props herself up on an elbow and meets my eyes. "I have a question, but if you don't want to talk about it, that's fine."

I chuckle. "Great introduction for a question. Go ahead."

"Before you said you left the service earlier than you wanted to. What happened?"

It's not something I like to talk about, but I don't want to hold anything back from her. I take a deep breath. "I left because my mom was sick. She had cancer."

"Oh, Fox, I'm sorry."

"My dad took off on us when I was still a baby, and she basically single-handedly raised me while keeping a roof over our heads. It was hard on her, but I'm so grateful for all she did for me." I stare at the ceiling as the memories flood back. "I didn't tell my mom that I had leave coming up, and I went home and surprised her. But I was the one surprised. She hadn't told me she was sick."

The memory of her answering her door when I knocked is one I'll never forget. My mom had lost thirty pounds and all her hair.

"When I saw her, I asked her why she hadn't told me."

Julia takes my hand in hers and squeezes.

"She said she didn't want to worry me because she was certain she was going to beat it. Until she'd gotten her latest test results earlier that week."

I can't hold back the emotion as I remember sitting across the table from her that day as she told me she had six months at most.

"My commander was understanding, and I was voluntarily discharged. I spent every day of the next seven months with my mom." I smile at the memory. "Yes, seven. At the end, she joked we got an extra month out of the damn cancer." I sniffle and wipe at my eyes. "I miss her so much."

Julia leans into me and holds me. "I'm so sorry. But I get it. My mom was a single mother, too. It was always the two of us against the world."

"Yeah? You don't talk about her much. What's she like?"

Julia sits up and smiles. "When I was young, she was great. She had me when she was eighteen, so I like to think I got her best years. She's the smartest person I've ever known. Everything was great until it wasn't." Her smile fades. "She met a man when I was eleven, and he was living with us two weeks later. Then, two weeks after that, he was gone. My mom fell into a deep depression and never recovered. Now she goes from man to man and doesn't really care about me anymore."

I pull her close. "I'm so sorry. That must be hard."

She nods into my chest. "It is. She has medication for her depression, and

when she takes it, she almost seems like herself. But she hasn't taken it in years."

I squeeze her tight. "I know it's not the same, but I care about you very much."

She takes a deep breath. "Thank you. But enough about my mom. We should go get dinner. Maybe after, we can come back here and do this again."

I grin. "Yeah, I'd like that."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Fox

WAKING up this morning with Julia curled around me made me the happiest man. It's how I want to wake up every day. Part of me wonders if I'm falling too fast for this woman. The other part remembers we've been friends for a couple of years, so it's natural for things to move at an accelerated pace.

I drove her to work on my way to MTS. When I walk into the kitchen, I spot Maverick next to the coffeepot. He pours himself a cup of coffee, then turns around and leans against the counter.

"We might have a lead on who broke in here," I say.

His brows jump. "Really? Who?"

"Remember Detective Hone? We used to work with her."

He crosses his arms. "I do, but that was a few years ago."

I pour myself a cup of coffee and sit at the table in our little office kitchen. "Well, it turns out she and Stormy tried the friends-with-benefits thing, and when she got clingy, Stormy called it off."

Maverick sits across from me. "Well, that would fit the personal angle. But why now?"

I shrug. "I don't know. But it really isn't *now*. If we go back to the fire, that was early last year."

He leans forward onto the table. "Let's say it is her. Why would she risk her career? For what? To cause Stormy some discomfort?"

"Not sure, but Julia is going to have drinks with her later today. When



Julia was assigned to work with us, Detective Hone told her not to get involved with any of us.”

Maverick stares at his coffee. “It’s good advice. I mean, no offense to you, but if she’s working with all of us, it’s better to keep it professional. But that said, I am happy for you two.”

Rover walks into the room. “Happy for who?”

“Maverick and Sarina,” I say, hoping he believes it was me who spoke.

Rover grins. “Yeah, me too. You’ve really loosened up since you two got together.” He pours himself a cup of coffee.

“Yeah, whatever,” Maverick says.

Wanting to change topics before Maverick lets something slip, I turn in my chair to Rover. “We might have a lead on who’s coming after MTS.”

Rover turns around and leans against the counter. “You mean who’s coming after Stormy?”

Maverick stands up. “You think it’s Stormy he’s after?”

“I do.” Rover takes a sip of his coffee.

Maverick goes to the sink and puts his cup next to it.

Rover watches him as he steps away. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Maverick glances at me, then Rover. “Walking.”

Rover points to his cup. “You use it; you clean it.”

I lean back and prop my legs on an empty chair as Maverick stares at the cup. Finally, he goes to it and washes it. After he dries it and puts it away, he turns to Rover.

“Happy?”

Rover smiles. “As a clam.”

Maverick shakes his head. “I’ve been trying to figure out how the same person could know both private codes for Fox and Stormy. I think Trip is right. They must be using some device to figure it out.”

“And it was just by chance it was Stormy the first time?” Rover asks. “My gut says it’s someone who knows him.”

While these two stare at each other, I stand up. “Well, you’ll like the lead I told Maverick about. Apparently, he wasn’t convinced.”

Maverick smiles. “No, it’s pretty fucking convincing. I’m just messing with Rover.”

Rover’s brows shoot up as he looks at me. “What lead? Why didn’t you tell the rest of us about it?”

“I was about to. I only told Maverick a minute before you walked in.”

CT passes by.

“Hey, CT! Fox knows who broke in!” Rover yells.

This guy. “I didn’t say I know. I said I had a lead.”

“Yeah, Maverick said it was convincing, and if you can convince a hard-ass like him, it’s got to be true,” Rover says.

CT steps into the kitchen, laughing.

Maverick glares at Rover. “Hard-ass?”

Rover shrugs. “It’s true. It takes a lot of evidence to convince you of anything.”

“I think that makes him cautious, not a hard-ass,” I offer.

Maverick nods to me. “Yes, I agree.

“Damn, I need coffee to be around you guys,” CT says as he walks over to the pot. Then he holds it out. “Okay, who’s the asshole who took the last cup and didn’t brew anymore?”

Both Maverick and I point to Rover.

“I was getting to it.” He goes to the cupboard to grab the coffee.

“Fox, stop stalling. Tell us, who broke in?” CT asks as he takes a chair.

“Well, if you all would stop bickering, I will.”

CT motions his hands to me, indicating he’s ready. I explain everything that I told Maverick to CT and Rover.

CT gags. “No, no, no. Why did you put that in my head?”

“What?” Maverick asks.

“The image of Stormy having sex.” CT rubs his temples. “Get it out. Give me something else to visualize.”

“Rover’s sister,” I say with a straight face.

CT’s eyes pop open, and he glares at me. Most of us, except Rover, all know he’s got a thing for Rover’s little sister, Amber. I’m pretty sure something is going on between them. But somehow, Rover is clueless. Or maybe he plays dumb because he doesn’t want to know.

Rover glares at CT, then points at him. “Don’t you dare visualize my sister!”

Or maybe he doesn’t know.

“Visualize Connie chewing out Rover,” Maverick says as he arches a brow in my direction.

CT laughs. “Yeah, I could replay some of their fights for days.”

“They aren’t fights,” Rover says. “It’s foreplay.”

CT scrunches his nose. “I need to get out of here.” He jumps up and

leaves.

“What about your coffee?” Rover calls after him.

“Not worth it!” CT yells from down the hall.

Rover slaps me in the stomach, and I wince. While I’m mostly healed, it’s still sore. He realizes his mistake.

“Shit, sorry. You okay?”

I nod.

He frowns again. “Why the hell would you tell CT to think about my sister?”

I shrug.

“I know she has a thing for him. The last thing I need is anyone encouraging him,” Rover says.

“Wait, your sister has a crush on CT?” Maverick asks.

Rover nods. “I’m pretty sure of it. Anyway, just don’t mention her again. All right?”

“All right,” I say.

Rover leaves the kitchen, and I turn to Maverick. “At the rate he’s catching on, CT and Amber will be married with kids before he figures it out.”

Maverick laughs. “Stop, it’s not funny. I don’t think they are actually together. Do you?”

I bark out a laugh. “You’re kidding?”

He shakes his head.

“They have to be. Remember Rover talking about Amber having hickeys last year?”

“Yeah, but we don’t know who they came from.”

He’s right. We don’t. I just assumed.

I spend the rest of the day doing paperwork for my last assignment or three. They are all blending together at this point.

Julia is stuck at her desk, too, due to her foot injury. At the end of the day, I pick her up from the station, noticing Greenhow is still gone, then I drive her to the local bar for her meeting with Detective Hone.

While she goes inside, I wait outside in case she needs me to step in. Even as I say that, I realize I’m being overprotective.

Rover walks up to my car and gets into the passenger seat. One thing about working in a small town, someone can always find you.

“How long has she been in there?” he asks.

“About thirty minutes.”

“Do you really think Hone is behind it all?”

I nod. “Based on everything I told you guys, everything points to her. Except for motive. But maybe she was more upset than Stormy realized.”

Rover sighs. “He’s a good guy but not at all warm and fuzzy. It’s possible he really hurt her and never had a clue.”

“Maybe.”

Stormy may not be warm and fuzzy, but his ability to read people is spot on.

“Hopefully, McNamara gets her to confess something.”

“Then what?” I ask. “We have no evidence tying her to any of it. And she can just say Julia is lying.”

“I don’t know. We’ll figure that out when we get there. You waiting here until she’s done?”

I nod.

He grins. “You really have it bad for her. You finally going to make a move?”

Of course, he doesn’t know I already have, and until Julia is ready to go public, I can’t say anything.

“She just broke up with Dan. I will. Soon.”

He pats me on the shoulder. “Don’t wait too long. If you miss your chance again, you’ll never forgive yourself.”

“I won’t.”

“Good. I’m going to head home. See you tomorrow. But feel free to call if Hone confesses.”

He exits my car and walks down the street to his motorcycle.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Julia

WHY AM I SO NERVOUS? I've spoken to Jeanine many times, and she's always been friendly. But those times, I didn't view her as a suspect.

It doesn't help that after I arrived and we ordered drinks, she excused herself to take a call, and I've been sitting here, drinking and thinking too much.

"Sorry about that," she says when she returns. "My mom is in long-term care, and something came up they wanted to discuss."

"Oh, if you need to go, we can reschedule."

She lifts her glass and drinks half her beer. "No, stay here. I needed this. Thank you."

If I didn't already feel guilty, I sure do now.

"Tell me, what did you want to talk about?" she asks. "You sounded upset on the phone."

Upset? No. Nervous. Yes. I take another drink of my beer.

"When I took over for you working with the guys at MTS, you said don't get involved with any of them. Well, I really like one of the guys, and I think he likes me."

"Don't do it."

I lean forward. "Do you know something about the guys that I don't?"

She focuses on the condensation on her glass, rubbing it off all sides. "This is just between us, right?"

I nod. "Of course."

Her eyes meet mine. "When I worked with the guys, Stormy and I became good friends. We were the best of friends." She smiles. "Well, one night over drinks, we got the bright idea to become friends with benefits."

My brows go up as I feign shock, acting like this is the first time I've heard this. "Did you fall for him?"

She laughs. "Oh God, no." She leans in and whispers. "The sex was terrible. I mean, it wasn't terrible, as in bad; it was awkward. We had no chemistry." She takes another drink. "We tried a few more times, thinking it would get better. It didn't, so we ended it."

"Oh, so you're worried I'll have awkward sex?" I'm not clear where her story is going.

Her smile drops. "No, it's not that. After we decided to call off the benefits, things were awkward at work, too. Basically, I lost my best friend. It was probably for the best because I started seeing John shortly after that, and he's got a bit of a jealous streak."

She finishes her beer, then meets my eyes.

"Look, my point is, if things don't work out—and let's face it, they rarely do—it will be awkward at best working with those guys."

I nod. "I get it. Thanks. I'll really think about it." I finish my beer.

Well, that was not the story I expected, and if it's true, she has no reason to go after Stormy. But to find out if it's true, someone has to ask Stormy if the sex was not great. And that person won't be me.

Jeanine's phone rings again. "Sorry, it will just be a minute."

She leaves the table to answer her phone but comes back only a minute later. "Sorry, it's my mom's nurse again. I need to go handle this in person. I hate to cut this short. Let's get together again soon. All right?"

"I'd like that," I say.

Five minutes after she leaves, I make my way outside. Fox is waiting across the street in his car. I get in. He takes my crutches and places them behind the seat. I fill him in on our entire conversation.

Finally, he blows out a breath. "Wow, that's going to be uncomfortable for you when you ask Stormy if it's true that the sex was awkward." He shakes his head as he stares out over the hood.

"Me? Why would I ask him? This sounds like a guy-to-guy conversation."

His head whips to me. "The man is my boss! I can't ask him that."

Besides, she told you, and trust me, it will be best if Stormy thinks you didn't mention that part to me."

Crap. I hate to admit it, but he's right.

"I suggest you find another way to word it, though. Asking him if he was awkward or bad at sex might not go over well." His lips curl up, and he glances out the window so I can't see his face. His body shakes. Just a little, but I catch it.

"Are you laughing?"

