



TIED
OVER

Mary Calmes

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Tied Over

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TIED OVER

Josiah Redeker has been tied up, tied down, and just plain tied to Bodhi Callahan since the younger marshal was paired with him five years ago. It was an easy slide from partners to best friends, and though Bodhi wanted more, Josiah thought Bodhi could do far better than him. That made for a bumpy ride, and, of course, the moment Josiah realized that trying to live without the man he loved more than anything was not something he could do, that was when Bodhi broke the big news that he was getting married. Adding to that nightmare, they got reassigned as partners because other people needed them more.

It's a disaster all around, and all Josiah sees ahead of him is pain—and not only from getting shot.

But what he thinks he knows for sure isn't exactly all there is. Turns out, he's not the only one who's missing his touchstone, and Bodhi might be fraying at the edges, coming undone. When two people have been tied together over and over for so long, it's not so easy to get loose. And maybe neither wants to be free of the other, and that could be their future, as long as no one comes between them... with a gun.

ONE

Though I hated all those movies where the main character said he was too old to do whatever shit he was doing, I had to admit I was, in fact, too old to be running down guys half my age. Like the fucker I was chasing at the moment, Stanislav Loginov, who looked to be in his late twenties. At forty-three, I should not have been running. At my age I should have been promoted by now, but I was still an investigator with the marshals service, nothing more. Not that being more seemed fun. All the guys I knew who'd been promoted looked like hell most of the time, and at least I wasn't chained to a desk like the higher-ups. But really, the running was overrated.

Loginov took a turn down a delivery tunnel—those ramps between office buildings—and following him was ill advised. Because if he all of a sudden stopped, and had a knife, my momentum would carry me right into him, and I'd be gutted like a fish. The good news was, with how hard he was running, arms and legs pumping like he was an Olympic hopeful, I was betting his brain was in full flight mode; no fight in his noggin at all. The only thing he was trying to do was outdistance me, which was likely, except I wasn't alone. My temporary partner, Eric Pazzi—six months out of rehab, two riding a desk and four with me—was circling back around in our, I had to say, pretty cool 1987 Pontiac Firebird that had the actual bird painted on the hood. Investigators drove whatever had been seized by Asset Forfeiture, and because I was always the first one down when new cars came in—I had learned my lesson

driving a Gremlin a few years back—I had jumped on the Firebird.

As soon as Loginov came up through the tunnel, Pazzi cut him off, having driven up on the sidewalk, and my fugitive hit the car, his momentum taking him over the hood. He might have gotten up and run on—he was clearly in great shape—but that same moment my partner was out of the car, yanking him back across the hood and down onto the ground. I couldn't see, I was hunched over, trying to breathe, but I heard a *thud* as Loginov made contact with the concrete, and then the zipping sound of plastic handcuffs.

“The fuck were you thinking?”

For a moment I thought Pazzi was yelling at our fugitive, but the voice wasn't his and the question was directed at me.

And then there was more yelling about how stupid I was. Loud, loud yelling as I was questioned about how far up my ass my head was.

Not Pazzi.

First off, Pazzi never shouted. They taught him in rehab how to stay calm. Apparently, that had been one of his triggers—his anger and frustration. No way the newly rehabilitated marshal would have ever raised his voice to me.

Turning my head, not ready to straighten up yet, I looked at my partner. Not the current one, but instead the real one. The old one. The forever one until one of us was promoted. The guy I'd been with for five years, whom I'd transferred to Chicago with, sort of, three years ago. I'd come to the Windy City maybe a week ahead of him, trying to give him time to decide if he wanted to stick with me. I knew better, though; he'd been right behind me as usual, and pissed that I hadn't waited for him.

Whereas Pazzi had black hair, like me, my regular partner had a dirty-blond, sun-streaked mane and bright turquoise-blue eyes that were now set in a glare that should have killed me with its fury. He was going to murder me. And that was funny, in a weird, psychotic way, because he'd been worried for my

safety—I got that from the stream of obscenities shouted at me—and because of that, would now end my life. It made no sense other than to show he cared.

“Are you fuckin’ listening to me?” he yelled again because I’d been zoning instead of answering him which he’d always hated.

Shit.

I said the only thing I reasonably could. “Where the fuck is Pazzi?” I shouted like I was the one who should have been mad.

“Standing wherever the fuck I left him, waiting for you to tell him where you are.”

“What?” I straightened up and pointed at my ear. “I talked to him on comms.”

He shook his head.

“I did! I said where I was going.”

“No,” he snarled. “As far as I can tell, your earpiece is dead.”

“I just used it!”

Again with the headshaking.

“Then how the hell are you even here?”

“Because I fucking know you, idiot!” he roared.

Godfuckingdamnit.

The worst part was, it was true. No one on the planet knew me better than Bodhi Callahan. He knew everything, from how I liked my eggs scrambled to why I hung up all my shirts, including T-shirts, to the fact that I was useless in the morning without coffee. Some people needed it, enjoyed it, but for me, my blood didn’t pump, my brain didn’t turn on, nothing. He also knew that a fugitive would choose to run down a long tunnel between buildings since they hoped it would open up into a parking garage and give them more room to maneuver. Even more importantly, Bodhi knew I would always follow wherever that fugitive went. I might not be the fastest guy, but

I never gave up. I had great stamina, and I never stopped until I ran out of pavement or someone went down. How many dark alleys and strobe-lit clubs and abandoned buildings had he followed me into where, honestly, it would have been very easy for anyone to get the jump on me? The thing was, he was always there, so even when people stopped and shot at me, he was the one who returned fire or tackled me to the ground before I was hit. It was not a surprise that he had appeared out of thin air. I expected nothing less of him. He was my partner after all.

“How did you know I was running?”

The look I got, like I was stupid, was not one of my favorites.

“You’re saying I’m predictable?” I teased him.

“I’m saying you’re suicidal,” he growled, leaning down and then straightening up with a Glock 26 in his hand. “Did you miss the shoulder holster on this asshole?”

I had. Yes. “No,” I lied. “But it doesn’t matter. He would’ve had to stop to pull it.”

There were sirens then, and our Special Operations Group, SOG—the marshals’ version of SWAT—was there to take custody of Loginov. Normally, for criminals wanted for anything less than murder, we put them in the back of whatever car we were using at the time. But Loginov had worked for the Lenkov crime family and was wanted, along with others like Adrian Sergeev, whom Bodhi and his temporary partner, Sen Yamane, had picked up last week. He needed to be secured with more than just a seat belt. On the orders of Grigory Lenkov, Loginov had killed many. As I understood it, at least when Lenkov’s son Maksim was giving the orders, the bloodshed had been minimal. But the son had turned on the family, and when everything came to light, it became clear that Loginov and Sergeev had done more for the father than the son ever knew about. This had been Loginov’s last run, ever, as a free man.

ONCE BODHI STEPPED AWAY from Loginov, the SOG guys took him. Wes Ching, who was in charge, collected the gun and the amazing number of small blades the man had on his person.

“How did you get the Firebird?” I asked Bodhi as I got in the passenger side and he slid in behind the wheel.

“Again, Pazzi was sitting there, waiting to hear from you, and when I asked where you were, and he had no answer, I yanked him out of the car, got in, and came to save you.”

“Save me? Really?”

I got another deadpan look.

“Clearly, you’re not in a good mood,” I grumbled.

“Oh, I wonder why,” he muttered.

What was impressive was that he’d found me based solely on our history and vague directions. As law enforcement, we couldn’t use any app to find our phones—nothing based on location was allowed, as that could place us in danger. Our phones could be pinged, but only from our office in an emergency. So really, all Bodhi knew from Pazzi was where I’d gone, a general idea of where I’d started, and from there, it had all been guesswork. I thought I’d been shouting information to Pazzi the whole time I was running, but nothing at all had gone through. My expectation was that my partner would be there, offering me backup, and he was, but only because it was Bodhi. Anyone else, I’d probably be dead. Or at least shot and left bleeding on the sidewalk. It was not one of my better moments.

Bodhi said, “I’m gonna have someone’s ass for letting you go out with a busted earpiece.”

I reached over and patted his thigh. “Thank you.”

“I’m done with this, you understand?”

He meant us, apart. So was I.

“It’s time to talk to Doyle,” he said simply.

Ian Doyle being the deputy director, the guy who decided who we worked with and for how long.

“Why’s that?”

“You know why.”

I was fishing and we both knew it, but I didn’t give a damn. I wanted to hear him say he missed me, because that was how needy I was lately.

“Clearly, Pazzi is good to be back on duty,” Bodhi explained, indulging me. “And he and Yamane are either going to do well as partners going forward or not. But the only person who can absolutely make sure you’re not dead is—”

“Stop, go back,” I cut him off, having seen someone I knew out of the corner of my eye.