He turns back to me, trying really hard to suppress a smile. "No," he says as a giggle escapes. That sets him off even further, and he full-out belly laughs. "Okay, yes. I'm just picturing how the conversation will go. Please do it at the office so I can listen outside the door."

I pick up a napkin from the console between us and throw it at him. It does nothing but reminds me I'm hungry. "Can we grab something to eat? I had a beer on an empty stomach, and that probably wasn't a great idea," I say.

"I figured you might order food."

I lean back. "No, right after we ordered drinks, she took a call, then another call. There was no time for food."

He starts the car. "Where do you want to go?"

I point at the end of the road to a burger place where you pull up and park. They bring your order to your car. Many years ago, they did this on roller skates. Now they walk the orders out.

"Really?" he asks. "You like that place?"

"Yeah, I'm craving their burger, and I don't want to get out of the car."

He glances over. "Yeah, using crutches is never fun."

"How often have you had to use crutches?"

He shrugs. "Not sure. Lost count. Between sports injuries as a kid and injuries on assignments, it adds up."

He lost count? I can't imagine. "This is my second time. First time was when I was a new recruit. I tripped going down a few steps and broke my tibia."

"Were you chasing a suspect?"

I sigh. "No. I was walking out of the apartment building I used to live in."

He laughs.

"It's not funny."

"It kind of is."

We order, and our food comes quickly. After he takes a large bite, I set down my burger. “So, is this the fancy dinner date you were going to take me on?”

His eyes bug out. He shakes his head until he swallows. “You picked the place. This wasn’t my idea.”

I grin.

“Once your foot is healed, I’m taking you somewhere nice.”

“Once my foot is healed?” I nudge him. “I guess after last night we don’t have to rush it.”

He laughs. “Admit it. You didn’t want to wait that long.”

I finish chewing my last bite as I take him in. I always thought he was attractive, but now he smiles more, and those intense looks he gives me are the sexiest thing ever.

When my eyes meet his again, the same desire I feel is mirrored back. My hand goes to his chest. “No, I didn’t want to wait. I’ve never been this attracted to someone, and each moment I’m with you, I can’t wait to get you alone to rip off your clothes.”

My hand trails down his chest to his pants, where I cup his now-hard erection. He swallows and looks out the windows.

“We should probably leave and go somewhere more private.”

“Yes, we should.” I straighten in my seat and reach for my seat belt.

“Hey, kids, what are you two doing here?”

Fox jumps. “Holy shit, CT. Don’t sneak up on me like that.”

I turn to see CT grinning at us from Fox’s window. “Why are you so jumpy? Doing something you shouldn’t?”

“No, just grabbing some food. McNamara just followed up on that lead regarding Detective Hone.”

I’m frozen as I watch Fox turn back into professional mode. If I hadn’t had my hand on his dick moments ago, I wouldn’t believe he had any feelings for me. No wonder I never caught on.

He’s holding the bag our food came in over his lap. It looks casual, but I know it’s not.

“Yeah, how did that go? Did she confess?” CT asks.

Fox glances at me. Neither one of us wants to say anything more until we talked to Stormy.

“No confession. I need to confirm some things with Stormy, but my gut says she’s not the one,” I say.



CT frowns as he looks from me to Fox. “So, we’re back where we were with no suspects?”

“Looks like it,” I say.

CT turns his gaze on Fox. “Did you question Hone with her?”

“No, I drove her so she could get dropped off at the door.” Fox points to my foot.

CT’s eyes move from me to the crutches sticking up behind us. “How are you doing? I heard you were injured running from that asshole, Doogan.”

“It’s healing slowly.” Before CT can ask any more questions, I change the subject. “CT, what brings you here?”

“Yeah, I didn’t think you were a burger kind of guy,” Fox adds.

It’s a jab. CT’s family has money, and while he doesn’t usually show it, he does enjoy eating at some of the nicer restaurants.

He shrugs. “Sometimes I enjoy a burger.”

Fox crosses his arms. “Are you here alone?”

CT laughs. “No, you caught me. This is where I bring my dates to really impress them.”

Fox looks past CT. Then he opens his door, causing CT to have to jump out of the way.

“What are you doing?” CT asks.

Fox doesn’t say a word and walks toward CT’s SUV. I watch from where I’m at because I was serious. I don’t want to deal with the crutches anymore today.

After Fox stares into his car, he turns to CT and crosses his arms. It seems confrontational. Damn, maybe I should get out and see what’s going on.

Fox shakes his head and makes his way back toward me. CT is on his heels. The window is still down, and as they approach, I can hear CT.

“We’re friends. It’s not weird to go out and grab some food. What the hell is your problem, anyway?”

Fox is almost to the car, but that last line stops him. He spins around. “My problem is we all know what the hell is going on. How Rover lives in denial is beyond me. You need to tell him because this is going to blow up.”

CT’s arms go in the air. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“Bullshit.”

CT stares back at his car, then he steps closer to us. “I want both of you to hear this. There is nothing going on between Amber and me. I will admit that I want something with her. And I will admit to you only that she might have

kissed me in the past. But I made it clear to her that until we can discuss this with her brother, nothing can happen.”

“Do you need a mediator when you talk to Rover?” I ask.

Fox nods. “That’s actually a good idea. He won’t hit you if Julia is standing there.”

CT stares at me for a moment. “Yeah, he will, but I might take you up on that. But it’s not me that’s putting off talking to Rover.”

“Really?” Fox asks.

CT nods.

Interesting. I don’t really know Amber well, but I’m curious now why she’s the one hesitating.

“Ford?” Amber calls out.

CT turns.

“Can we go?”

He nods. “I gotta go, but I want to stay in the loop if you find anything more on Hone.”

“You will,” Fox says.

CT runs back to his car, and Fox gets in his.

“Well, that was fun. Back to your place?” he wiggles his brows.

I laugh. “If that’s your move, sure, but just drop me off.”

“Babe, you haven’t seen my moves yet.”

I laugh harder.

“Not the reaction I was going for,” he says as he pulls out of the lot. “But that’s all right. I’ll show you when we get to your place.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Fox

THE MOMENT her door closes behind us, I take her crutches from her. Then I pick her up and carry her to her bedroom.

Instead of protesting, her lips immediately go to my neck. I set her on the bed and slowly began to move her shirt up and off. But Julia has other plans. She yanks my shirt up, and I step back to take it off before she rips it. Her fingers go to my belt, and she quickly has it undone and my pants open as well.

I grin. "In a hurry?"

She yanks down my pants enough to expose my cock. Then she stands on her good foot, grabs me, and spins us around. I'm shocked when she pushes me onto the bed and is hovering over me.

With a mischievous grin, she cups my balls and sucks the head of my cock into her mouth.

Holy shit. I moan. She continues to take more in with each pass, sucking hard. I'm seeing stars.

"Fuck, Julia, your mouth feels so good."

I lift my head and watch her work me over. My orgasm is close, so I pull her off.

"I really love what you're doing, but I want to come inside of you."

She grins as she stands up. "Don't move," she orders as she takes off her pants. She sits on the edge of the bed and removes the rest of her clothing.

I watch her every move. This woman is stunning in every way. As a detective, she mostly wears suits or dress clothes. But what no one else knows, except me, is that under those dress clothes, she wears the sexiest bra and panty sets.

Once she's stripped bare, she climbs over me until she's straddling me. She rubs her clit along my length. Her eyes close, and she moans as she moves back and forth. My hands go to her breasts, and I pinch one of her nipples.

"Yes, just like that," she says.

She lifts up and lines me up with her entrance. She pushes herself down fast, and I'm fully seated, trying not to come too soon, but this woman feels so good. I fist the sheets as I force my mind to calculate how many dates I've been on with Julia. This sounds strange to do at a time like this, but if I don't try to distract my dick right now, he's going to finish too soon.

Slowly, she moves her hips in a circular motion, and I've lost track of my math. "Touch me," she says.

I move one hand to her clit as she undulates above me.

"Oh, right there. I'm about to come. Yes! Royce!"

My name on her lips and the way she's milking my cock send me over the edge.

I nearly black out, but as I catch my breath, I notice she's touching her clit again. I take over, and she moves her hands to my knees and leans just a little to give me better access. It only takes a few strokes, and she yells.

"Yes!"

Then she falls onto my chest, breathing hard. After a moment, she meets my eyes. "Hi."

I chuckle. "Hi."

"I've never had back-to-back orgasms with a man before."

I lick my lips. "Is that so? Well, now that I know that, I'll make sure you have as many as you want." I roll us until she's on her back. "I'll be right back."

I grab a towel and clean her up. We made a mess of the sheets, but neither of us seem to care.

"Fox—"

"Say my real name."

She smiles. "Royce."

"No one calls me that. I like that you do."

Her hands move to my chin, and she runs her fingers over my beard. “I think I’m in trouble when it comes to you,” she says.

I bend back to look her in the eyes. “Why do you say that?”

She props herself up on one elbow. “Well, being with you is by far the best sex I’ve ever had.”

I’m giving her a goofy smile right now, but I can’t help it. “Same to you, too.”

She frowns. “Don’t say stuff just to be agreeable.”

I flip her onto her back and settle between her legs. Hell, I’m half-hard again. I press my cock to her core. “I’m not trying to be agreeable. I’m being honest. You’re the sexiest woman I’ve ever known, and I can’t seem to get enough.” I kiss her neck, and she wraps her legs around me. “Add in the fact that you’re caring, funny, and easygoing...” I move my mouth down and suck on her nipple because it gets her going every time.

She moans.

I release her and move my gaze to hers. “I’m falling for you, Julia.” As the words come out, I know I’ve already fallen.

Her hands cup my face. “I’m falling for you, too, Royce.”

I lean down and kiss her as she rocks her hips into me. I’m ready to go again, and I line up, but this time, I take it slow. And for the first time in my life, I make love to someone.

She holds on tight. Her eyes well, and a tear falls. I still and wipe her tear.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Nothing. I just feel so much.”

I relax because, hell, I do, too. I lean down and kiss her while continuing to move slowly in and out.

Her grip on my back tightens. “Royce!” she says just before another orgasm washes over her.

I pump several more times until her body stops squeezing mine. She smiles the most content smile, and this overwhelming feeling of love washes over me as I push in and climax.

I remain there as we share several light kisses. I don’t want to move, but eventually I do.

After we clean up, she falls asleep in my arms. I lie awake, smiling, enjoying feeling her up against me. I must have dozed off because something jolts me awake.

“That’s my phone,” Julia says as she reaches over and pats her

nightstand, searching for the device.

“I think it’s on the floor,” I say.

The ringing stops but starts back again.

She turns on a lamp. “I have to check it in case it’s work.” She finally locates it and sighs. “Dammit. It’s my mom.”

Her mom calls back a third time.

“You should get that,” I say.

She closes her eyes. “Please don’t let her be drunk.” Then she finally answers the phone. “Mom?” She sits up. “What’s wrong?”

I can’t quite make out the words, but her mother is half crying, half yelling through the phone. Julia jumps up and turns the phone on speaker.

“I swear he had another woman here, but he keeps denying it, and he won’t leave. Why won’t he leave?”

She grabs her clothes and gets dressed, so I do the same.

“Okay, can you just stay in your room until I get there?”

“But he should leave!” her mom yells.

Now that she’s dressed, she leans over the bed. “Mom, listen to me. Just lock your door and wait for me. Do not confront him further. I promise I will help you get him out, okay?”

Her mother snuffles. “Okay.”

“I’m leaving now. Call me if anything changes.”

She ends the call and looks over at me. “I’m sorry. She said when she confronted this guy, he hit her. I’m afraid it’s going to escalate.”

“I get it. But I’m going with you.”

I wait for her to argue, but instead, she smiles. “Thank you. Since I’m on crutches, I appreciate the backup.”

I drive, and she directs. “Without traffic, it will take about an hour to get there.”

At least we have that going for us. It’s late, and the traffic is light. “Who is this guy?”

Julia blows out her breath. “No idea. I’m sure she met him at a bar and brought him home. She’s usually living with a man within a week of meeting him, if not that night.”

I frown. “Really? I thought guys in bars usually only wanted one night.”

She laughs. “Not the type of bar my mom goes to. Those guys are looking for a roof and maybe some free food.”

“Ah, so someone who doesn’t want to leave?”

“Exactly.”

When we pull up, her mom’s house is dark.

“Let me call her.”

Her mom answers on the first ring.

“We’re here.”

“Thank you! He’s sleeping on the couch in the living room. Do you still have your key?”

“I do. We’re coming in now.” She nods to me, and we walk up to the door. Since she’s on crutches, I take the key from her and unlock the door.

I go in first, but Julia is right behind me. She turns on a light, and a man grumbles from the couch. He tosses off the blanket and stands up.

A man we both recognize. He smiles at Julia.

“Long time no see, Detective.”

Julia’s eyes are wide, and she doesn’t move. I suspect she’s in shock.

“Aden Hart?” she finally asks. “How?”

While she wants answers, my goal is to detain this man. I lunge for him to take him down, but he senses me coming and bolts to the kitchen and out the back door.

I follow, leaving Julia to deal with her mother. This guy is not getting away from us again. He’s agile and able to get over the fence and through the neighbor’s yard quickly. But so am I.

A dog two houses over barks. But it doesn’t faze this guy. No, he jumps and pulls himself up and over a six-foot fence. I do the same. He looks back over his shoulder, and yes, motherfucker, I’m right here.

He’s right in front of me, then suddenly, he drops and disappears. There’s a thud and a groan. I stop as a light comes on.

“Who’s there?” a man asks.

The light illuminates the yard and the empty pool Hart fell into.

“Call the police. There’s a wanted fugitive in your pool,” I call out.

“Who the hell are you?” he asks.

“The guy who caught Aden Hart,” I say.

I keep my eyes trained on Hart while the man calls the police.

“Fox?” Julia calls from the distance.

“Back here!” I yell. “We got him.”

Hart cries out, “My leg is broken.”

Good, he won’t be able to run.

“Why were you with that woman?” I ask.

Hart moans. “You don’t stop, do you? Every last one of you with all your questions.”

Sirens grow louder as what I’m hoping is the police coming.

“Answer me. Why are you with the detective’s mother?”

Hart finally looks up at me and grins. “Because I walked into a bar and asked about your security company. She had plenty to say about it. Man, she doesn’t like you guys.”

“Why were you asking about us?”

“Research. Odds were good that your team would be working security on something I’m involved in. Imagine my luck when I met someone not only familiar with you guys but who was willing to share all she knew to take you down.”

This guy has to be fucking with me. “The detective’s mom wants to take us down?”

“You and your buddies.”

“Why?”

“Put your hands above your head!” an officer yells at me.

I do, but damn, his timing is bad. I guess I’ll have to ask Julia’s mom about it. “He’s in the pool.”

“Who?”

“Aden Hart. He’s a wanted man. Agent Carter with the FBI has been searching for him.”

An officer pats me down.

“I have a concealed gun on my right ankle. I have a permit to carry in my wallet.”

The officer removes the gun and takes my wallet from my pocket.

“Is he armed?” the officer asks.

“Not sure, but he hasn’t pulled anything on me,” I answer. “Hey, Hart, why does she want to hurt us?”

Hart grins. “Never asked. Don’t care.”

Julia makes her way through the gate and to us on her crutches. The officer questioning me spots her.

“Julia? What are you doing here?”

“Jack, the man down there is wanted by the FBI and CIA. We need to detain him.”

That’s pretty much what I told the guy, but instead of questioning her, he smiles and tells a couple of other officers to get Hart out of the pool.



Jack turns his attention back to Julia. “Thanks. We’ll handle it from here.”

Julia and I walk slowly to her mom’s place.

“You know officers from all over.”

“Yeah, whenever I get a chance to work with other jurisdictions, I grab it. Pine Valley isn’t exactly busting at the seams with crime.”

I jog ahead of her and spin around so I can walk backward, watching her. “Of course not. It’s because MTS is there.”

She shakes her head. “Or maybe it’s because the Pine Valley Police do a great job.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

She stops, then notices I’m grinning. “Wait till I’m off these crutches. I’ll get you back for that one.”

I close the gap between us and wrap my arms around her waist. “Please do. Hey, want me to carry you? It’s a distance on crutches.”

“No, I’ll be fine. Let’s just get back there before the cops come to question my mom.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Julia

I'M SO over these damn crutches. We're almost to my mom's place when Fox clears his throat, drawing my attention.

"What?" I ask.

"Hart said something about your mom."

"Do I want to know?"

He stops me at the edge of her lawn. "What he said is probably lies, but I want to question her to be certain. Just be prepared. You might not like what I'm asking."

I nod. There is nothing I like about this. Why the hell was Aden Hart in my mom's house? Of all the men she could pick up, she found him? No, everything Hart does is calculated. He found her. But why?

When we walk into her house, she's sitting on the couch, holding the blanket Hart was using. I swear she's sniffing it.

She spots me and stands up. "I really thought he was the one. I thought he would be the one to help me get over..."

Is this why she goes from man to man? To forget about the last one? As for thinking he's the one, she's said that many times. While my mom is a romantic at heart, she has no filter when it comes to picking men.

Although I believe this is all on Aden. I mean, seriously, it can't be a coincidence he picked up my mom, of all people.

"How did you meet him?" I ask, hoping that once I get her talking, I can

find out if she gave Hart any information about me or Fox. Although, she doesn't know anything about the investigation. I never tell my mother anything about my job.

My mom sets the blanket aside. "I went to see you at the station but you weren't there."

"You did?" She never visits me at work.

She shrugs. "I was feeling good and thought I'd surprise you and take you out for lunch. When I learned you were out, I got mad at myself for not calling first. Then I drove through your town and stopped at a bar."

"Buckys."

She nods. "I finished my drink and was about to leave when a man sat down at the bar a few stools over. He asked the bartender something and I was drawn to his voice. It was low and sexy." She stares into the kitchen, and I'd bet money she was reliving that night.

"How did it go from him sitting at the bar to him staying here?"

She sighs. "Well, I struck up a conversation with him. I may have mentioned I was living with a man but it was over and I just wanted him to leave. Aden offered to come with me to help." She smiles. "I agreed because it served Grant right to think he was being replaced."

Fox frowns, and I give him a subtle shake of my head so he doesn't ask about Grant. We needed to keep her focused.

"Aden came home with me, and Grant didn't put up a fight, thankfully. Aden asked if he could sleep on my couch, and I said yes. He's stayed here a few times over the past couple of weeks. He was such a gentleman. The most he ever did was kiss my cheek. I asked him why he didn't make a move, and he said he was trying to get to know me."

"What happened tonight?" I ask.

She stands and walks to the kitchen, then grabs a beer from the fridge. "Well, last night I tried to kiss him, and he said he just wanted to be friends. After all that! Can you believe it? When I got home earlier, I smelled perfume. I don't wear perfume. I knew he'd brought someone else here. I told him to get out. That was when he hit me, and I ran into my room and called you."

"Ms. McNamara," Fox says.

"Melanie, please."

Before he can ask his question, someone knocks on the door. Fox gets up and answers it. An officer nods at him.

“I understand Aden Hart was staying here,” the officer says.

“That’s what we were told,” Fox says.

“Well, we need to search the place for anything Hart may have left behind.”

My mom steps forward. “It’s fine. The only thing he left was that duffle bag.” She points to a bag sitting on a chair.

After the officers search the house, the officer who knocked on the door steps up to us. “I just got word we are handing over the investigation to the FBI. I’m sure they will be in touch and will want to question you,” he says to my mom.

“I’ll be here,” she says.

The officers shuffle out, and I turn to my mom. I’m not sure how to handle this situation. My mom is usually so flippant about the men who come and go in her life. But her demeanor now tells me he really hurt her.

“He’s going to regret doing this to me,” my mom says.

“Mom, no. This man is a known criminal. You don’t want anything to do with him, I promise.”

My mom’s gaze meets mine. Her eyes are vacant. “I’m going to bed,” my mom says. She walks to her bedroom and closes the door without another word. It’s clear we won’t get any more information from her tonight.

“Wait, I have more questions for her,” Fox says.

I shake my head. “I’m surprised she told us as much as she did. But she’s shut down for the night.”

“Shut down?” he asks.

I haven’t talked to Fox about my mom and her moods. It’s not something I really ever want to talk about.

“It’s how she gets. Trust me, she won’t talk anymore tonight. We should go.”

As we walk outside, he’s frowning, and I know he’s going to ask more about it. But fortunately, he doesn’t.

Fox drives us back to my place. With only a couple of hours until we both need to be up for work, we crawl into bed.

The alarm goes off minutes later. Well, that’s how it feels. I want to enjoy waking up with Fox in my bed, but I’m so tired.

“I’m going to shower,” I say.

“Uh-huh,” he responds.

I quickly shower and get dressed. When I step into the bedroom, he’s still

in bed, now snoring lightly. The sheet is down at his waist, and one arm is above his head. Damn, he's a sexy man. His shoulders are broad, and my eyes move to his abs. Fox shouldn't be allowed to wear a shirt. My eyes move to the scar on his stomach, and it brings me back to how close I was to losing him.

"Turnaround is fair play, you know," he says. "Take your top off so I can stare."

I laugh. "You'll need to earn that."

He's up so fast and has me in his arms. "Mmm, you smell good," he says.

His phone vibrates from the nightstand, and he releases me. "It's Carter."

While he takes the call, I go into the kitchen and make coffee.

Fox strolls into my kitchen wearing only his underwear, and despite the lack of sleep, I want to climb this man.

"He is on his way to MTS and wants us to meet him there in an hour. I'm going to take a quick shower first."

He turns to walk away.

"Hold up."

He turns back.

"You said he wants us both there?"

He nods.

"We?" I hold up my phone. "I didn't get any calls."

His cheeks turn pink. "Oh, uh, I might have accidentally said you were here when Carter called."

Well, so much for keeping this between us for now. But I'm not going to let Fox off the hook easily. "Is that so? And who else have you told?" I cross my arms.

He swallows. "Trax. And Maverick figured it out."

I arch a brow.

He rushes toward me. "I'm sorry. I know you didn't want to share this yet, but I had to tell Trax to get him to check on you. And like I said, Maverick figured it out from watching us."

I grin. "It's okay. I told Harding. We shouldn't keep it a secret anymore."

He wraps his arms around my waist. "You told Harding?"

"Yeah, it didn't feel right lying to her."

"So, I can kiss you whenever I want?"

I shake my head. "Not in meetings, no. It's one thing to not tell people, but it's another to keep things professional."

He grins. "Got it. No groping in the office."

I smack his butt.

"Now, that would be considered groping." He kisses the top of my head. "I'm going to shower now."

After we both get ready, Fox drives us to MTS.

"I wonder if Harding will be here," Fox says.

I've always wondered about him and Harding and if there's ever a chance to ask. "Did you two date?"

He frowns and glances at me, then back at the road. "What? Harding and me?"

"Yeah."

"No, why would you think that?"

I shrug. "Guess I saw you talking to her a time or two and wondered."

He keeps glancing over at me while he drives.

"What?" I finally ask.

He grins. "Was that a hint of jealousy?"

My cheeks warm, and I turn away and stare out my window. "Maybe a little."

He takes my hand in his. "No, I was never interested in her. Peaches had the biggest crush for a long time, and anytime he was around her, he would get really quiet. You probably just saw me doing most of the talking."

"Peaches gets quiet? Huh, I hadn't noticed."

He snorts. "Yeah, that's how all of us knew about his crush. Peaches and I actually had a bet involving you and Harding."

I turn a little in my seat. "What kind of bet?"

"It was a bet to see who got up the guts to ask out their crush first. The loser had to wash the other one's car for a month."

My mouth drops open. "That's why you washed his minivan that month?"

He nods. "But it really wasn't my fault. I went to the station pumped up and ready to tell you how I really felt. That was the day Dan was there and I met him."

Is he serious? I stare at him, and there is no indication he's joking. I feel sick to my stomach as it sinks in. All that missed time together. "I only said yes to a date with Dan because I thought you were dating that blond woman at Kelly's."

He glances over at me. "I still can't believe you thought I was dating her."

She's underage." He shakes his head. A moment later, his eyes widen, and he glances at me again. "Wait, you thought I was into underage women?"

"It didn't register that she was too young. All I saw was a beautiful woman who looked at you like she was in love. That's why I thought you were dating her."

He squeezes my hand. "It looks like we have time to make up for."

"Maybe back at my place after the meeting."

He laughs. "You're insatiable."

I run my hand up his arm. "Have you looked at yourself in a mirror? You can't blame me."

I swear his cheeks turn pink.

Fox pulls into the MTS parking lot. "Wait before you get out. I don't want that damn peacock to attack you."

Laughing, I glance out the window and spot Cheeto on the roof. "He wants nothing to do with me. Only you."

We manage to get inside without any incident and walk into Stormy's office to find Cowboy and Carter. Carter stands up, and our eyes go to him.

"Did you get Hart to talk?" I ask.

Carter shakes his head. "Unfortunately, no. During questioning, he made it clear he isn't going to speak."

"He asked for an attorney?" I ask.

Carter motions to the conference table, and we all take a seat. "No. He stated he has no intention of answering any of our questions. And then he went silent. He's being transferred to the King County Jail this afternoon. We need Detective McNamara to go in and question him. Alone."

I'm surprised by the request. "Did he ask for me?"

Fox shakes his head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Excuse me?" I say. "Why the hell not? I'm a detective, and I can question the man."

Fox reaches for my hand but catches himself and pulls his arm back. "No, it's not that. The man targeted your mom. That can't be a coincidence."

I lean back. "Not every suspect is after me. What happened with Doogan has us both on edge. But Hart isn't Doogan."

"She's right," Carter says. "I don't have the impression he's going after her."

"Then why have her go in and question him?" Fox asks.

Carter swallows and glances at Cowboy. "McNamara, what I'm about to

say is my opinion of Hart and not at all what I think.”

I shift uncomfortably. That’s not a great lead-in.

“Before Hart was questioned, he went through intake. The officer tried to get him to loosen up, and in the process, Hart said things about you and your mom.”

Carter still isn’t looking at me.

“What kinds of things?”