Checking behind him, he threw the car into reverse and came to a dead stop in the middle of the right lane. From there we could see between two apartment buildings to a parking lot, where someone was being beat up by two very large men.

“Tell me that’s not Terry Washington,” I said to Bodhi, then turned to look at him.

He squinted.

“It’s not him, right?” I asked, even though I was pretty sure it was. I went back to staring down the alley.

“No, it can’t be,” he said slowly, as if in pain, “because he’s in MCC for six more months.”

“Fuck,” I groaned, sure now it was Terry, and then hit the dash. “Go as far as the dumpster.”

Whipping the car into a hard right, Bodhi gunned the engine, and we flew down the alley. The two guys took off, leaving Washington to slide down the wall he’d been held against. Braking with a squeal of tires, we were out of the car in seconds, and I ran by Washington, slowed, made sure he was breathing, then sped up after Bodhi, who was yelling at the guys to stop. The good news was, someone in the apartments above must have seen Washington getting pummeled, because there were cops at the opposite end of the parking lot. The bad news was, they drew on all of us.

“Show us your hands!” the two patrol officers yelled.

The two men stopped but didn't put their hands up like Bodhi and I did. Instead, both turned to us, the one on the left reaching toward his back.

"Don't do it, man," Bodhi warned him. "Whatever that was, it isn't worth getting shot over."

With both men facing us, the cops rushed over and put them on the ground, slapping on cuffs. The two men looked up at us—ballsy, but it made sense that they were more concerned with me and Bodhi than the uniformed CPD officers.

"Who're you guys?" the older of the two officers asked us.

I turned sideways so he could see the star on my belt. "Deputy US Marshal Josiah Redeker, and this is my partner, Deputy US Marshal Bodhi Callahan."

"Thanks," Officer Jardin—I could see his nameplate—said. "You guys got whoever these goons were beatin' up?"

"Yeah, we got it," I told them.

"We need you to meet us at the First."

He meant the First District, which was over on South State Street, about two blocks over.

"Will do," I assured him. "We're right behind you, or we'll see you at the hospital depending on how bad the beating was."

"Roger that."

Bodhi and I ran back to Terrence Lavon Washington, who was supposed to be serving six months for embezzling funds from the pet store where he used to work. He had provided testimony that helped put his boss, Jonathan Reaser, in prison for importing and exporting endangered animals for people to hunt and eat. I was glad he was in jail for the foreseeable future. Sadly, it was the wire fraud that did it—not him being a disgusting human being who imported tiger cubs for people to kill and stuff—but whatever worked. Washington, who had embezzled money from the sales to pay off his massive gambling debts, had my sympathy. Once his boss moved to Boca, he'd made sure that the business only sold to private

collectors who kept the animals on their estates, no eating or hunting involved, and he sent half the money to the World Wildlife Fund. All that—half the money going to charity, making sure none of the animals were being hurt, and helping put his boss in jail, which had entailed him wearing a wire—helped whittle down a three-year embezzlement charge to six months. He'd run away three times, which had gotten us involved, but each time, each set of marshals, including Bodhi and I, had argued that it was a misunderstanding. The last time, he'd been successfully incarcerated, so I was dying to hear how he was out.

He was limping down the alley, toward the street, holding his left arm, when we caught up with him. As soon as I put my hand on his right arm to stop him, he screamed.

“Stop that,” I growled at him.

“Oh, it's you,” he said, smiling, though his lip was split. “Hello there, DUSM Redeker. How are you today?”

I stood there, arms crossed, staring at him. I hated the DUSM acronym. Even though deputy US marshal was long, the shorter version sounded somehow like I worked at the DMV. I couldn't imagine anything worse than working there, answering dumbass questions all day long.

“This isn't my fault,” he insisted.

“We need to get you to the hospital,” Bodhi grumbled, taking his good arm, the right one, to lead him to our car. “And if you're gonna be an asshole and try and run, I'm gonna cuff you. Do I need to do that?”

“No, sir, DUSM Callahan.”

I groaned, and he made the limping worse on purpose as he walked alongside Bodhi. Already I could see my day getting longer and longer.

PAZZI AND YAMANE met us at the hospital, both ready to write up a report on the situation.

“No,” Bodhi snapped at them, sitting on a rolling stool beside Washington’s bed. We were still in the ER, waiting for our prisoner to be seen. At least we weren’t out in the chairs anymore, a small step in the right direction. “We’ll write it up, but, Pazzi, did you even check to see if your partner could hear you?”

“I don’t—what do you mean?”

“My earpiece is dead.” I passed it to him. “I need you to take it back to the office, turn it in to Tactical Operations, and —”

“No,” Bodhi corrected me. “It goes to the Training Division now.”

“The hell you say.”

“Listen, it used to go to Tactical, but now they only do files, safes, and containers.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard.”

His shrug told me he didn’t give a crap.

“No way that’s right.”

“Who reads the memos that come through?” he asked snidely.

Shit. He had me there.

“Training is in charge of everything you carry, from your gun and ammunition to all the communication devices.”

“That makes zero sense.”

“Why’re you breaking my balls?”

“It should be Tactical.”

“I’m not arguing, but it’s Training now, not Tactical.”

“That’s so stupid.”

“If I’m ever put in charge, I’ll change it back for you,” he promised.

“Okay, good.” I smiled at him before turning back to Pazzi. “So yeah, take this to *Training*”—I enunciated the word

for Bodhi—“and tell them it’s busted. Make sure you fill out the paperwork or someone could really get hurt.”

It hit Pazzi suddenly, I could tell from the way his face fell. “Oh my God,” he gasped. “You were out there alone?”

“No,” Bodhi corrected him. “He had me. But you need to realize that at no time could you hear him, and he thought you were listening the whole time.”

Pazzi grabbed my shoulder, and I looked at his hand disdainfully, like it was a fungus, until Yamane reached out and moved it off me.

“It’s fine,” Bodhi consoled Pazzi. “You didn’t know, but now you do. Get the earpiece fixed. Fill out everything.”

“I will,” he promised.

Ever since Pazzi got back from rehab, *earnest* was the best word to describe him. He had been put on leave for drugs. I wanted to say oxycodone was the one that had caused the trouble, but I didn’t know for sure. I wasn’t one of the folks given that piece of information. Plus, it was none of my business. I never asked and he didn’t volunteer the information. I was with him for one thing and one thing only, which was to assess his fitness for duty. He had been in rehab for six months, and his partner, Sen Yamane, had been out on administrative leave for three and then sent to another district to work until Pazzi returned. Yamane had gotten himself in trouble because he didn’t report that his partner needed help. Instead, Yamane had covered for him. That was bad—because what if Pazzi had hurt someone or failed to help his partner when he was stoned—but I also sympathized with Yamane, because that’s what partners did. They looked out for one another. I couldn’t fault him for that. What I found most impressive was that our boss, Chief Deputy Sam Kage, had taken both back. He wasn’t shipping them off somewhere else; he wasn’t pushing his problem marshals off on another district. What he’d done was put Pazzi with me and Yamane with Bodhi for the last four months to make sure they were ready to be partners again and that both had learned their individual lessons.

Doyle had said that Bodhi and I were supposed to teach them to do everything by the book again. Really, that was hysterical. My partner and I operated on a loose interpretation of said book. Doyle had asked us if we understood our assignments.

“Absolutely,” I’d said, going for helpful with my tone. Bodhi told me later it came off as overly cheerful verging on sarcasm.

“Don’t be a wiseass,” Doyle warned me.

“What?” I’d looked to Bodhi for help.

He rolled his eyes before giving Doyle a huge smile that was supposed to be supportive. I told *him* later it came off as snide.

“You know what I mean,” Doyle grouched at us. “Teach them not to be fuckups.”

“That we can do,” Bodhi assured him.

And that was what we’d done. They were ready to go back to working together, and since Yamane had gone to see Pazzi every week while he was in rehab, taking his lovely wife, Kyung Mi, with him to visit his partner, I was thinking they were solid. I had told Doyle as much even before the experiment started. But now, as we closed in on the four months, having it go to five was impossible for me. I needed my partner back. Since he now had a serious person in his life, I really only got work time with him unless I wanted to see his boyfriend—now fiancé—along with him. There was never a time when it was only me and Bodhi anymore. And while that was totally fair, and I had to wrap my brain around the fact that my best friend and partner was getting married in September, I missed it being just the two of us. Bodhi and Hayden were having a destination wedding at Hayden’s family compound on Mercer Island, an apparently stunning—from what I’d been told—nearly fifteen thousand square feet property close to Seattle. The family Bodhi was marrying into was crazy rich. I tried not to think about it or how shitty I felt all the time.