He finally meets my eyes. “Unflattering things. Basically, he thinks you’re an incompetent detective.”

I stand up. I’m ready for that asshole.

Carter holds his hand up. “Now, we need to use that to our advantage. You worked a prior case involving him. He believes you missed key evidence. The details are not important. What is important is that if he doesn’t find you competent, he might get careless.”

“I still don’t like this,” Fox says.

“What did he say about my mom?” I noticed Carter left that off.

“He said she’s crazy. The officer believed Hart was spouting off anything to avoid questions.”

Hart is an asshole, but I can’t let that get in the way of taking him down. “Fine. I’ll do it. What do you want me to ask?”

I will ask the questions Carter wants, but there is one thing I’m going to find out from Hart. Why did he target my mother?



## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Fox

I DIDN'T LIKE it one bit that Julia went into a room alone with Hart. Even though we could see her through the window and hear her through the speaker of the interrogation room, I don't trust that man. Especially since he dodged questions regarding how he met Melanie. But he did say one thing that has been bothering me. Hart claims that Julia's mom showed him photos of all the guys who work at MTS. He has to be lying. First, there is no way her mom would have those. Our photos are not on the company website and are not made public. Second, why would Melanie show them to Hart? The more I think about it, the more I'm convinced it was one of many mind games Hart tried to play with Julia.

But she didn't fall for any of them. With each piece of bullshit Hart spewed, Julia would ask one or two follow-up questions. Hart wouldn't answer them. After an hour, Julia gave up and left while Hart was talking. It was priceless. The man truly thought she was hanging on his every word.

It's been a week, and we still don't have any real answers from Hart or any idea why he chose to target Julia's mom. Melanie hasn't returned any of our calls and wasn't home when we tried to see her.

Our best guess is once he knew who she was, he thought maybe he could get information and stay ahead of us. Since Julia doesn't share any of her work with her mom, Hart wouldn't have gotten any leads.

Julia walks into my office smiling. She's still stuck using the crutches,

which means she's also still stuck doing desk duty.

"A surprise visit?" I ask as I move closer to her. I take her in my arms and kiss her.

That's right. I don't care who sees. After she agreed we could tell everyone, we did as soon as the guys were all back together, which was at the end of the day yesterday.

She cocks her head. "I'm here for the meeting."

"What meeting?"

Cowboy appears in my doorway. "Fox, can you join us?"

"That meeting," Julia grins.

I wonder what's going on. "Hey, after the meeting, want to grab lunch?"

She hesitates.

"Or not. If you have plans," I say, trying but failing to sound cool with it.

"I would love to. I'm supposed to meet my mom at my place, so we might have to keep it short."

"You finally reached her?" I ask.

She nods. "This morning."

"Do you think she'll tell you anything more?"

She shrugs. "I'm going to see what I can find out." She walks out of my office and down the hall.

I follow her into Stormy's office. Maverick and Trax are already in the room. We all sit down.

"Carter says he wants to talk to all of us about Hart," Cowboy says. He calls Carter from the phone on the conference table, then puts it on speaker.

"Please tell me he talked," Julia says when Carter comes on.

"I'm afraid not, but this past week, we were able to gather a lot more information on him. Aden Hart owns a house in Virginia. According to the neighbors, they never see anyone going or coming, but a landscape company mows the lawn once a week. We were able to get a warrant, and I think you'll be surprised by what was found inside."

"A written confession?" I ask.

Maverick frowns at me.

I shrug. "He said we'd be surprised, and that would surprise me."

Carter clears his throat. "No confession. Aden Hart's body was found in a large freezer in the garage.

I sit up taller. "Wait, you let Hart go?"

"No."

We all wait for Carter to say more, but finally, Julia loses patience. “How the hell did he get to Virginia? Was he transferred?”

“It turns out, the man we have in custody is not Aden Hart. He stole Hart’s identity years ago from what we have pieced together.”

Julia shakes her head. “No, it’s Aden Hart. He stood trial for fourteen murders. If it wasn’t him, it would have come up with his fingerprints, mug shot, something.”

“Unless Aden is his twin brother. Maybe he could pass it off?” Maverick says.

“No twins. We believe the man we have in custody is Leroy Daniels. Aden was his cousin. Daniels got into some trouble as a juvenile. Nothing major but the police in that town knew who he was. He managed to graduate high school and went into the military. I’m sending Cowboy his military photo now.”

We all wait as Cowboy stares at his phone and then finally turns it around for us. There’s no doubt that’s the man we call Aden. He’s much younger in the photo, but it’s him.

“Daniels was dishonorably discharged for going AWOL on a mission. He moved back home, according to his sister, but was kicked out soon after. He was caught stealing his mother’s jewelry, including her wedding ring, and pawning it.”

“AWOL on a mission? Do you have any more details?” I ask.

“I’m working on getting the records,” Carter says.

“Sounds like a great guy,” Trax says, shaking his head.

“Was he into drugs? Gambling?” I ask.

“His sister didn’t know. She said she never heard from him again.”

It sounds like that was for the best.

“It took more effort to find information on Aden. Daniels’s sister said she didn’t really know Aden. He was older and lived in a different state. The house where Aden was found originally belonged to his parents but passed to him when they died.”

A man with no family? I’m starting to see why Daniels picked him.

“One of our agents got a local television station to show a photo of the real Aden we found inside the house and asked anyone who knew him to come forward. Luckily, his ex-called in.”

Julia looks at me and then back to the phone. “Wait, is this an ex of the real Aden Hart or of Daniels?”

“The real Hart. Her name is May, and she knew Daniels, too. She said Daniels showed up and started sleeping on Hart’s couch. Hart told her he was just helping the guy out.”

Rover and CT walk into the room. “Hey, sorry we’re late. Damn geese were blocking the road again,” CT says.

We all know which geese they’re talking about. Every morning for the past several weeks, the geese have decided they need to cross Henderson Road.

Rover shakes his head. “I told you we needed to leave earlier.”

CT raises a brow. “No, you kept saying goose time. That’s why I told you to shut up.”

Rover’s hands go to his hips. “Yeah, goose time. I was telling you to allow for goose time.”

“For the love of God, shut up, you two,” Trax says.

They each take a seat. “What did we miss?” Rover asks as if he hadn’t just been arguing with CT.

Those two can flip from arguing to work mode in a second. And after this meeting, I’m sure they’ll be back to the goose topic.

Cowboy scratches the back of his neck. He’s not normally in the office and leaves Stormy to run the day-to-day operations, so he’s not as used to dealing with those two. Fortunately, he chooses to catch them up.

“Did the ex have anything more to say?” Rover asks.

“She did. She blames Daniels for her relationship ending. According to her, Daniels showed up shortly after Hart graduated college. Hart was having trouble finding a job, and Daniels talked Hart into working with him. May said she didn’t know exactly what they did, but she was certain it was illegal. She said Hart changed and grew violent. She left him and hasn’t talked to him in twenty years.”

“And no one else came forward in response to the news broadcast?” Julia asks.

“No. And that same agent tried to track down classmates from college but had no luck there, either. One professor remembered him and said he was a loner,” Carter says.

Maverick taps his fingers on the table, drawing my attention. He’s frowning. “What was Hart’s degree in?” he asks.

“Business,” Carter says.

Maverick meets my eyes. “Well, a business degree would help when you

are trying to convince someone you'll be the CFO of a security company."

Carter sighs. "Yeah, we don't have it all figured out yet. Obviously, it's quite a stretch for the man to go from essentially jobless and homeless to buying a yacht with cash and being the CFO of a major military contractor."

Trax stands up and stretches. "It sounds like he had twenty years to go from one person to the other. A lot can happen, especially if you meet the right, or in the case, the wrong people."

Julia rubs her temples. "Do we need to fill in the rest for this case? Carter, do you have enough for him to be sent away this time?"

Carter is silent for a moment while we all wait. "What we have should be enough, but it might not be. This will be going to trial, and Daniels can be quite charming when he wants to be. Although I'm curious to see his response when I tell him the real Hart's body was found."

Julia leans back. "He won't react. The entire time he was being investigated for those murders at the bakery, he never reacted."

"You're probably right. Well, that's all I have for now," Carter says. "I'll let you know if he ever confesses."

Cowboy ends the call, and we sit in silence for a moment.

"He's going to get away with it again," Julia says. "I feel it."

"No," I say. "This is different. He's being charged with treason. He can't hire some officer to plant evidence."

Julia's head jerks in my direction. "You think he hired that officer to plant evidence in the murder trial?"

Do I? The more I think about it, I do. So, I nod.

"Why?" she asks. "At the time, the officer was extensively interviewed, and it was determined that as a new officer, he was trying to make a name for himself. There was no evidence of a payoff."

She's right. It was investigated, and if there had been anything nefarious, it would have been found. At least, I hope so. "Just a gut feeling. That's it."

"Hey, you all call a meeting without me?" Stormy booms from the entryway.

"Stormy?" Rover says as the man walks into the room.

Stormy moves slowly, and he's lost weight. "Yeah, they finally released me."

Cowboy steps around the table to him. "And I told you it's too soon to come back to work."

Stormy holds out his hand, and Cowboy shakes it. We all gather around

them.

Stormy's grinning. "I'm not here to work. I might not ever come back."

Cowboy holds up a finger. "Don't even joke about that."

The two men laugh.

"It's great to see you. You look better than when I last saw you," Julia says.

"I would hope so," Stormy says. His smile drops as he turns to the door. "Oh, Ozzie, you can come in." He turns back to us. "He thought you all were having a confidential meeting and didn't want to interrupt."

Ozzie steps into view. "Hey, guys."

It's been a while since I've seen Ozzie. He works at Reed Hawthorne Security in New York. He's a great guy, and I wonder if he's here for an assignment.

"What brings you by?" I ask as we bump fists.

"Well, I heard Stormy was being released today, and I promised Coff I'd come here sometime to visit, so I decided today was a good time. I flew in on the red eye, and once I landed, I called Stormy to see how he was doing. He asked me for a ride to the office, and here we are."

"Ozzie? You're here?" Coff says as he walks into the office to join the rest of us.

The guys hug, and Coff notices Stormy. "Stormy! It's great to have you back." He goes in for a hug but stops and holds out his hand. "Sorry, you're probably hurting too much for hugs."

"That I am." He looks around. "Has anyone heard from Peaches recently?"

"Yes, he's still home recuperating. Unlike you, he listens when I tell him he's not ready to work," Cowboy says.

"Hey, I already told you I'm not working. But I am up for lunch. How about we all head to Kelly's? On me," Stormy says.

"Sounds great to me," Rover says.

Kelly's is a few blocks away, so we all file outside to walk over.

"Do you need a ride?" Ozzie asks Stormy.

He shakes his head. "I'll be going slow, but I'd like to walk."

A loud caw overhead draws our attention.

"Is that a peacock?" Ozzie asks.

"That's Cheeto," Rover says. "Our defense peacock."

Ozzie frowns. "What's a defense peacock?"

Coff slaps him on the back. “Don’t ask. You think the guys in New York are weird? They got nothing on these guys.”

“Ah, thank you,” Rover says.

Coff shakes his head.

I walk with the group, but I keep my eye on that damn bird. I swear he’s watching me, too.

“No wonder he attacks you,” Julia says. “You’re not supposed to look him in the eyes.”

I break my staring contest with the fowl to see Julia laughing at me. “Where did you hear that?”

She shrugs. “Common knowledge. Don’t stare down any wild animal.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Her phone rings, and she checks it. “My mom. I better take this.”

She steps away from the group as she takes the call. I turn my attention back to the guys.

“Stop. Just because you know all the embarrassing stories doesn’t mean you need to share them,” Coff says.

Ozzie laughs.

“Yes, he does,” CT says. “He’s obligated to tell us.”

I smile as I watch the group make its way into the sandwich shop.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Julia

“YOU’RE NOT GOING to be here for at least an hour? Really, Julia?”

I roll my eyes, although my mom can’t see me through the phone. “Mom, we were supposed to meet at my place at two this afternoon.” I specifically pushed out the time because I wasn’t sure how long the meeting at MTS would take.

“Fine. I’ve got an errand I can run. What’s keeping you anyway?” she asks.

I close my eyes. She’s angry, and if she’s angry, she might not meet with me, and I haven’t had a chance to question her yet about Daniels. “I’m meeting some people for lunch.”

She snorts. “Sounds fancy.”

“We’re just going for sandwiches. Nothing elaborate.”

“Is that Fox guy with you?”

I haven’t told my mom we’re dating, but the fact we both showed up at her place when she called in the middle of the night was probably a clue. “Yeah, he is.”

I’m walking behind the guys, and I turn my eyes to Fox. We are almost at Kelly’s. “Hey, I gotta go, but I’ll see you soon.”

“Sure. See you soon.” She ends the call.

My mom often isn’t the most pleasant to deal with, but thankfully, she didn’t argue about this. I was worried she’d use it as an excuse to go home



and not meet me.

Thirty minutes later, we are all sitting down, eating our sandwiches. Stormy keeps staring at Fox and then at me.

“How long have you two been together?” he finally asks.

Fox, who was taking a drink of water, spits it out and starts coughing. I hand him a few napkins.