It was an old story. When my brain finally kicked in and decided that yes, I was going to take the chance of loving my best friend, even being absolutely certain he could do better... that, of course, was the moment he fell in love with someone else. For years Bodhi Callahan had been sending signals I'd have to be an idiot to have missed, and it made karmic sense that now the shoe was on the other foot and I was the one pining.

The first year we were partners, he decided to just be around, all the time, a hundred percent accessible to me day and night.

The second year, he fucked anything that moved. Seriously. And that was fine. He was young, single, gorgeous, and everyone who looked at the man thought yeah, I want that. It made sense.

The third year, we moved to Chicago from Las Vegas, shared an apartment, and I got to see, firsthand, the revolving door of one-night stands. There were also repeat offenders, fuck buddies no more serious than he was.

The fourth year, I felt him putting distance between us. He wanted to buy a place, I agreed, and we told his buddy Joe, whom we were subletting from, that he could sell the apartment because we were both out. Bodhi got a nice place in River North, which had a great nightclub scene and enough restaurants that you never had to eat in the same place twice. It was high energy, very him, very hip and cool, a young professional's paradise.

I moved to Albany Park, on Keystone Avenue, which was a gorgeous tree-lined street. My house was older, built in 1912, but it was renovated before I moved in, a sweet little two-bedroom, one-and-a-half-baths place with a garage underneath. It was slate blue with white trim, and to get to the front door you had to trudge up a steep set of stairs. I liked that for the most part, except on the days I went grocery shopping.

Not living together had taken a huge strain off my relationship with Bodhi. Just not having to watch him walk around the house with only a towel, showing off all his sleek

gold skin over long, smooth muscles and washboard abs, helped my brain not short out at the beginning of each day. I didn't have to dwell on all the sex *he* was having and the absolute *zero* that was going on for me. Apart, I ceased comparing my life to his, myself to him. I was older than him—when we first became partners, I was thirty-eight to his twenty-seven. Now, five years later, I was an old man at forty-three, and he was getting ready to tie the knot at thirty-two. In separate homes, I didn't have to keep up appearances and look happy all the time. I could wallow in my misery alone.

There was one person in the world I could talk to about this, and that was a friend, Sergio Mata, who used to work for the DEA and was now a private detective in Las Vegas. He worked with Croy Esca, who used to work for Torus Intercession here in Chicago. Really, if you thought about it, the world was just not that big.

“You don't think *misery* is overly dramatic?” Sergio asked me on the phone the other night.

“No,” I said defensively. “I'm miserable.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I missed out.”

“Or,” he began in that way he had where you knew he was getting ready to argue, “you could confess about the torch you've been carrying since the day you met, and perhaps he'll call off his wedding and fall into your arms.”

“How many romantic comedies does your wife make you watch?”

“He likes rom-coms,” Beth called out since he had me on speaker. “I like action movies, Jed. You know that.”

I did. “Sorry.”

“But he's right, you should confess. It's so very Victorian of you to take this yearning to your grave.”

I hung up. Sergio called back, still laughing, and I could hear Beth as well. “I'm not above hanging up on you and your lovely wife again,” I warned him.

He coughed then. “Listen, just tell him how you feel. If he says no, I’m gonna go marry Henry—”

“Hayden,” I corrected.

“Hayden Birdman the Third, then—”

“It’s Burdine.”

“Like I care.”

“And why’re you adding *the third*?”

“Because you did the first time you told me about him.”

I didn’t recall that.

“But that’s not the point, Jed.”

No, it wasn’t.

“You have to come clean. It’s not fair to him, and since he’s your best friend and the guy who has to decide when and if to pull the plug if that decision ever needs to be made for you, you should probably tell him you’re head over heels.”

“It’s too late.”

“But if you’re gonna be sad, you should be sad because you tried and it wasn’t meant to be. You shouldn’t be sad preemptively because you never sacked up.”

“Nice. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied cheerfully.

Was I sad? Yes. Was I more happy for him than sad for me? Actually, I was. Because that was the true test of friendship. The selfless bit. Easy to be a friend when everything was going great. Harder when literal testing was required. And honestly, I deserved to miss out on him when all I had to do was pull him into my life and stake my claim any of the four years I’d had all his attention. There was no one to blame for my stupidity.

Except...technically, I was right. Because guess who ended up with a guy his own age? I was ready with the whole told-ya-so if anyone brought it up. Not that anyone would. I had a reputation for being a bit scary. I was the old man in our

office team, after all. Or at least, the younger guys thought so. It was why, I was sure, Doyle had split me and Bodhi up to begin with. If I was thinking about it all logically, probably having Doyle put me and Bodhi back together was a bad thing. Better to leave it like it was until Bodhi left on his Fourth of July vacation. He'd be gone for a week and then go back out for his wedding and honeymoon two months after. And really, who knew if he would even come back. If your husband was a millionaire, why did you have to work? Not that Bodhi didn't love being a marshal just as much as I did, but I always got the feeling he could also leave it behind and not look back. That wasn't a bad thing, especially if you wanted a well-balanced life. If he left, he could fall back on his second love. He'd gone to school on a tennis scholarship and studied criminal justice, *but* he had a minor in art, pottery being his thing. And now it was finally within Bodhi's grasp to devote himself to something he loved.

I had a vision of him in some lake house, waking up every morning and going upstairs to his studio, where he opened the French doors so he could see the water and breathe in the cool air. I imagined him with a mug of coffee before he sat down at his potter's wheel. And yes, it was right out of *The Notebook*, which I'd been forced to watch by Sergio, but I could see that as his life. And he deserved it. He'd done his time finding kids, walking through bloody crime scenes, hunting violent fugitives, and sitting on stakeouts. If he wanted to leave it all behind, no one would find that weak. The burnout rate for all kinds of law enforcement was high, and that made sense. If every day you had to see the worst of humanity, how long were you supposed to keep trying to be the break against the pounding waves? For me, the commitment was lifelong. For him, I suspected the end was near. And I'd miss him when he left, but maybe this was how it was always going to end up.

TWO

It wasn't fair for both Bodhi and me to have to sit at the hospital with Washington on a rainy, humid Monday morning when one of us was more than enough, so I told him he was free to go. Plus, Hayden had friends in town he wanted Bodhi to meet and have lunch with, one of which was Davis Warren, who was not only his best friend, but who would also be the best man at the wedding. Since Bodhi had asked me to be his, we would have to meet at some point. Davis and Hayden had been friends since Exeter, and then gone to Harvard together. After graduating from law school and passing the bar on his first try—Bodhi had told me that like it would mean something to me—Hayden had joined the firm his father owned, and that his grandfather had started. But Talbot and Leeds, one of the top firms in Chicago, had recruited him in his fourth year, and he'd moved. He and Bodhi had met at a club late last year, and three months later it was serious. They had spent New Year's skiing in Vail with Hayden's family, and another two months after that, Hayden had gotten down on one knee at a friend's Valentine's Day party. It was very romantic, but apparently, that was the kind of guy Hayden was.

I hated him.

The officers who'd helped us earlier—Jardin and his partner, Esposito—came to see me and Washington at the hospital when I called and said I had no idea when we would be in. I also had to call his lawyer from the trial and the ASA who'd been assigned to the case.

“*Nooo*,” Assistant State Attorney Aspen Clark whined when she threw open the curtain to reveal me, the two uniformed officers, and Terry Washington lying in the bed.

“Ta-da!” I announced to make it more exciting for her. Like a magic show.

“Stop that,” she growled, then gestured at Washington. “Why is he not in jail?”

“I can explain,” he told her.

“He can explain,” I echoed. Since I’d already heard the insane story, I wasn’t going to tell her but instead enjoy her hearing it for herself.

For whatever reason, last Thursday, Washington had been taken with others from the MCC to bond court. That in itself wasn’t crazy. Lots of people with continuances and no one to pay their bond stayed in prison, but you still had to go back and forth to appear before the judge. The issue was, why was *he* going? Washington’s sentence was set.

“As you know,” Washington pointed out, “questioning the guards is never a good idea, so when they said, ‘you’re going,’ along with all the other brothers, I said nothing and decided to just enjoy the ride.”

She looked at me, and I smiled. Her groan was loud.

He continued, “Imagine my surprise when they called for a Taylor Whitmore and I was dragged in front of the judge. I mean, c’mon, man, Taylor Whitmore? How white does that name sound?”

“Pretty fuckin’ white,” I chimed in.

“Pretty fuckin’ white,” he repeated, looking at me like we were clearly on the same page. “And as I am Black, I was wondering what the hell everyone was thinking, but what the fuck ever, ya know? Who am I to question?”

“Oh God,” Clark said, rubbing the bridge of her nose.

“So Judge Ingraham, who I’ve never seen in bond court before—it’s normally Gerraghty—says that I will have to do a

thousand hours of community service and be on probation for six months, but I'm free to go."

"Free?" she asked him.

"Free," he repeated, nodding.