“A few weeks. Did someone tell you?” I ask.

Stormy shakes his head. “About time you two figured it out. The way you two looked at each other when you thought no one was watching...” He shakes his head. “And you.” He points at Fox. “You better treat her right, or you’ll answer to me.”

I’ve never had a father or anyone who acted like one. Stormy’s threat is touching, and I find myself smiling.

Fox turns to me and puts his arm around my shoulders. “No worries there.”

The bell above the door dings, but I’m too caught up in Fox’s eyes to pay any attention to it.

“Julia?”

I glance up and find my mom smiling back at me. “Mom? What are you doing here?”

She bends down to hug me, which is not something she ever does. “I was in the area and hungry, so I thought I’d grab some lunch.”

She stands there awkwardly for a moment. If she thinks I’m inviting her to join us, I’m not. Besides, it’s too much of a coincidence that she found me.

“What made you come in here, of all places? What was the errand you were running?”

My mom arches a brow and doesn’t take the bait. “It was nearby, and this place looked good.” She glances across the table, and her gaze stops on Rover. “So, these are the guys you work with?”

“Yes.” I don’t introduce them because part of me wonders if it’s true she spoke poorly of them to Leroy Daniels. And if I’m being honest with myself, I don’t trust her.

“Melanie?” Stormy asks. “Is that you?”

My mom’s gaze turns to Stormy, and she pales. But she quickly gathers herself and forces a smile. “You remember me?” she asks him.

Stormy knows my mom? Why would she not tell me this?

Stormy smiles as he stands up. “Of course I do. It’s been a long time. You

look good.”

My mom slaps him. Hard. I gasp, and my hand goes to my mouth.

“You sure as hell didn’t remember or think of me all those years ago.”

Stormy glances around at the guys uncomfortably. “What are you talking about?” He turns his attention to Cowboy. “Melanie and I were high school sweethearts.”

“What?” The word slips from my mouth.

My mom and Stormy? Now I really don’t understand why she never told me.

My mom’s arms are crossed. “Yes, and as soon as high school ended, you couldn’t run away fast enough.”

The man frowns. “After we graduated, I went into the service as I had planned. We talked about it.” Then Stormy crosses his arms. “You promised to write me, but you never did. I waited months, thinking there was a delay in the mail.”

My mom laughs. “I didn’t write you? Like you didn’t know about all the letters I sent to your house and the calls. I even went there to beg your parents to make you contact me. But they made it clear you wanted nothing to do with me. Not in the condition I was in.”

Everyone in the restaurant is staring at them. Stormy glances around. “Maybe we should discuss this somewhere else.”

What condition was she in? Before I can ask, my mom takes a step closer to Stormy.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? No witnesses so you can make up more lies.” She laughs, and at this moment, I don’t recognize the way her face twists up and she almost spits when she speaks next. “No, I’m not leaving. Whatever you need to say, say it in front of everyone.” My mom crosses her arms and stomps a foot, essentially appearing to be a toddler.

No one moves. Stormy and my mom appear to be in some sort of standoff.

Finally, I stand up and whisper to my mom. “What’s going on?”

“This man abandoned me. Abandoned *us*. And now he stands here, trying to say it was all on me? Bullshit!”

Us? What is she talking about? She can’t mean that, can she? I stare at Stormy. I mean, I really stare at him. And for the first time, I see my eyes staring back at me. I take a step back, and Fox is right there, holding me. This can’t be right. My mom would have told me if I was working with my father.

Or would she? She never told me she even knew Stormy. All she told me about my dad was that he had died in the service.

My body feels numb, and I have to work hard to control my breathing so I don't pass out. My mom can be selfish, but did she really lie to me my entire life? If I'd known my father was alive, I could have searched for him. All those lost years we could have been in each other's lives.

Stormy's eyes widen, and he looks from my mom to me and back again. "You were pregnant?"

My mom snorts. She actually snorts. "I sent you all those letters before I knew, and I was worried because I hadn't gotten my period. Finally, a friend pushed me to take a test." She sniffles and wipes her eyes.

Everyone has gone silent as they wait to see how Stormy reacts.

Stormy's gaze meets mine. "Melanie, are you saying Julia is my daughter?"

My mom's finger stabs Stormy in the chest, and he winces. "Why didn't you just tell me you wanted to break things off when you left? I wrote so many letters. And every day, I would go to the mailbox. But you never wrote back."

Of course, she's not answering the question we all need her to. Although I can see it now.

Stormy reaches out and pulls her into his arms. That's when my mom breaks down and sobs.

"Melanie, I never got any letters. Did you send them to the address my parents gave you?"

She pushes him away. "They didn't give me any address. I brought my letters to your house. Your dad told me he made sure they all got to you. He told me you didn't want to write back, and you were done with me."

Stormy shakes his head. "No, he wouldn't do that." He steps toward me. "Melanie, you haven't answered the big question hanging in the air. Is Julia my daughter?"

My mom grabs a napkin from the table and blows her nose. "Yes."

My knees give out, but Fox catches me. Hearing the confirmation from my mom is too much. Tears blur my vision as I try to focus on my mom. "Why didn't you tell me? You knew I worked with him."

She knew it. She had to.

"That man," my mom points to him, "didn't deserve you. He abandoned us."

Stormy takes my hand. “I never would abandon you. I swear. I didn’t know.”

He looks so sincere, staring into my eyes. I never thought of Stormy as a liar. My mom, yes. But I’m struggling to imagine she really kept this from me. Yes, she has her issues, but when I was younger, she didn’t. At least, not that I recall. Maybe I cast out negative memories because I can’t imagine she really would have kept this from him. From me. Raising me on her own was difficult at best.

“You went off and made quite a life for yourself, didn’t you?” My mom is now sitting at the table, drinking from a flask. Where the hell did that come from? “Instead of taking care of me and the baby, you used your dad’s money and really made a name for yourself. Now you own two companies that are both making quite a decent profit. That money should have been mine.” She points to me. “Ours.”

How the hell would she know if the company is making a decent profit? Is she guessing? “How do you know all of that?” I whisper.

She ignores me and continues to glare at Stormy.

He places his hands on the table and leans down until he’s at eye level with her. “A decent profit?”

She laughs. “Well, more than decent. I wondered how you had enough money to buy another security company. Your company gets paid very well for the contracts you have.”

I walk over and sit down next to my mom. “Mom, do you know how much they are paid for their work?”

My mom turns to me with a smile. “I do.” She glances back at Stormy. “I have to say I’m surprised you even take jobs with the Navy anymore. Those private jobs are so much more lucrative.”

My body goes numb at her words. There’s only one way she could know this unless she’s making it up. “Mom, have you ever been inside the Morgan Thompson Security office?”

She takes another gulp from her flask. “Of course I have. How else would I know what’s going on?”

“How did you get in?” I ask. She must have been the one to enter the security code. But how did she figure that out? “I mean, how did you figure out the code?”

After finishing the flask, she tosses it onto the table. “That wasn’t hard. A little research and I bought a device that figured it out for me. I will say I was

surprised when I saw the date you chose.”

“You knew it because you were his first,” I say.

She slaps the table hard. “I should have been his only.” Her shoulders slump, and tears fall from her eyes. “You always said I was the only one.”

I’m torn between comforting her and being angry. But the shock is finally wearing off as I realize this means that she broke in.

“Holy shit,” Rover says behind me. “Did you leave some chocolates at the office?”

My mom smiles. “I’d forgotten about that. Yes, I did last year, I believe.” She glares at Stormy. “Hope they made you sick.”

Stormy’s fist pounds the table. “Did you set fire to our office?”

“Stop!” I say as I stand up.

This woman is my mother, and I do need to protect her because right now, she’s going to admit to everything she’s done. And it’s quite clear I have no idea how truly unbalanced she’s become.

I glance around, and the guys are all staring at me with various expressions of confusion.

“It looks like she will need to be brought in for questioning, but that questioning shouldn’t be done by the apparent victims or her daughter. And she needs an attorney.” I wait for someone to object to what I’ve said, but it’s silent.

“No,” Stormy says. “She’s not going in.”

I’ve never been at odds with Stormy, and right now, it doesn’t feel good. Before I can argue, he continues.

“I’m not going to press charges.”

“What the hell?” Cowboy asks.

“As long as she tells me everything she’s done in regard to MTS.”

And just like that, I’ve tensed up again. I turn to my mom.

She’s staring at her hands. “Fine,” she says.

I sit down, and Stormy does, too.

“How many times have you been inside that office?” Stormy asks.

My mom shrugs. “Inside? Only twice.”

“Have you been inside my home?” Stormy asks.

She continues to stare down as she nods.

“How many times?”

She licks her lips. “Ten.”

“Jesus,” Rover says.

“What did you do inside my house?”

My mom lifts her head and glances at everyone sitting around the table, then focuses back on Stormy. “I’ll tell you, but not the others.”

Stormy nods. “All right. There’s a bench on the sidewalk one shop down. We’ll go there and let everyone here finish their lunch.”

I follow them to the door, but Stormy turns and stops me.

“Julia, I would like to talk to your mom alone. Okay?”

“Oh, sure. Okay.”

I watch from the window as they both walk the short distance to the bench and sit down.

“Are you all right?” Fox says from behind me.

His tender voice is my undoing. I’ve been trying to hold it together, but I can’t anymore. I spin around and launch into him, my crutches dropping to the floor. Tears spring from my eyes. He holds me tight for what feels like a long time.

Finally, I lean back so I can see his eyes. “Thank you for being here.”

He pushes some hair off my face. “Of course. That was quite the bombshell she dropped. She never mentioned Stormy to you?”

I shake my head. “She knew I worked with him but never said a word.”

He winces. “Yeah, that’s not right. But maybe Stormy will get some answers.”

I take a deep breath and let it out. “Or maybe I need to face the fact that my mom needs help. Help that she obviously isn’t going to seek out on her own.”

I glance outside in time to see my mom stand from the bench.

“Your daughter has been right under your nose, and you didn’t even know. Look at the resemblance!” she yells loud enough for everyone inside to hear. She stomps away.

Stormy doesn’t move from the bench. I let her words sink in. Did she think we should have simply looked at each other and figured it out? That makes no sense.

“Hey,” Fox says. “For what it’s worth, I never noticed the resemblance between you and Stormy until today.”

“Me either. Sometimes you don’t see obvious things until they’re pointed out.”

But I shouldn’t have had to piece this together. My mom should have told me who my dad was. Why would she keep this from me?

## CHAPTER FORTY

Fox

“HEY, I’m not sure what to say in a situation like this,” Ozzie says as he stands across from Julia and me. “But I packed up your sandwiches in case you want them later.” He hands us a bag.

“Thanks,” Julia says.

“Stormy is a great guy. I’m certain he had no idea,” Ozzie says.

Julia nods.

He turns to me. “I’m going to check on Stormy.”

We watch as he walks outside.

Stormy is on the phone, and Ozzie sits on the bench.

Maybe I should push Julia to talk to him, but right now, I’m numb and shell-shocked. I can’t imagine how she must be feeling.

She grabs my hand and squeezes it. “I’m going to find my mom. I have a lot of questions.” She punches something into her phone and holds it to her ear. “Dammit. Voicemail.”

“Do you want me to drive you to her place?”

Julia bites her lip as she thinks. “No. She won’t go home. She’s in avoidance mode again. It will be a few days before I’ll hear from her.”

That sounds awful. When she needs her mom the most, the woman abandons her. Plus this also means we can’t question her further about Daniels.

“Fox? Can you take me to your place?”

“Of course. Let’s go.”

We say bye to the guys and head out to my truck. My nerves kick in as we start our drive. Julia has never been to my place. Wait, did I leave dirty underwear on the floor? I don’t know. Sweat beads on the back of my neck. I grip the steering wheel tighter.

“What’s wrong?” Julia asks.

I glance at her and then back at the road. “Nothing.”

She turns in her seat to stare at me. “Don’t lie. I can’t take dishonesty.”

I blow out a breath. “It’s just that you’ve never been to my place before, and I haven’t cleaned it recently.”

She grins. “You’re nervous. Thank you.”

I frown at her. “You like that I’m nervous?”

She moves her hand to my leg and squeezes. “I like that you’ve given me something else to think about. Even if just for a minute.”

I can’t imagine what she’s feeling, not only finding out that her father is alive and out there but also that it’s a man she works with and that he never knew about her.

As we pull up to my house, her phone rings. She stares at it.

“It’s Stormy.”

“I’ll wait on my porch. Take all the time you need,” I say.

She nods and answers. I get out of the truck and step onto my porch. Then I turn back to watch her. She’s nodding at something Stormy said. The conversation only lasts a minute before she removes the phone from her ear. It takes her another minute before she exits my truck.

As she approaches me, a small smile tugs at her lips. “Stormy wants to talk in person tomorrow morning.”

“That’s a good thing, right?” I ask.

She nods. “It’s a good thing. I think both of us are in shock right now, but hopefully, we can get to know each other better over time.”

I wrap my arms around her and hold her close.

“Okay, it’s time,” she says. “I need to see your place. I can’t believe I’ve never been here.”

I unlock the door and turn back to her. “Keep in mind I don’t have people over, so it’s not set up for entertaining.”

I step in and try to see the place through her eyes. It’s pretty bare as far as the furnishings go. In the living room, there is a couch, a chair, and a television. There are no decorations or photos. But there are plants. Way too



many plants. Thanks, Trax.

“Let me give you the tour,” I say as I take her hand.

“Why do you have so many plants?”

“When I was in the hospital, Trax told people I wanted plants in lieu of flowers.”

“I never took you for a plant person.”

“I’m not.”

We walk into the dining room, where there is no table but a few unopened boxes. There are two barstools at the kitchen counter where I usually eat. I show her the spare bedroom, which also has unopened boxes, and then my bedroom.

She steps into the bedroom. “This is the most decorated space in the house.”

By decorated, she’s referring to the one photo I have on my dresser. It’s of my mom and me before her diagnosis.

“Did you move in recently?” she asks as she stares at another unopened box in the corner of my bedroom.

“No. The boxes were stored at my mom’s place. It’s mostly stuff from when I was a kid and some of her things.” I don’t add that the boxes have been sitting here for three years and I can’t bring myself to go through them.

Losing my mom was the hardest thing I’ve had to deal with. She was my rock, and it has really sucked since she’s been gone. But I swallow that down. Right now, I need to be here for Julia.

“Hey,” she says. “Where did you go?”

“Sorry, the boxes are from my mom’s, and it got me thinking about her.” I cup her face in my hands. “But I want to talk about you. If you want to talk.”

She sits on the edge of my bed. “I’m not sure what to talk about. I’m angry with my mom for lying to me all these years. She said my father died in the service. Clearly, she knew that wasn’t true. I’m upset with myself for not realizing how bad she’s gotten. I mean, did she really try to burn down MTS? Or was she smoking and stalking, and it was an accident?”

I sit beside her. “Your mom smokes?”

She shakes her head. “Well, she did, but she quit last year. I was so happy she finally did. But now that I think about it, she quit around the time of the fire.”

I take her hand in mine. “Maybe she felt guilty, and it was an accident.”

“Ugh!” She lets out a loud sigh and flops backward. “Even if it was, she’s broken into MTS, and worse, she admitted to going into Stormy’s place multiple times.”

I lay back beside her. “Yeah, I’m not familiar with whatever security Stormy has on his house, but I’m sure it’s not easy to crack.”

She turns to me. Her eyes well with tears. “I have to get her treatment of some kind. Or admitted. She’s going to fight it. But she stalked Stormy.” She covers her face. “I’m a horrible daughter.”

I pull her hands from her face. “Hey, no, you’re not. Your mom did bad things, but she hid that side of herself from you.”

She shakes her head. “No, she didn’t. I mean, I knew she wasn’t taking her medication for depression. I didn’t know she would do all that she did. If I’d given her more of my time, I would have seen things were getting worse. But giving her time has been so hard. It’s hard to force a relationship with someone who doesn’t want one.”

I can’t imagine your own mom not wanting a relationship with you. My mom and I were close until the day she died.

She wipes her eyes. “I wonder if she pulled away because of my resemblance to Stormy?”

“It’s possible. Or it’s possible that whatever issue or illness she has got worse over time.”

Julia nods. “She’s definitely worse. Or she hid everything she’s done from me before. Hell, maybe that’s why the guys leave her. I always thought it was because she picked men who were using her for a place to stay.”

“Maybe now that the truth is out, your mom can heal. It sounds like there was a lot of damage done when Stormy left.”

She frowns. “I hope so. I hope it doesn’t reopen old wounds.”

I wipe away a tear.

“Thank you for being here for me. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your support through all of this.”

“Julia, I’d support you through anything.” I mean it, too. If she asked, I’d do anything for her.

Her hand moves under my shirt to my chest and then down to my stomach. Just that small touch from her and I’m on fire. I stare at the ceiling. She needs comfort right now, not sex. But her fingers find skin as they move under my shirt. I close my eyes.

“Royce?”

I love it when she uses my name. Hell, I love her. The realization makes me smile. I open my eyes and turn to her.

“Hey, what are you thinking about?” she asks.

I reach over and cup her face. “I’ve fallen completely in love with you, Julia.”

She smiles as she moves her body closer to mine. “I love you, too.”

We both stare at each other, grinning as our words sink in. Her hands slowly move down as her eyes fill with desire. Her grin turns mischievous.

“Julia? What are *you* thinking about right now?”

She sits up and pulls off her shirt. “I need you.” She straddles me and leans down for a kiss.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Julia

I'M nervous as I walk through the door of MTS. Stormy asked me to meet him here this morning so we could talk. I'm not even sure what I want him to say.

"Julia," Stormy calls from down the hall, "I was getting us some coffee."

I join him as he hands me a cup. "Thank you."

He nods toward the back door. "I thought we could go out on the deck."

"I'd like that."

We step out onto their enormous back deck. I love this space. They use it mostly for gathering before their paintball games, but I think it's the most relaxing place. There's a light breeze, and birds are singing from the trees. We sit on the steps.

He chuckles. "Sorry, there aren't any chairs. I figure anything I put out here will get destroyed with paint anyway."

My eyes catch on the stairs. He's right. There are layers of dried paint caking them. All blue and red.

"I saw your mom last night."

His words catch me off guard. I'd called my mom three times and left three messages. She never returned any of my calls.

"She came to my house, and we had a real heart-to-heart. She really thought I was dead. She brought you to my parents' house when you were three, hoping to get in touch with me."

He sips his coffee as his eyes tear up. “My dad told her I was dead and never to come back.” He wipes his eyes. “I called my dad and made him tell me what happened. He said he never gave me the letters or her my address because he was convinced she’d cheated on me and the kid wasn’t mine.”

I set my coffee down. “Why did he think that?”

He wipes at his eyes again. “My father is a hard man, so I was shocked when he opened up and told me why he did it. He’d been in love in high school. The girl got pregnant, and he was ready to marry her. But then he found out she’d been sleeping with his best friend and the baby wasn’t his. She tried to pass it off as my dad’s because he came from a wealthy family, and his best friend didn’t. He never truly trusted anyone again after that. And when your mom told him she was pregnant, he jumped to the conclusion that she was simply trying to cash in.”

I huff. “Because he got screwed over, he was convinced all women were out to screw men over?”

“Something like that.”

I hope I never meet this man who kept my father from me all my life. “What about your mom? You said he only loved once. He didn’t love her?”

Stormy shrugs. “I think in his own way he did, but he held a lot back. I don’t know why my mom stayed with him.”

We sit in silence for a few moments as it all sinks in.

“Did my mom tell you why she didn’t come to you when she found out you were alive?”

He leans his head back and stares at the sky. “She thought I was in on it with my dad. That I told him to tell her that. She found out that I worked with you at times, and she said she was furious. That’s when she hired a private investigator to find out everything about me. Her conclusion was that I abandoned both of you to go off and get rich. Those are her words.”

I reach for my coffee cup, now wanting something to hold. “I’m sorry for everything she’s done.”

He reaches out and puts his hand on my arm. “Julia, it’s not your fault.”

I squeeze the cup to work up the courage to get this out. “It is. There’s something you need to know about her. She was fine for a long time. But something changed. She gets depressed, like really depressed, and I can’t reason with her. She has medication that helps, but she doesn’t like to take it. I knew she wasn’t well, but I pretended she had it under control. Clearly, she didn’t.”

Stormy sighs. “That’s still not your fault. You’re not your mother’s keeper.”

I stare at this man. He’s always been compassionate, and he would do anything for these guys. And me, too, even before he knew I was his daughter.

“You almost died saving me.” Tears well in my eyes as the words come out. “If you had, we would never have known this.”

“Come here,” he says.

I lean into him, and he hugs me. “We know now, and that’s what we need to focus on.”

I nod. He loosens his grip, and I sit up straight again. “Are you going to press charges against my mom?”

He shakes his head. “No, I’m hoping we can put all of that behind us.”

“But she shared confidential financial information with the media, and she shared the identity of the men with Daniels and maybe others.”

Stormy stares off into the trees. “She let me delete everything that was on her phone, and she allowed Trip to delete anything about MTS from her cloud storage. She’s trying, and that’s all I’m asking for.”

“Thank you. For not punishing her.”

He nods. “Want to have dinner Sunday? My place. I’ll cook.”

I don’t bother hiding my smile. I’m happy Stormy wants to get to know me. It helps soothe all the years when I wondered if my dad ever wanted me. “I’d love to.”

A loud caw comes from overhead as Cheeto yells at us from the railing. We both glance at the bird.

“I’m not sure luring that thing here was my best idea,” Stormy says.

I laugh. Fox filled me in on everything involving that peacock. He hates it since it attacks him. We actually plotted his revenge against Rover for feeding the thing Fox’s favorite snack.

“Fox would agree with you.”

Stormy twists to face me. “You two are good together.”

I blink a few times, again caught off guard by this man. “Thank you.”

He smiles. This is something I really needed from him, his approval.

“I love him.”

“Is that so? It sounds like I need to have a serious talk with Fox, make sure he understands I was serious about him treating you right.”

I laugh.

“What? I may have missed out on the first twenty-six years of your life, but I’m here now, and I take this seriously.”

So many emotions are running through me right now, and I can’t stop the tears as the emotion spills over.

The bird caws and takes off, running around the side of the building.

A moment later, Rover yells from the front of the building. “What the fuck?”

We race around the corner. I’m trying not to laugh because I know exactly what we’ll find, and as Rover’s motorcycle comes into view, I have to work hard to keep a straight face.

Cheeto is perched on the handlebars, and despite Rover waving his arms around, the bird is not moving.

“Why, Cheeto? We had a deal,” Rover pleads.

CT stares at the situation with his arms crossed. Coff and Ozzie are both shaking their heads. Fox is leaning against one of the cars with a smug look.

Rover turns and points at Fox. “What did you do?”

Fox shrugs. “Guess he likes you now.” He straightens up, spins on his heel, and walks back into the office.

Rover opens his box trunk. His head falls. “Seriously? He just poured the Cheetos in? This is an orange mess!”

Cheeto is suddenly on the back of the seat, trying to get into the box. Rover steps away as the bird eats as if the box is his feeding bowl. Rover keeps trying to convince the bird to get off his bike. It’s a futile attempt, and we can’t help but watch. I glance back at the door and spot Fox standing there, laughing.

Finally, the bird must finish because it looks up and caws at Rover. Then it poops on his seat.

“No!” Rover yells. “I thought we were friends!”

I’m not sure if he’s talking to Fox or the bird, but his eyes are on the peacock.

“You shouldn’t mess with people if you can’t handle the payback,” Coff says, grinning.

“Payback? What did Rover do?” Ozzie asks.

Coff laughs. “Let’s go inside, and I’ll fill you in.”

“Does Ozzie work here now?” I ask Stormy, wondering why the man is here again today.

He laughs. “No, Coff came in to finish a report so he could take the day

off. Ozzie's just along for the ride."

Rover continues to groan as CT steps up and hands him some cleaner and paper towels.

Stormy spots Fox in the doorway. "Fox, we need to talk."

Rover stops cleaning and turns to us. "Yes! He should get in trouble for this!"

Stormy shakes his head. "I'm not getting involved in your prank shit. No, we need to talk because you're dating my daughter."

CT and Rover both yell out, "Ooohh!"

Fox goes pale as Stormy approaches. Before they get inside, a car pulls into the parking lot.

Agent Carter gets out and slowly looks at each one of us, ending on Rover, who appears to be washing his motorcycle with paper towels.

"Bad time?" Carter asks.

"No, what's up?" Stormy says, walking toward him.

Carter glances back at Rover again, then at Stormy. "I have more information on Daniels, and since I had to come out this way anyway, it's easier just to tell you all in person."

CT leaves Rover to join us. "Come out this way anyway? Another assignment?"

Carter shoves his hands into his pockets. "No, it's another case I'm looking into on my own. Can we go inside to talk?"

"Of course," Stormy says.

I follow them inside, and Rover follows behind me. "You better tell your boy to watch his back."

I stop and turn to Rover. "Leave it alone. You two are even now."

"Even?" Rover screeches. "My trunk box is ruined. There's no way I can get that bird to leave it alone now."

Fox steps out of his office and shoves a box at Rover. "Here's a new one. We're even."

Rover blinks as he stares down at the box. "You bought me a new one?"

"Yes, it was worth it." Fox pushes past him into Stormy's office.

Once everyone is sitting down, Carter begins.

"We've been digging into Daniels and discovered that after he killed the real Aden Hart, he not only took over his identity, but he also claimed he'd earned that business degree, among other lies. Posing as Hart, Daniels has been tied to a number of financial scams that ended with him richer and the



people he scammed poorer. We have reason to believe he was planning to run the same scam in the next town over, Rosedale, but something stopped him.”

I clasp my hands and lean forward. “Why would you run a scam in Rosedale? It’s a small town.”

“A small town where the majority of the residents belong to one church and donate a portion of the income to it. He targeted churches and their parishioners.”

“That’s shitty,” Rover says.

Stormy crosses his arms. “You said something stopped him. Do you know what?”