"So you see, it wasn't his fault at all," I chimed in for Washington, who shot me a look of appreciation.

"Are you kidding?" Clark looked like her brain was about to explode. "He should have told the judge who he really was!"

Jardin scoffed.

"Officer?"

"C'mon, counselor, anyone can see it was a setup," Jardin said, and Esposito added, "I've never even heard of a Judge Ingraham, and I used to work bond court."

"I suspect," I said, grinning at her, "that someone wanted Washington out."

"Maybe the two guys beating him up?" Esposito offered.

I shook my head. "No, those two were likely working for his bookie. You ran them, right? They came back as muscle, I'm betting."

"They're still sitting in holding, nobody's run anybody yet, but I'm guessing you're right," Jardin agreed. "I mean, I talked to them. Not a lot goin' on there. Criminal masterminds those two are not."

"Who is this Whitmore, and where is he now?" Clark interrupted, glaring at me.

Was she kidding? "How am I supposed to know? I don't work for the CPD."

Her sigh was long.

"You know, the good news is, Whitmore is probably at home, not knowing he's got community service to do, because you and I both know you guys don't just lose people in the system anymore. Right?"

“Anymore?”

“Don’t be defensive,” I told her sweetly.

“I hate you.” She was then quiet for a moment, thinking. “You realize it’s possible that Whitmore has taken Washington’s place in MCC.”

Esposito shook his head. “That’s stuff from a movie. In real life, guards know what people look like, like I used to, but there might be other reasons”—he looked at me—“why Washington was set loose.”

“Like?” Clark asked.

“Like maybe he talked to someone he shouldn’t’ve, and someone is hoping to tie up loose ends,” Esposito concluded.

“That seems reasonable,” I said with a yawn.

“I don’t like that at all,” Washington added.

“Still, it makes the most sense. Somebody wanted Washington out for a reason. Why would that be?”

On cue, I saw a man walking toward us. He was tall, handsome, and wearing a great suit that showed off the breadth of his shoulders and the broadness of his chest. I groaned, realizing when he took off his sunglasses—and what kind of a douche wore their sunglasses inside anyway—that I was looking at Special Agent Spencer Crouse.

Along with Hayden Burdine the Third, I hated him too.

He picked up a chair, carried it with him, put it down next to me, then took a seat, smiling like the asshole he was.

“No,” I said.

“Oh, c’mon, you haven’t even heard what I did yet.”

I shook my head and gestured at Clark.

Crouse had that thing going for him where half of you really wanted to slug him, while at the very same time, the other half wanted to see what would happen if you went to bed with him. Raw sex appeal and charm rolled off the man in waves, and combined with the fact that he was ruggedly

handsome, with dimples under his artfully styled stubble-lined jaw, I was certain he could have anyone he wanted.

“Hi,” he said, getting up and offering her his hand. “Special Agent Spencer Crouse.”

She mapped his shoulders, the thousand-dollar suit, the tie that wasn't in any kind of knot I'd ever seen, far too fancy, and then, of course, his eyes. They were that dark liquid deep brown, and she was probably thinking at the moment how pretty they were. The thing with him was, the spell his looks and his deep baritone always cast was quickly destroyed when your brain turned on and you actually listened to what he was saying.

“I'm the guy who got your guy out of jail,” he announced to Clark.

“Thank you, my brother,” Washington said to him, a thing I'd heard him do before when talking to any Black law-enforcement officers. It never helped.

“I am *not* your brother,” Crouse corrected him.

Clark said, “I'm sorry, what?”

“I sprang him,” he said, giving her his dazzler.

“Are you kidding?” she yelled, yanking her hand from his and standing up.

He stepped back, chuckling, like her indignation was cute—I wanted to punch him whenever he did that to me—and lifted his hands in mock surrender.

“Listen, it was the only way we could lure Burian Petrov out of hiding.”

She squinted at him. “Why do you care? He's a low-level piece of—”

“He killed an ATF agent in a raid last week and went to ground.”

“Well, shit, you could have led with that,” Clark said, groaning, and sat back down.

The CPD officers had to step away then, and I stood up, shook both their hands, and thanked them for their help. Clark thanked them as well. Once they were gone, Crouse sat back down, closer to me, his knee wedged against mine.

“An associate of Burian’s talked to your boy in lockup.”

Clark and I both turned to Washington.

“Technically, yes,” he agreed, “but all he needed was some molly to smooth him out.”

“You got him ecstasy in jail?” Clark was horrified.

“Yes, but like I said, just enough to make sure he stopped climbing the walls and driving everybody nuts. I had no idea he’d come back to talk to me about my source.”

“Who’s the guy?” I asked him.

He grimaced. “Moses Laramie. I didn’t know he was mobbed up with Petrov. It’s all been a mess since the Lenkovs got busted. That family kept everyone else in line. Now shit has gone to shit, yanno?”

“I thought the Lenkovs weren’t in the drug business,” Clark questioned him.

“They weren’t, you’re right. But you also couldn’t deal or do anything they didn’t like in their territory and their territory was big.”

“I heard that,” I told him. “But let’s focus on you now, all right?”

He gave me a quick nod.

“So what does Petrov want from you? Is he after you playing middleman between your supplier and him?”

He looked like he was in pain.

“Yes?”

“Yeah,” he muttered. “I told them they’d have to wait for my resupply for me to get a message out.”

I directed my next question to Crouse. “I’m guessing you didn’t wanna wait once you found out they made contact?”

“No. I did not,” he said cheerfully. “We have Petrov’s entire world bugged and still had no idea where he was until suddenly we heard he was going to make a move on your supplier,” he said, refocusing on Washington, “we decided to make things happen.”

“Why don’t you just arrest Petrov for killing the ATF agent?” Washington asked.

“He told you already,” I answered. “He went to ground. They have no idea where he is.”

“But now we know who he wants to talk to,” Crouse threw out.

“Why does the FBI think Petrov will come out of hiding for Washington?” Clark sounded exhausted, and I understood. The machinations of the FBI were always tiring.

“Not for Washington, for his supplier,” Crouse clarified. “Petrov, along with everybody else, has been scrambling to fill the vacuum left by the Lenkov crime family since they were dismantled. They all want to be the one that takes over Chicago, but Petrov and his old man, they’re in a shit situation because of all of them, all the families, they’re the weakest. His family is all drugs and the sex trade and gun trafficking, whereas the Lenkovs—”

“Had senators on their payroll, we know,” I acknowledged, leaning forward to look at Washington. “They want to meet your supplier to kill him and take over his operation.”

“I’m confused,” Washington told me. “Since the Lenkovs weren’t in the drug business, and Petrov wants to be as big as them, why does he care about continuing with—”

“Because he can build collateral quickly with drugs,” I explained. “He needs a fast infusion of cash to make certain his family can compete with the others.”

“Okay, got it.”

“Is your supplier big? Do they move a lot of product?”

He nodded.

“Who is it?”

“No, man, I can’t give up my supplier.”

“Well, you’re gonna have to so Crouse here can turn that over to Narcotics, get them busted, and then step in *as* them and bring down Burian Petrov.”

He looked at Crouse. “Is that your plan? To bust my guy and then pose as them to get Petrov?”

“Yessir,” he answered.

Washington shook his head. “I can’t do that. They know my family.”

I sighed deeply. “What family?”

“My mother and sister.”

I looked at Crouse. “He does this, everybody goes into WITSEC.”

“Petrov killed a federal agent. He gets the needle for that, and yes, your guy goes into protective custody.”

“Actually, Petrov gets life in prison for that in the great state of Illinois,” I reminded him. “But okay, I’ll call my boss and we’ll collect everyone. Do you have people coming?”

Crouse waggled his eyebrows at me.

I turned to Clark.

“I hate him,” she told me.

I pointed over my right shoulder, and she understood that the line formed behind me.

WASHINGTON WAS RELEASED from the hospital, and I took custody of him, then waited on SOG to move him to the marshal offices in a caravan of black SUVs and squad cars that looked like the president was visiting. Upstairs, I took him to the large conference room, and we waited for the seats to fill up.

Miro Jones, director of Custodial WITSEC—which took care of all persons under the age of eighteen—leaned in, smiling at me. “You hungry? I’m ordering food.”

“I’m hungry,” Washington chimed in.

“I’m getting Mexican. You want some carne asada tacos?”

“Yes, please,” he nearly whined.

“I’ll get you sides too,” Miro promised, then looked at me. “You want your regular ulcer-inducing burrito?”

I smirked at him. “Really? That’s what you’re going with when your guy gets death on a plate from that other place?”

“Death on a plate,” he muttered under his breath.

“And yes, I want my burrito, and I want extra salsa verde.”

He was mumbling about intestinal damage when he closed the door.

“What’s gonna happen now?” Washington asked me.