Carter pulls his briefcase from the floor and opens it. I cough to cover my laugh. At every meeting, he has to make a dramatic showing of opening his briefcase and pulling out something important. Even at the station, most of our communication and information sharing is done electronically.

He places a photo of a woman in the middle of the table.

I stand up for a better look. “Wait, that’s Amy Paulo. She was one of the murder victims in the Bakery Fourteen case.” I’ll never forget the names of those victims. The images of their bodies are something I can never unsee. It was the most horrific crime scene I’d ever been at.

“Bakery Fourteen?” Coff asks.

I sit back down. “It was what we called the Daniels murder case because there were fourteen people murdered in a bakery.”

Carter clears his throat, getting our attention back on him. “Yes, she was. And she was also Daniels’s girlfriend. He was in love with her.” He turns and points at Rover. “And before you ask, no, he didn’t kill her.”

I stand up again. “Yes, he did. We had evidence.”

Carter shakes his head. “Daniels targeted the wrong person in one of his schemes. A man named Marlo Backman. Backman followed Daniels for a while and learned about the woman. Backman lured her, her family, best friends, and their husbands all to the bakery. Unfortunately, there were a few workers there, too. The man had all of them killed and made sure to plant evidence so Daniels would be charged for it.”

I blink. “That’s an elaborate way to take someone down. Who is this man?”

Carter sighs. “He’s a businessman currently serving a five-year sentence for embezzlement. He has no violent history that we were aware of.”

“How do you know he was the one to set up Daniels?”

Carter stands and walks toward the window. “Backman likes to talk, and the guy in the cell next to him told his attorney everything. That attorney contacted the FBI when she discovered the person Backman was talking about was on our most wanted list. She was hoping to work out a deal for her client. An agent took her messages, but we are backlogged due to staff cuts. No one ever followed up. Until the name Aden Hart name came up again and again during this investigation. The agent remembered those calls and dug into it.”

I glance around, and several of the guys are frowning.

“What exactly did Backman say?” Fox asks.

“He says no one better fuck him over because he’ll get them framed for murder. Our cellmate asked him what he meant, and Backman told him the entire story of how he set up Daniels for all those murders by planting evidence. And he also mentioned he paid off a rookie cop to plant evidence, and he made sure the cop was caught so Daniels would go free. As a result, he said he owns Daniels now.”

A clicking noise at the end of the table grabs our attention. Trax is holding what appears to be a fidget spinner.

“Trax, is that Peaches’s spinner?”

He tosses it on the table. “Yeah, dammit. He told me to try it out while he’s gone, and that damn thing is addictive. Please, someone, take it away.”

CT reaches over and grabs it. Then he starts playing with it. “That’s a lot of effort. Why didn’t Backman just have him killed?”

Carter shrugs. “My guess is Backman thought he could control Daniels.”

“Do you think Daniels wanted to steal this weapon to get away from Backman?” CT asks.

“Or was Backman the mastermind behind it all?” Rover asks.

Carter retrieves the photo from the table and puts it back into his briefcase. “I don’t believe Backman was involved in the weapon stealing. When our guy asked Backman if he’s made the guy do anything else, the man said no, but once he’s out, he will.”

“But only if he can find him,” I say. “This was Daniels’s escape plan.”

CT sets the fidget spinner on the table. “Well, I guess he has to figure out how to escape Backman in prison now.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Fox

EVEN THOUGH JULIA and Stormy learned of their true relationship only two months ago, it's like they've known each other all their lives. And I'll admit, it's been strange for me to adjust to this new dynamic. Whenever the guys at work bring up Julia, I usually cut them off. The last thing I want is for Stormy to think I'm talking about our relationship with the guys.

But hopefully, after we return from this trip, any concerns Stormy has will be alleviated. Not that I'm doing any of this for him. I'm not. No, this is for me and Julia.

"I'm ready," she says as she walks out of the bathroom in a short sundress.

My hand fiddles with the ring box in my pocket as sweat beads on the back of my neck. When I told Trax about my plan, he suggested I wait a little longer. And yes, we haven't been dating that long, but I've known this woman for over two years. And I'm certain she's the one.

She frowns as she approaches me. "Are you feeling all right?" The back of her hand goes to my forehead. "Do you have a fever?"

A fever? No, just nervous because I'm going to ask the woman I love to marry me and hope she's ready. I sure as hell am.

I chuckle to lighten the mood. "No, I'm still acclimating to the weather here."

As if on cue, the trade winds kick up, blowing cool air into the condo

we've rented.

"Really? I love the sun and breezes. This has to be one of the most relaxing vacations I've ever had."

I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her close. "Is it because of the weather or the news you got last week?"

She grins. "I will admit when Greenhow announced he's leaving to take a new position in Eastern Washington, I wanted to scream, yes! But I held back. And yes, knowing he'll be gone when I return does make me very happy."

I kiss her, then step away. "Let's go." I take her hand in mine and lead us to our car.

The drive to the restaurant is short. I've already arranged everything. And before you jump to conclusions, no, I am not asking her to marry me in a crowded restaurant. No, better.

When we walk in, there is a large crowd which was also expected.

"Hey, do you want to get a drink at the bar before dinner?"

She glances at all the people.

"I'll put our name on a list first," I say.

She smiles. "Yes, that would be great."

I give my name to the hostess and lead Julia to the bar, where we order Mai Tais. Once we have our drinks, I take her hand.

"I want to show you something."

She follows me up two flights of stairs. At the top is a door. I turn to her. "Can you hold my drink for a second?"

She takes it. "Sure."

I unlock the door, which causes her to arch her brow.

"Where are you taking me?"

I grin. "You'll see."

Once the door is open, I take my drink back and lead her onto the roof of the building. At first, all you see are vents, but once you get around all that, you have a full view of the ocean and sunset.

"Fox! This is amazing!"

Julia shared with me how Dan had proposed, so I won't be dropping to one knee while she's taking in the view. I wait patiently as we finish our drinks. Once she's done, I take her glass from her and set it down on the ground.

The moment the sun drops below the horizon, she turns to me, smiling. "I

never knew you could be so romantic, but this is perfect.” She pushes up onto her toes and gives me a quick kiss.

I wrap my arms around her waist. “Julia, from the moment I first saw you, I knew deep down we were meant to be together. I’m sorry it took me so long to get out of my own damn way.”

Her hands cup my face. “I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions about you dating someone else. But we did finally find our way to each other.”

My hands start to shake, and I need to speed this up before she notices. “We did. And now that we are together, I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy, Julia. I want the forever, the family, the house, and maybe even a cat and dog.”

Her mouth parts. “What are you saying?”

I wanted to say more, but I hadn’t accounted for my nerves taking over. I pull away just a little and get down on one knee. I pull the box from my pocket. “Julia, will you marry me?”

Her lips curl up as she nods. “Yes, Royce. I’ll marry you!”

I stand, pick her up, and spin her as she buries her face in my neck. She said yes! I’m overwhelmed with emotion as I finally lower her back to the ground. Then I kiss her hard. Before it goes too far up here in a very public place, I pull back.

“Royce?”

“Yeah?”

She nods to my hand. “Do you have a ring in there, or is that only for show?”

“Oh, shit. I was so nervous I forgot to open the box.”

When I open it, her face lights up as she stares in. “It’s beautiful. Can you put it on me?”

I take her hand and slip the ring on.

When I glance up into her eyes, she’s holding back a laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

Her smile drops. “Oh, I thought you were trying to be funny.”

I glance down, then back at her. “You don’t like it?”

She places her other hand on mine. “I love it. It’s just you put it on the wrong hand.”

I stare down and laugh. She laughs, too.

“You didn’t think I’d say yes?”

I move the ring. “I was worried you’d think it was too soon.”

She stares at the diamond and then at me. “Not at all. In fact, we could always get married tomorrow.”

I wait for her to say she’s joking. She doesn’t.

“You’re serious?”

She nods. “I am, but I’d prefer to have my mom and Stormy there.”

Those two have talked a few times over the past couple of months, and after the initial shock wore off, both of them are trying to be friends, for Julia’s sake.

I nod. “I’d like my friends to be there. Maybe we plan a wedding back home, and then we can come back here for our honeymoon.”

“Yes, I like that plan. Now, let’s go celebrate.” She tugs my hand toward the door to the stairs.

\* \* \*

WE SLEEP in the next day since we were up most of the night “celebrating.” After a relaxing breakfast in bed, we each get ready for the day.

“Hey, I forgot to ask. How did you get a key for the roof?”

I grin, happy. “A friend owns a condo above the restaurant. Roof access is included. When I told him what I wanted to do, he lent me the key.”

She kisses me. “So, you planned it in advance?”

“I bought the ring a month ago.”

Her brow shoots up.

“Babe, I’ve been all in since our first kiss.” I kiss her back.

“Babe?”

I shrug. “Like it?”

Before she answers, someone pounds on the door. We didn’t order room service and aren’t expecting anyone. I walk to the door and check the peephole. I lean my forehead on the door.

“Julia, we’re being invaded,” I say as I open the door.

Trax and Maverick step past me and go straight to Julia.

“Yes!” Maverick says as he points to her finger.

“Congratulations, you two,” Trax says.

“What are you guys doing here?”

Trax grins. “My best friend tells me he’s getting engaged and you don’t think I’d be here for you?”

“I didn’t think you’d go through with it, so I insisted on checking for a ring before he said anything,” Maverick says.

I cross my arms. “You didn’t think I’d go through with it?”

Maverick shrugs. “It took you two years to ask for a date. Figured you’d wait at least four before taking the next step.”

I glance at Julia, who, fortunately, is smiling at all of this.

“I asked her to move in with me after one month. That was the next step.”

Maverick rubs his chin. “You two are living together?”

He’s the one who advised me not to wait too long. The next week, I told him I asked Julia to move in. How the hell can he forget that?

He grins. “I’m just kidding. Seriously, though, congratulations.”

Trax sits in the chair in the room. “What are your plans today?”

Oh, are they planning on joining us? No, Trax isn’t delusional. Although he did fly all the way here.

“Trax, I appreciate you checking in, I think.” Shit, I was really hoping for more time alone with Julia.

Julia sits on the edge of the bed. “Well, our plan is to go to the beach for a couple of hours and then come back here and spend the afternoon in bed.”

Both Maverick and Trax simply nod.

Julia grins. “Having sex. Lots and lots of sex.”

Trax laughs. “I’m guessing you’d rather we not join you?”

Finally, Maverick laughs. “The look on your face, Fox. Priceless. Seriously, we only came by to say congratulations. Trax is going to teach me to surf.”

“You surf?” Julia asks Trax.

He nods. “Since I was a kid. Love it.”

“Looks fun to me,” Maverick says.

“You know you can surf in California, and it’s a shorter flight from Seattle,” I say.

Trax stands up and stretches. “True, but you gave us an excuse to go to Hawaii.”

“I’m surprised Sarina was okay with staying home,” Julia says. “She told me Hawaii was on her bucket list of places to visit.”

“She came with us. She is currently on a lounge chair under an umbrella staring at the ocean while trying to write her next book,” Maverick says.

“Actually, vacationing with them is perfect,” Trax says. “I get him during the day while she writes. Then he spends the late afternoons through the night

with her.”

“And what will you do?” Julia asks.

Trax grows serious. “I have something to keep me busy.”

He doesn’t say more. Since this summer, when Julia and I got together, I haven’t spent as much time with Trax. Lately, I get the impression he’s going through something, but when I ask, he tells me everything is fine. But as I watch him, I know it isn’t. Hopefully, he’ll open up to me soon.

“Well, we better get going,” Maverick says. “You two have fun. I’ll see you back in Seattle.”

I shake hands with both guys, and Julia gives them hugs.

“Thank you for stopping by,” she says. “Good luck with the waves.”

“Good luck with him,” Trax says, “Mrs. Davenport.”

Once they leave, I spin Julia into my arms. “Mrs. Davenport. I like the sound of that.”

Her hands move down my back, and just like that, I’m turned on again.

I pick her up and carry her over to the bed.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Changing our plans,” I say.

And that’s exactly what I do. We can go to the beach tomorrow.



## EPILOGUE

Ozzie

MY PHONE BUZZES with a message from Piper.

Piper: *Have to cancel our plans. Maybe next time.*

What the fuck is this? Maybe next time? We had a long heart-to-heart about this yesterday. There's no way she would be so flippant to say "maybe next time."

I storm out of my office, down the hall, to her desk. But her computer is off. She's gone. I check the time, and it's five-thirty. That means she left at her usual time of five, and instead of telling me in person, she waited until she was home to text me.

Piper. This woman is all I can think about. I tried not to develop feelings for her. Hell, not only is she my teammate's cousin, but she's younger. Eleven years younger. I know better. But there's this pull I can't deny. She feels it, too.

Every time I brought the idea of dating to Piper, she always said she wasn't ready. She refused to tell me why or even discuss it, so I figured it must be about Durango. I explain to her that I can handle her cousin. This has been the cycle we have been living over and over again. Until yesterday. She told me I'm worth the risk. She opened up about her feelings for me, and I've been on cloud nine.

Tomorrow night we are supposed to talk to Durango together. Well, until she sent a text to cancel.

If she changed her mind and says she's still not ready, I can't keep doing this to myself. I can't keep living my life in limbo. Not that I'll find any other woman who captures my attention like her.

I know because I used to date a lot. Something my best friend, Durango, is very aware of and part of why he doesn't want me near Piper. But what he doesn't realize is once I met her, I stopped dating. It seemed pointless.

Maybe I should go to Seattle and visit my best friend, Coff. I shoot him a text asking if he's free.

I walk back to my office and pace between my desk and the door. "Fuck."

"You all right?" Durango asks from my doorway.

No. Your cousin is driving me crazy. "Yeah, just sick of paperwork."

He chuckles. "I get that. Can I talk to you about something?"

"Of course."

He steps in and leans against the wall. "I'm heading out on assignment now." He holds up his duffle bag.

Could this be why Piper canceled? Maybe she knew her cousin was leaving town. "You want me to keep an eye on Piper?"

He asks every time he goes out of town.

He scratches the back of his neck. "I'm getting predictable, aren't I?"

"Getting? You've always been."

"Asshole," he laughs but then grows serious. "Now, I shouldn't have to say this but don't take advantage of the situation. I'm only asking you because you two seem to be friends. But if you touch her—"

I put my hand up. "You've made your position very clear."

And he really has. I can't blame him for being protective, but it pisses me off that he only sees me as some player out for a good time with his cousin and not as a man who truly cares for her. But there is no point in trying to convince him if Piper isn't willing to take the next step with me. Next step, hell, any step.

He nods. "Okay. I'll check in when I can. I'll see you when I get back."

"Stay safe. And don't worry about Piper. I'll make sure she's all right."

"Thanks."

He leaves, and I sit back down. My phone buzzes with an invitation for a FaceTime meeting. I accept.

Coff's goofy grin fills the screen. "Hey, you want to come to Seattle? Have you seen the weather?" He's outside and holds the phone to give me a sweeping view of his backyard. The sky is dark gray, and everything looks

wet.

“I just wanted to get away from Piper so I don’t do something stupid.”

Coff knows I’m hung up on her because we used to be roommates and she’d come over. He’d question what was going on, and finally, on my last visit to Seattle, I told him everything. Not that there’s much to tell. I want her. She always says she wants me, but she’s not ready. Until yesterday. We were going to discuss how we could make Durango understand and accept us.

“But that plan is out the window.”

“What’s going on?” Coff asks.

“She canceled our plans for this weekend. And after I sent you that text, Durango asked me to keep an eye on her while he’s gone on assignment.”

“Keep an eye on her? She’s twenty-two.”

“Yeah, but you know Durango. He always asks me to check in on her.”

“She still hasn’t told you what’s going on? What’s holding her back?”

I shake my head. “But she said she was ready and we were going to talk to Durango tomorrow. I had hoped she would open up after that.”

“I’m sorry. That really sucks. If she really is that indecisive, maybe she’s not ready. She is only twenty-two.”

I sigh hating that he’s right.

“I’m afraid we’re heading out of Seattle this weekend; otherwise, I’d say fly over and check on Piper with phone calls.”

“Where you headed?”

“Sedona. Delaney says she can’t take another day without seeing the sun.”

I chuckle. “Well, she is a Californian girl. How long do you think she’ll last in Seattle?”

He sighs. “I don’t know. Despite the weather, she seems to love it here.”

“What about you?”

He shrugs. “It’s all right. I mean, I like the guys and all, but it’s not the same as there. You know?”

I nod. “I do. Hey, maybe one winter there and Delaney will be begging to move to New York.”

“Move to New York? I thought you liked it here,” Delaney says in the background.

“Oh, hey. I didn’t hear you come out here,” Coff says. “I was just telling Ozzie about our trip to Sedona to get some sun.”

“I can’t wait. Seattle’s nice, but how do these people live with no sun?”

“Hey, I need to go,” I say. “Have fun in Sedona, you two.”

Coff frowns. “Do you want to talk about Piper some more?”

I blow out a breath. “No. I need to focus on something else. Maybe I’ll go to a bar.”

Yeah, I can go to a bar, but I know damn well I’m not picking anyone up.

Coff tilts his head. “No, you won’t. Look, you may be sick of my advice, but you have to talk to her. Really *talk* to her. Otherwise, you’ll keep going in circles and driving yourself nuts.”

“I did. Last night. That’s why her canceling really sucks. I thought we were finally on the same page. I’m going to head over there and find out what’s going on. Maybe give her an ultimatum because I can’t keep this up. Now go have fun and send me some photos.”

Coff grins. “Deal.”

I end the call and toss my phone onto my desk. I guess I’m going to see Piper this evening.

\* \* \*

PIPER

AS SOON AS I set down my keys, I grab my phone and turn on the music. I set it on the kitchen counter. I have the apartment to myself for a few days, and I love it. Durango does not like my music, but when he’s gone, I’m playing it. And I’m going to dance.

“I see you still like to dance,” a familiar voice says.

I spin around and lock eyes with the man I hoped never to see again. My ex. He swore he’d find me no matter where I went. It’s been a couple of years, and I’d hoped he’d moved on with someone else.

“Surprised to see me, love?”

His nickname for me causes my stomach to roll. I run to the sink and vomit.

“Not the welcome I was hoping for,” he says. “I’ve been watching you, and you are never alone. Until now.”

“Not for long. My roommate will be home soon, and I have a friend coming over.”

He laughs. "You're a shit liar. I watched your cousin leave with a bag."

I wipe my mouth with a towel. He knows I live with my cousin. What else does he know?

"Why are you here? How did you find me?"

He leans against the counter. "You know why I'm here. I told you. I'm the only man for you. But I'm not so sure you're as loyal."

Loyal? I've been too scared to be with anyone else. It's one of the reasons I've put Ozzie off. But this weekend, we were finally going to discuss dating and talking to Durango. I'm ready. I really thought I would never see John again.

"Who is this?" He holds up a photo of Ozzie and me standing outside the building's front door, laughing.

"That's one of my cousin's coworkers."

"Is this the friend that's coming over?"

"Yes."

John grabs my phone. "Cancel your plans." He moves behind me and watches from over my shoulder.

I open my text string with Ozzie. How can I clue him in that I need him with John over my shoulder? Maybe if I'm brief, he'll come over anyway, demanding answers.

Piper: *Have to cancel our plans. Maybe next time.*

I wince as I send it. After everything we talked about yesterday, he has to know I wouldn't send this message. John takes my phone and puts it in his pocket. It vibrates several times, and if I had to guess, Ozzie is asking questions.

"Sit," he says as he nods to a stool next to the counter.

I sit. "How long have you been watching me?"

"Long enough to know you don't belong here. Here's what going to happen. You're going to pack a bag, then leave a short note for your cousin telling him you're moving back to Montana."

"I don't want to move back to Montana."

I don't see it coming. He smacks me hard, and I cup my cheek.

"Let's go." He grabs my wrist and drags me down the hall to my bedroom.

He seems to navigate this place like he's been here before.

"How did you get in?"

"Doesn't matter," he says.

He tosses me onto the bed and goes to my closet, where he finds my suitcase. He opens it and starts tossing in things from my dresser. Half of it ends up on the floor, but he doesn't care. Finally, he closes it and leads me back to the kitchen.

"Where is some paper and a pen?" he asks.

Before I answer, there's a knock at the door.

"Piper? We need to talk." It's Ozzie. I bite back my smile.

John pulls a gun from his waistband. "Get rid of him. And if you try to tell him I'm here or anything is wrong, I'll shoot him." He pushes me toward the front door until we both hear a key in the lock.

John runs into the dining room and hides just on the other side of the wall. "Remember, I'll shoot him."

Ozzie walks in and stops when he sees me standing in the kitchen.

"You canceled our plans," he says. "Why?"

I finally meet his gaze, and my heart hurts. "I'm not ready." Please see that I'm lying.

His hands go to his hips. "Not ready?"

His eyes land on my suitcase, and his brows go up. "Going somewhere?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Montana."

He's staring at me, and I want so much to tell him John is in the next room, but I can see him out of the corner of my eye, holding his gun, ready to shoot. He has to sense something isn't right.

"Please tell Reed I'm sorry for quitting on him."

He steps closer. "You're quitting RHS?"

I nod, and a tear slips from my eye.

"Were you going to tell me? That you're leaving?"

"I was going to call you." Please catch that. One thing he knows about me is I will send a text over a phone call every time.

"What about our conversation yesterday? Were you just playing games with me?"

I bite my cheek to keep from sobbing. The pain in his eyes is too much. "No, Braxton. I was just confused. I'm sorry."

His eyes narrow. I never call him by his real name.

Instead of questioning it, he backs up, shaking his head. "I have to get out of here."

He spins around, and I watch the man I love walk out the door. After he's gone, I let the tears fall.

"Good job, love. Now write that note." He now has his gun aimed at me.

I write the note as John instructs the entire time, hoping, willing Ozzie to come back. But he doesn't.

"Grab your suitcase," he says.

I pick it up, and he wraps one arm around my waist and shoves the barrel of the gun into my side.

"Now let's go. I'm parked a block up."

As I exit the building, I look everywhere for a sign of Ozzie. But he's not there.

To anyone passing by, John and I look like a couple. There's no reason for anyone to stop us.

A car beeps as he uses the fob to unlock it. If I get in that vehicle, I won't escape him. It's trash pickup day, and there are bags piled up on the sidewalk. It's all too soft to use. My eyes scan the sidewalk. I spot it.

He takes my suitcase, steps to the trunk, and puts it in. While his attention is not on me, I reach down and grab the discarded blender. As he turns, I hit his head as hard as I can with it. He sways. I drop it and run.

"You bitch! I'll kill you!"

I keep running. Then I hear the gunshot, but I don't slow down. Not until I feel the fire of pain in my leg. My leg gives out, and I go down. Please, someone, stop him.

Want to know what happens to Piper? [Click here to read Ozzie.](#)

# CAST OF CHARACTERS FOR SECURING JULIA

## **Morgan Thompson Security**

Josh “Cowboy” Morgan – Owner, married to Shaw Morgan

Poseiden “Stormy” Thompson – Owner

Cody “PP” Anthony – Engaged to Lucy Gardiner Taylor – Connie’s best friend

Donny “Maverick” Reis – Girlfriend Sarina McIntyre

Dax “Rover” Adams – Girlfriend Connie Stevens

Grayson “Peaches” Walsh – Girlfriend CIA Agent Cara Harding

Royce “Fox” Davenport

Ford “CT” Mora

Lance “Trax” McClure

Logan “Coff” Folger - used to work at Reed Hawthorne Security but was transferred

Cheeto – the team’s defense peacock

## **Susan Stoker’s Legacy characters**

Blake “Rocco” Wise

Mark “Bubba” Wright

Decker “Gumby” Kincade

Beckett “Ace” Morgan

Cole “Rex” Kingston

Forest “Phantom” Dalton



Tex

**Pine Valley Police Department**

Chief Stevens

Detective Julia McNamara

Detective Greenhow

Detective Jeanine Hone

**Seattle Police Department**

Detective Gordon

Officer Thomas

**Golden Defense Security**

Mr. Wilcox – CEO

Pat Harris aka Aden Hart aka Leroy Daniels – CFO

**Other characters**

Special Agent in charge Benjamin Carter -runs Seattle FBI office

Agent Brian Folger – works out of the San Diego FBI office, also brother to Coff

CIA Agent Cara Harding

Trip - handles all cyber searches or tech issues

Braxton “Ozzie” Zavala – works at Reed Hawthorne Security, best friends with Coff

Delaney Manzia – Coff’s girlfriend

Amber Adams – Dax’s sister

Dan – Julia’s boyfriend

Loraine – Julia’s high school friend

Doogan – criminal, tangled with McNamara in the past

Charlie – one of Doogan’s men

ALSO BY DANIELLE PAYS

***Morgan Thompson Security Team***

Defendant Sarina

Shielding Connie

Rescuing Cara

Securing Julia

***Reed Hawthorne Security Team***

Thunder

Lightning

Coff

Ozzie

\* \* \*

*Dare to Surrender*

Chasing Her Trust

Taking Her Chase

Saving Her Target

Trusting Her Hero

Captivated

Embracing Her One

\* \* \*

*Dare to Risk*

Deceived

Pursued

Played

Consumed

Tangled

\* \* \*

To learn more about her books, please visit her website at <https://daniellepays.com>

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danielle Pays writes steamy romantic suspense with twists you won't see coming. She enjoys romance as well as mystery and suspense and blends them both using her beloved Pacific Northwest for inspiration with its mix of small towns and cities.

When not trying to write her characters into some kind of trouble, she can be found guzzling coffee while trying to convince her dog to learn the command drop.

Want to Connect with Danielle?

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<http://www.amazon.com/author/operationalpha>*

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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](#)

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***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* (Oct 2023)

*Searching for Heather* (Jan 2024)

*Searching for Khloe* (May 2024)

**The Refuge Series**

*Deserving Alaska*

*Deserving Henley*

*Deserving Reese*

*Deserving Cora* (Nov 2023)

*Deserving Lara* (Feb 2024)

*Deserving Maisy* (TBA)

*Deserving Ryleigh* (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.

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