“Well, first another marshal is gonna come in here and ask you a lot of questions and do a lot of typing, and after an hour of that, we’ll be joined by detectives from Narcotics and you will spill your guts to them. Then as soon as that’s done, the FBI agents will come and talk to you, and tomorrow at this time, you, your mother, your sister—”

“And my dog, Greta—”

“And your dog, Greta,” I assured him, “will be on your way to a new life.”

“What about Greta’s microchip?”

It was a valid question.

“Greta will be reported to the company who monitors the chip as having died, and then that number will be reregistered with the marshals service as belonging to your new name.”

“I bet you guys didn’t use to take animals, huh?”

“As a rule, the marshals service does not move pets, but you so happen to be in Chicago, which is run by Chief Deputy Sam Kage, who believes that causing witnesses, like yourself, who are helping to apprehend criminals, any additional stress by separating them from their pets is bad.”

“I like him.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just eat your food when it gets here and answer all the questions, all right?”

He nodded quickly.

“You look like shit,” I told him.

“I was beat up today,” he reminded me. “That damage could possibly be part of the problem.”

“You’re a wiseass.”

“It’s been noted,” he agreed.

Several moments went by.

“No?” he prodded me. “Nothing else? No witty comeback?”

I grunted.

His smile was warm. “You’re a strange man, DUSM Redeker.”

“Listen, when you get moved, you need to do exactly what you’re told, all right? Don’t fuck around or be an idiot. Don’t be you. Think of your mother and sister.”

“Okay.”

Fifteen minutes later, Miro brought food in, which I was so happy about, I could’ve kissed him. Anything to get Washington to stop telling me about his day-to-day activities in jail. My brain was turning to mush.

It was nice that Miro took a seat with us and ate his food, which consisted of some sort of bowl that had a lot of green in it that looked decidedly healthy. Not long after, he was joined by Ian Doyle, his husband, my boss, deputy director of the Northern District of Illinois, who was scowling. Not that this was any big change. As far as I could tell, Doyle had a singular facial expression, and that was the one. It was his default to be irritated.

“Is that your regular?” I asked him.

And then, out of the blue, amazingly, I got a grin. “Yes, it is,” he said proudly.

“What is it again?”

“That, my friend, is the Diablo Burrito with fire sauce from Fuego, two blocks away.”

Of course he hadn’t gotten his food from the same place the rest of us got ours. That would be too easy.

“I’ve never been to Fuego.”

“Yeah, well, you’re missing out,” he said with a shrug. “I like all my food hot.”

“Too hot,” Miro commented, shaking his head.

“Jesus, I can smell that from here,” I said, concerned that he was going to put that in his body. “Why is the sauce so dark?”

“Ghost peppers,” he replied as if bespelled.

“Is that a good idea? It looks kinda dangerous.”

“No, it’s great.”

I glanced at Miro, checking to see if he looked concerned, and found him squinting, probably from the fumes getting in his eyes. I returned my gaze to Ian. “Aren’t ghost peppers the ones chefs have to wear respirators when they cook with them?”

“I’ve never heard that,” Ian said, “but Jameson Reyes did say it was one of the hottest things he’d ever eaten.”

“*The Jameson Reyes?*” I was stunned.

“Who’s Jameson Reyes?” both Miro and Washington asked.

“*Who’s Jameson Reyes?*” Ian and I answered, both horrified.

“I hate it when you do that,” Miro told us.

“He’s the guy on the Food Channel,” Ian explained. “The one who travels around the country, trying all the hottest stuff. He went on that show *Hot Ones* and was good until almost the very end. When he was here in Chicago, he hit Fuego and had

this very burrito and said it was certified Jameson Reyes perfection.”

I shook my head. “Don’t do it, man.”

“No, do it,” Washington encouraged him. “I wanna see.”

The door opened, and Jack Dorsey, another investigator, came in and took the seat across from Washington.

“You’re already done eating?” Miro asked him, looking stunned.

“If you grew up with five brothers, you’d eat fast too.”

“That must’ve been more inhaling than—did you even chew?” Miro wanted to know.

Dorsey grunted and looked at Washington. “You’re gonna need to talk to me while you eat so we can get this done. I need information and—the fuck are you eating?” he asked Ian.

“The Diablo from Fuego. It’s my burrito. I always eat this burrito.”

“Yeah, but what’s with the fumes?”

“Small room,” Miro told him.

“You’re gonna fuckin’ die eating like that,” Dorsey assured him.

“I’ll die happy, then,” Ian replied, taking another bite.

“Shit,” Dorsey grumbled, then looked back at Washington. “Okay, so anyway, we’re gonna start the intake paperwork, but you won’t actually be considered enrolled in witness protection until your status has been verified.”

“What does that mean?”

“Because you have yet to name names and tell your story to the appropriate people,” I explained, “you don’t qualify. We know you will, but dates and times need to be precise, and until you have your meeting, you’re not in WITSEC.”

Washington nodded. “I get it.”

As Dorsey began asking questions and Washington answered, other people filed in. Crouse, grinning, took a seat

on my right as Washington was on my left. Jago Mabe, a detective from Narcotics we dealt with a lot, was there along with his partner, Roberto Salazar, Berto to all of us. They both seemed tired, as CPD detectives constantly did, but without exception, Salazar always looked better than Mabe. It could have been his sartorial flair—the man always appeared impeccable in his suits—or that his hair, shaved close to his head, never looked like his partner’s, a mane in wild disarray. He’d told me that with his mother being Black and his father Cuban, he was genetically gifted to look good all the time. And while I couldn’t argue the fact that the man was handsome, in comparison to Mabe, he never had to put in much effort.

If you thought about a narcotics detective, someone from TV or movies, that was what Mabe looked like. On all the cop shows, the guy in jeans with a leather jacket, unshaven, with hair that was far too long, who smelled like cigarette smoke, and who, when he didn’t have his Aviators on, had them on top of his head—that was Mabe. He was a walking, talking gritty stereotype of a character in a seventies cop procedural come to life. I had liked him right away.

“You’re eating without us?” Mabe grouched at the room.

“Fuck off,” Ian told him.

“The hell are you eating?” Salazar asked, his face scrunched up.

“Ghost peppers.”

“You’re gonna die,” he assured Ian.

“Not today,” Ian replied with a grin.

We all talked about nothing while Dorsey finished getting the basics from Washington and we all scarfed down our food. I offered Salazar and Mabe some of mine, but neither took me up on it.

“You already have lunch?”

“Yeah, it’s almost three,” Salazar told me. “The rest of us eat on schedule.”

“Boring,” I commented.

“Unless you don’t actually go to bed,” Salazar said, shooting Mabe a look that was utterly steeped in judgment. “Some of us just screw around and alternate between booze and coffee.”

“Nothing wrong with coffee,” I said defensively.

“But not as its own food group,” Salazar assured me.

“I—” Mabe began, like perhaps he was going to argue, but then just threw his hands up. “Yeah, fine,” he agreed instead.

I shook my head. “Speaking from experience, man, you gotta sleep and drink water.”

“Coffee is just better water,” he grumbled.

I really couldn’t argue with that.

“Hydration, brother,” Miro apprised him.

“I drink plenty.”

“Vodka doesn’t count,” Ian told him.

“Says you.”

“You’ll be dead by forty,” I declared.

“Oh God, I hope so,” Mabe groaned.

Salazar did a slow turn to him.

“I mean, *no*. I’ll drink water,” he promised.

I saw the clench of Salazar’s jaw as he faced me. “Don’t be a prick, all right?”

“Yessir,” I agreed with a grin. Clearly, Salazar was not about to let Mabe go quietly into that good night. He’d make sure the man stuck around.

Once we were all done eating, Miro collected the trash, put another bottle of water down in front of Ian, and then left with Dorsey.

“Okay,” Ian said with a sigh, his focus on Washington. “Tell us who your supplier is that you’re supposed to introduce to Burian Petrov.”

“Please,” Salazar added, squinting at Ian, who only rolled his eyes.

Washington looked at me.

“You’ll have a fresh start, Terry,” I reminded him. “And you need one.”

“Yeah,” he agreed.

“And we can keep your family safe, don’t worry.”

He nodded quickly, then said to Ian, “I’m supposed to introduce Burian Petrov to my supplier, Rasha Wexler, tomorrow at ten in the morning.”

Mabe lifted his sunglasses, putting them on top of his head and in the process revealing his dark blue eyes now narrowed in half. “You’re telling me your supplier is a fuckin’ textile heiress?”

He nodded.

“Why?” Salazar asked Washington. “Why would she do that?”

“I have no idea.”

“For the thrill?”

“Really, man, I dunno.”

“And you got out, why?” Mabe wanted to know.

“We know the answer to that,” Ian said, tipping his head at Crouse. “My bet is that the FBI has an open investigation into James Wexler, Rasha’s father, for securities fraud. Am I right?”

“You are,” Crouse agreed.

“So your plan was to use his daughter’s situation to put pressure on him, but in the middle of your investigation, you got Burian Petrov in the mix, putting pressure on Washington to get to Rasha, and you can’t have that.”

“None of us can have that,” Crouse told Ian. “Petrov killed an ATF agent.”

Ian nodded. "So Narcotics gets Rasha, you get her father, and we get Petrov."

"That's right," Crouse said, smiling at Ian. "Good job, Marshal."

"I fuckin' hate Feds," Mabe grumbled, and no one could really blame him.

THREE

Washington had to go undercover, first with Rasha, then with Petrov, wired up both times, to get his deal and enter witness protection. The first time, with Rasha, it would be me, Salazar, and Mabe with Washington; the second time, with Petrov, it would be me, Crouse, and Washington. It was the FBI's party, basically, because their case, the SEC one against Rasha Wexler's father, had priority, and everyone agreed that once the daughter was pinched, the father would play ball. I was there because I knew Washington and I was the only one actively concerned with his safety.

Because of red tape, bureaucracy, and redundancy, we had to go to the FBI field office on Roosevelt Road to get the same briefing, again, from Crouse's boss.

Washington had looked at me in absolute horror. "Why? Why don't we just get started?"

"Because they're the FBI," Mabe told him, groaning as he walked by.

Before I could leave, Sam Kage stopped the circus and pulled me into the hall and down toward his office, where we were joined by Chris Becker, the supervisory deputy—Ian's boss, the one right under Kage—and Ian.

Kage said, "You weren't thinking I was going to let you go alone on this, were you, Redeker?"

Kage, along with my last boss in Vegas, did not permit their deputies to go solo at any time. Others did, and I understood that, but I'd yet to work for one of them.

“So is it Pazzi,” Kage asked, “or are we at a place now where you and Callahan are back to being partners?”

“It’s me, sir,” Bodhi said, jogging down the corridor to join us.

When I glanced at him, the look I got was icy.

I cleared my throat. “We’ve been meaning to discuss that change with Deputy Director Doyle, but—”

“After today’s screwup,” Kage said, crossing his arms and looking pointedly at Becker, then back to Bodhi, “I agree that you and Redeker will resume your partnership, and Pazzi and Yamane will resume theirs.”

“Excellent,” Becker said, and I understood right then that it was Becker who’d made the call on the change. “And I put Fullerton on leave until we can determine if any other equipment in his care was not tested.”

Since I never wanted anyone to get in trouble for something I did, I said, “Oh, I’m sure the earpiece was just a one-off and that—”

“You could have been killed,” Becker said flatly. “Had your regular partner not been able to back you up, without even knowing precisely where you were, our boss would probably be having a horrible conversation with your sister instead of standing with you now.”

I glanced at Kage, who arched an eyebrow, then back at Becker, who was shaking his head. They both looked less than impressed with me trying to make excuses for Adam Fullerton. And of course they both knew about my little sister, who had taken over my late aunt’s ranch and turned it into an animal sanctuary. It hurt for a second, thinking of Lisa getting that call about me in her farmhouse kitchen, with her husband and boys all around her. It would break her to lose me, and I never wanted to do that to her.

“Yessir,” I agreed with Becker.

“So yes, the person in charge of overseeing the equipment that all our people depend on to keep them safe will, in fact, be investigated for negligence.” His dark eyes, which I’d never

really noticed could bore into my soul, were on me. It seemed like he was expecting a response.

“Yessir,” I repeated.

“And Callahan, who saved your life today, will be reinstated as your partner.”

Saved my life was laying it on a bit thick.

“That’s all,” Kage grumbled and then left us, striding back down the hall with Becker on his right.

“Gee, that was fun,” I groused at Ian.

“Never talk,” he told me. “Really. Whenever Kage says something, just agree. Your life will go so much smoother.”

Once Ian was gone, Bodhi smacked me hard in the gut.

“The fuck,” I whined, bending over a bit because that shit really hurt.

“You never go anywhere without me,” he stated firmly, making sure we were both clear.

“Yeah, well,” I said with a sigh, “I was thinking you might wanna stay with Yamane in case you don’t come back.”

“What?”

In his defense, I hadn’t said everything at an audible level. Everything after the *well* had been whispered under my breath. “Nothing.”

“Come back from what?”

Unfortunately, the man had ears like a bat.

“Jed?”

I exhaled sharply. “I just thought maybe you might not come back after you got married, and if that were the case, then it wouldn’t make sense to switch back when it was all so close to happening.”

His brows, more ash blond than dirty blond like the rest of his hair, furrowed slowly. What was interesting was that his lashes were gold. Lots of beautiful shades going on with him that always caught the sun.

“Have you lost your fuckin’ mind?” he yelled.

Not exactly what I was expecting.

“You always think for some stupid-ass reason that because I minored in art in college, that somehow, I’m not as invested as you.”

“I—”

“You would think after five years you’d get that being a marshal is my calling and that I’m not giving it up for anything, no matter what anyone says!”

I had a feeling we were no longer talking about just me.

“I need some support from you here, yeah? I need my partner to have my back in all things,” he said firmly. “In. All. Things.”

I grinned at him, I couldn’t help it, and if his surprised gasp was any indication, I’d caught him completely off guard. “I got it,” I soothed him. “I won’t second-guess your commitment ever again, and until you tell me you want out, I’ll just go on believing that you want in.”

His gaze locked with mine, but he was silent.

“Okay?”

“Yes, Jed,” he replied, his voice husky with emotion.

Unsure of the look I was getting, or why his voice was suddenly all low and raspy, I gave him a quick pat on the cheek and then tipped my head down the hall. We jogged to the elevators together.

Minutes later, walking toward the SUVs in the parking lot, Washington gave Bodhi a smile. “I was wondering where the hell you were.”

“Whaddya mean you were wondering where he was?” I groused as I held open the back door of the Chevrolet Suburban so he could get in after my partner.

“Well,” he said, once he was sitting beside Bodhi, “he’s always with you, and when he’s not, I always think, uh-oh, how are we gonna live without him telling you where to go?”

I glanced at Bodhi, who was staring out the window on his side, giving the cement wall all his attention.

Washington shrugged. “I mean, you’re a badass and all, DUSM Redeker, but DUSM Callahan, he’s the brains of the operation, am I right?”

I refused to say a word to anyone on the ride out to the safe house in La Grange. Bodhi swatting my shoulder did nothing for my disposition.

WASHINGTON WAS EXPECTING to see his family, but his mother, sister, and his dog, Greta, were in Skokie. He got a bit panicky, so I called Lopez and Cho, who were the ones there with the people he loved, and once he got to talk to them on the phone, he looked and sounded much better. It made sense. When your mother told you everything would be all right, you believed.

Then he called Rasha, who, apparently, had been trying to reach him since Sunday morning. I told him to put the call on speaker, and when she answered, she was frantic.

“Where have you been? I’m freaking out and—”

“Why’re you freaking out?” he asked in a voice I’d never heard from him, composed and confident, and I was honestly surprised that he was so different with her than he’d ever been with me. I had to wonder if that was the part he played with her, if he was the guy who kept her from going off the deep end. “What happened?”

“My dad came by yesterday and told me he’s going—get this—to Russia for a visit with some friends.”

Crouse did a slow pan to me.

“Russia?” Washington asked her. “What the fuck for?”

“The FBI is investigating him, and he’s got a guy on the inside, ya know, Palmer, Palmeri, Pomeroy, something like that, and so he and my mom were on the first plane for Moscow. He cleaned out the safe, she took all her jewelry...I don’t think they’re coming back.”

Crouse was already on the phone, across the room, likely with his boss. Since I couldn't hear him, I couldn't say for sure.

“When was this?”

“Yesterday morning.”

“They just left you?”

That was it. She broke down, sobbing.

“Oh, honey, I'm so sorry. What does that mean for you?”

It took long moments to get her to stop crying, and there was that staccato breathing of trying to stop before we all heard nose blowing, and finally, she was back.

“My dad offered to take me with them, but what the hell am I supposed to do in Russia? Plus, Burian Petrov—oh my God, I need to tell you what happened with that fuckin' psychopath!”

“What? Tell me.”

“He was here, outside my place when I got home. He said he was gonna have you introduce him to me but didn't want to wait. He sent guys to your place and—God, I was so worried about you. Thank God you finally called me back.”

“I'm not home, so it's fine. What did he say to you?”

“He said he wants my business, but we both know it's Kayson's, not mine, and—”

I texted Washington that he should offer to pick her up. Now.

“Hey,” he rushed out, interrupting her. “Let me come pick you up. I'm scared for you. Tell me where you are.”

“You're scared?”

“Honey, I know Burian Petrov, and though Kayson thinks he's a goddamn gangster, he's gonna get you both killed.”

Quick whine from her like she was barely holding on. “Burian's here, in the other room. He's all coked up, and he

and his buddies are shooting at the walls. They tried to shoot Daisy, but she's in here with me now."

"They tried to shoot your cat?"

She dissolved into tears again.

"So you're at your place? Yes?"

"Yes," she managed to get out.

"And how many guys are there?" he asked after a text from me.

"I dunno, people are coming and going, but, like, twelve maybe?"

"Okay, I'm coming now," he promised her. "Lock the door, and don't let anyone in there with you no matter who it is. Don't leave the room. I'll be right there, honey."

He hung up and turned to me, looking frantic, his breath catching.

"You fuck," I growled at him. "You love her."

"Can we go already?"

"Yes, we can go," Bodhi snapped, clearly just as annoyed as I was. "But on the way you have to tell us everything, Terry. We're on your fuckin' side."

"I—"

"You knew it was Kayson's business, not hers."

He nodded.

"Why not tell us that?"

"Because if you guys went after Kayson, he'd think she rolled on him and that could get her killed." Terry answered with a catch of breath. "I can't have her hurt."

"I get that," Bodhi assured him, "but, Terry, you must be straight with us."

"I know," he said, sounding miserable. "It just happened, and neither one of us thought we should say anything. It wasn't safe."

“No, it’s not,” I muttered in agreement.

“How come they can shoot in her place and no one’s called the cops by now?” I asked him. If I shot a gun in my little house, there would be cops at my front door in minutes.

“Oh, her place is soundproof. It’s a really nice building. It’s gotta be worth at least a million. Her father bought it for her.”

Of course he had.

“So I’m guessing you guys are out,” Bodhi said to Crouse, sounding tired. Both of us hated not knowing all the facts going into something. It was a recipe for disaster.

“Fuck no, we’re still on Rasha’s folks. I need to put in a call to our office in Warsaw and to Interpol, but taking out Petrov is high on our priority list. He’s been deadly since the Lenkovs went down, with his something-to-prove bullshit.”

“And because of the murdered ATF agent,” Bodhi reminded him.

“Come on, you know that’s the number one reason we’re going after him,” Crouse said defensively.

Bodhi nodded.

“It is,” Crouse insisted, glaring at my partner.

“Sure. But the good press for taking down the Wexlers is more important, right?” Everyone knew how much the Feds liked taking down big, splashy targets. They were glory hounds. “Every OCTF Jed and I have ever worked on, the FBI took over and took credit for. That’s just the way you guys roll.”

It was true. Whenever Bodhi and I were on an Organized Crime Task Force, the FBI turned up right after the bugs were placed and we had our targets in our sights, and took down the culprits. And yes, we were all on the same team, and yes, they had more resources than all the rest of us put together, but still. It would have been nice if they’d at least given up a little bit of credit.

“Washington’s not gonna testify against Rasha,” I told Mabe and Salazar, “so does he still qualify for protection?”

“Yeah,” Salazar made the call. “Without him, she won’t talk to anyone.”

That was probably true. She only trusted Washington, and she was holding on by a thread. Only his promise to pick her up had given her any comfort.

“And Petrov is moving a lot of product,” Mabe reminded me. “We have the drugs. The FBI gets all the bodies. We’re all still in.”

Bodhi looked at Crouse. “Is the FBI still on board with Washington and his family if—”

“Plus Rasha,” Washington announced, and we all looked at him. “I’m sure she’ll want to come with me.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Crouse barked at him. “You think Rasha, the daughter of a billionaire, is going to just live in obscurity with you in some small town in—”

“My mother loves her,” he said, stopping Crouse, explaining things as if all this was normal. “They really like baking together.”

Crouse turned to me, shaking his head. “Can we go already?”

There wasn’t any more time to dwell on Washington’s love life. We had to leave to save this woman who, I was thinking, had no idea the danger she was in. In the car, I prompted Washington to explain to Mabe and Salazar about Kayson’s drug operation.

“They were in Ibiza on vacation when Kayson came up with the idea. He told her how easy it would be to move drugs from Spain to London, New York, and Chicago. He made her think everything was good to go.”

“He’s selling drugs in London and New York too?” Mabe asked.

Washington shook his head. “No, he didn’t have the right people in either of those cities to help him, and when he tried

to muscle out the gangs, the guys he sent got wasted. Only here did he have enough backup to get anything done.”

It was a mess, and as soon as we saved the woman he was in love with, I made a mental note to murder Washington for not coming clean from the jump.

Bodhi texted Becker so he'd know what was up and where we were, and got an immediate call back needing to know about the backup situation with the Feds. He didn't want us in there alone, holding only our dicks.

“We're the FBI,” Crouse growled at Bodhi.

“Please,” he replied with a grimace. “The only people less ready for an op to go sideways are the DEA.”

“That's because they're all cowboys. Either that or using so they can fit in with the guys they're busting.”

“Blanket comments like that help nothing,” I chimed in.

“If the DEA was in on this bust, we'd be blown already,” Mabe commented, shooting me a look. “Those assholes never check to see who's listening.”

As Bodhi and I had spent some time a year ago embedded with the DEA under Agent Stafford here in Chicago, and then again for a short time this past spring, I should have vouched for how he ran his team, but since Ian had recalled us before the op was done—because there was no new intel to report and nothing was moving forward—any praise would sound hollow. Because yes, Stafford ran a clean crew, no one was shooting up in the bathroom or doing coke to make themselves look like real drug dealers, but with no new concrete leads, Ian was done having us there. And being a marshal was a lot of stakeouts and surveillance work, but normally, after a fairly short time, we had a fugitive in custody to show for our effort. Sitting in an office, throwing a tennis ball back and forth with my partner, waiting for a lead, was too tedious for words.

“In Vegas,” I finally said because the silence was stretching on, “we had a DEA guy we were tight with who was great.”

“That’s because he was your friend first,” Bodhi reminded me. “DEA agent second. Don’t get all sentimental about the drug boys now.”

There was no winning.

“But my partner raises a good point about not knowing who’s listening,” Salazar pointed out, glaring at Crouse. “According to Ms. Wexler, you fuckers have a mole, so what the fuck, Crouse? I don’t see you telling us all about that.”

He scowled at Salazar. “I can’t go into that with you all at the moment due to your lack of clearance, but suffice to say that *Pearson*,” he said, enunciating his name so we’d all understand that Rasha had the name wrong, “was neutralized.”

I nodded. “Funny how you made the jump from Palmer to Pearson so quickly. Those names are nothing alike, and yet you’re all over the guy.”

“What’s your point?”

“Well, I’m wondering if maybe somebody’s been on him for a while for you to pull his name out of a hat so fuckin’ fast.”

“You can at least share that much,” Bodhi pressed him.

He glanced around the inside of the SUV.

“No judgment, Agent Crouse,” Washington said with a nod, offering support. “We’ve all been there with crooked colleagues, am I right?”

He took a breath. “Yes, he’s been under surveillance for a while.”

“Was that so hard?” Bodhi asked him, sounding a bit snide.

“Not helpful, DUSM Callahan,” Washington scolded him.

“This is already taking way too long,” Mabe grumbled.

He wasn’t wrong.

CROUSE HAD backup following us in another SUV. The point was that a small tactical team would go in, alert no one so it

wasn't splashed all over the news, and get out. For that reason, Salazar and Mabe were sitting the breach out and would watch from the sidelines. They would get Kayson the moment we brought him out, and then, in time, they would have Petrov as well.

I put Washington in body armor instead of a tac vest because with twelve guys in a room, God only knew who would be shooting at us. And he had to be the first one through the door, because Kayson's guys would light us up otherwise, and Rasha would definitely not even let us in her room without him. I hated the idea of taking him in with us, but we had no other play.

We were near the Magnificent Mile downtown, on Erie Street, when Washington sat up straight and pointed. Of course it was a high-rise, secure building; nothing was ever easy. I would have had Washington tell her to come down, but it didn't sound like she would be leaving without her cat, and I was guessing her now ex-boyfriend—even though Kayson didn't know that yet—would notice her bailing with her pet.

Washington went first to the door, lifted his head to the camera, and buzzed the security guard. When the guard saw Washington's face on the monitor, as he'd visited Rasha often, he buzzed him in. The man did a double take when he realized Washington was in body armor, but when Crouse flashed his badge, he calmed and nodded. When we were about to move by, though, he reached for his phone. I was out of position, but Crouse was there, having seen the same action I did. He pressed the muzzle of his Glock 19 hard into the man's ribs.

“Who are you?” Crouse asked.

The man said nothing, and Crouse slammed the butt of his gun into the man's temple, dropping the big man to the floor.

“Why?” Washington asked.

“He's not the security guard,” I replied as Crouse held up the man's hand, inked heavily in Russian Cyrillic. “He's Bratva, on Burian's payroll, no doubt. I'm betting the real security guard is lying dead, stuffed into a supply closet.”

At which point Washington started to shake, finally understanding what we were about to do.

“It’s gonna be okay,” I soothed him.

“Harper, Lucas.” Crouse clipped the words with a drill sergeant’s bark at two of the five Kevlar-strapped men he’d brought with him. The junior Feds snapped to attention. “I don’t care how exclusive this zip code is, no one goes up behind us. I don’t get a Bratva colonoscopy, and maybe you see GS-13 before next year. Clear?”

“Crystal,” Lucas answered.

“Ortega, Boyce, and Kim, you’re with us.”

I felt better knowing there would be no surprises.

The elevator ride was a bit snug, like a Henley just a size too small—passable, but not enough to be comfortable.

“These apartments go for what—a million five?” I asked, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife.

“Easily. Your point?” Crouse’s manner was all business.

“Just, you’d think they’d go in for a little more elbow room.”

“That’s what you’re thinking about right now?” Bodhi asked.

“And Christ, is that ‘The Girl from Ipanema’ playing?” I press-checked my Glock 20 to shake off some nervous energy.

Silence again.

“Yeah,” Bodhi said, grinning at me. “That is, in fact, ‘The Girl from Ipanema.’”

Everyone chuckled then, and it felt better. Leave it to Bodhi.

I checked Washington’s body armor again, and he smiled.

“You’re worried about me,” he said softly.

“Kinda my job. You stay behind me. Never in front, never beside,” I warned him. “I will not have the first conversation I ever have with your mother be that her son is dead.”

“Plus the paperwork is insane,” Bodhi reminded me.

“And that,” I agreed.

Washington was grinning as the elevator dinged.

In the hall, Crouse sent Ortega and Kim ahead. We took up the rear and moved out of the lift when they gave us the all-clear. The Feds took up position on either side of the door as Washington knocked. When no one answered, he tried the door, finding it unlocked. Kiss of death right there.

“Were you listening in the goddamn elevator?” I growled, stopping Washington from opening the door. He was our witness, after all; we were charged with his protection. Bodhi and I were likely going to find ourselves on the block when Becker realized how easily things could have gone sideways, and he was a big believer in taking way more men than necessary. He didn’t care, like Crouse did, about optics. He didn’t care if our captures were on the news, so already, our small team would have given him hives. But this would all go down easier if we didn’t add a dead witness to our laundry list of sins.

We formed a tight phalanx around Washington as we silently stepped into the luxury apartment’s airy entry. To the left was a wide archway, and in front of us was a long hallway. We were completely exposed—all anyone had to do was walk out of any of the doors I could see or come from the left. It was a nightmare.

“Which way?” Crouse asked in a harsh undertone.

“This goes to the bedrooms,” Washington whispered, pointing down the length of the corridor. “Rasha is at the very last one there, with the double doors facing us.”

“Okay,” I said, shoving him behind me.

“That,” he said, pointing to the large square archway, “leads to the living room and the kitchen. It’s all open concept. It’s a really nice place.”

Bodhi groaned, because really, were we touring real estate properties or saving his girlfriend? I got it, though; everyone had a different reaction to something like this. Some people

freaked out and fell apart, some got a bit too hyped up on adrenaline, while others, like Washington, were so used to crap like this in their lives, they went with the flow. I was glad he wasn't panicking, but I could do with a bit more fear from him, like downstairs.

When I felt Bodhi's hand on my shoulder, which told me our witness was now behind him and that I was clear to move forward, of course that was when Rasha opened the door to her bedroom and saw Washington.

"Terry," she gasped, and rushed down the hall toward us, carrying a fluffy Siamese cat in her arms.

Washington slipped around us and ran toward her.

In my periphery, I saw sudden movement as a shirtless guy walked out into the hall. Tattoos sprawled across his chest and arms, each marking a chapter of his life within the Bratva.

"What the fuck?" he roared, reaching for his Heckler & Koch MP5K machine gun. "Burian, the fuckin' punk-ass bitch is screwin' you over!"

Okay, switching from quiet surgical strike to loud. In my head, I'd known better. No way was this op going to play otherwise.

"Fuck," Bodhi yelled, flying forward to reach Washington and Rasha.

I arched my Glock up before the muzzle of his H&K could rise to the threat position and emptied three rounds in a quick burst at the henchman. Two bullets struck the man in the upper chest, punching a couple of holes in his lungs. The third round chinned him as he fell away, the lower half of his face exploding in a spray of blood and bone fragments that painted the neutral-toned wallpaper in a bright-red mush.

"Everyone's coming now," Crouse stated, and I checked to see that my partner had both Washington and Rasha pressed to the wall behind him. It wasn't great. If there was anyone in the rooms to the right or across from him, he'd be killed, and so would they.

He had to get out with them.

Crouse and his agents had raised their weapons as soon as the first round had been fired, an instinctive reaction drilled into them over years of training. Weapons trained on the dead body, fingers lightly resting on the triggers. Ready to neutralize any more threats.

There was a chorus of panicked Russian shouts.

I holstered my Glock and hastily relieved the dead muscle of his submachine gun. I slung the weapon sideways while I rifled through his pockets and took out a spare thirty-round magazine, tucking it into the waistband of my jeans. My Glock was a highly effective tool, but the MP5K in close quarters was the ultimate weapon.

“We get pinned down here, we’ll get blown to shit!” Crouse shouted, pulling a twenty-four-round magazine from his waistband and slamming it into the mag well of his Glock 19.

Two-handed, he fired twice at the first goon coming into the hall and struck him in the head. He went down hard. Crouse then led his men through the archway that I could now see into. Ortega let go half a dozen rounds toward another of Petrov’s thugs, drilling him in the gut.

“You gotta move your witness,” Crouse roared back at me.

He was right; the hallway was a kill box. I spun round to Bodhi, my muscles bunched tight with tension. “Evacuation protocol!”

His face was a mask of agony at the idea, but Bodhi knew the drill—witness first. Always.

His mouth tightened. “Going.” From the breast pocket of his jacket, he pulled his earpiece that connected us to Ian Doyle back at the office, shoved it into his ear, and shouted. I imagined the chaos there getting his call. There would be hell to pay, but SOG would be on the way. I looked at my watch—Wes Ching was punctual to a fault. From our office downtown, it would be ten minutes with lights and sirens. All we had to do now was live.

Bodhi was ready to run Washington and Rasha by me, but at the same time, one guard fired an entire magazine into the open space, hitting Boyce to my right in the chest and neck. His head snapped back, his arms flopping as he tumbled heavily to the floor. Rasha screamed as more rounds spat splinters of wood into the hallway. I had an opportunity and took it, shooting twice, missing, as the thug went to cover the instant I fired. The good news was, it gave Bodhi enough cover to safely run our two witnesses out. He didn't hesitate, there was no backward glance for me, and that was good and right. I just hoped I'd get to see him again.

Rushing into the room, I dropped the first guy who lifted his head up from behind the overturned couch, and then I crouched quickly behind a toppled table.

There was an anguished cry from Crouse as two bullets slapped into his chest. He fell sideways, his head bouncing off the floor. I spun to three armed goons running toward us. I registered all this in a microsecond before one of them got the drop on me. He swept forward, loosing a couple of quick rounds that thumped into my shoulder and chest, putting me on my knees, as if someone had struck me across the torso with a baseball bat.

I kept my right hand clasped around the trigger grip of the MP5K, my left securely holding on to the fore grip for stability, managing to fire as I went down. Three men was a big, easy target to aim for, almost impossible to miss at this range. A dozen bullets scythed through the air, smacking into the guards as they raced forward, drilling them in the abs, neck, and legs. It was a deal-closer. They fell away heavily, the bright-red jets of blood painting the marble floor like something out of a Pollock lover's wet dream.

It gave me just enough time and cover to get to Crouse and drag him behind the table.

I put out a hand to steady myself and nearly fell on my face.

"You're hurt," Crouse groaned like he was annoyed.

“It’s fine,” I assured him, because at the moment, I was and wasn’t. Things hurt more than I thought they should, but I hadn’t been shot in body armor in a bit, so that could be all it was. “You have to be in pain yourself.” Getting shot in the chest, in Kevlar, felt like being pounded by a sledgehammer.

“It’s not fine,” he corrected me. “You’re losing blood, Jed.”

“Okay, yeah,” I rasped, feeling it then, the pain assailed by sudden weakness that now amplified, spread all the way up and down the right side of my torso. “It’s official: I caught one under the vest.”

“You look bad,” Crouse commented, and I heard the concern and regret in his voice. “If we don’t stop the bleeding, you’ll be dead in minutes.”

I looked at my watch. “Like you know how long it’ll take,” I scoffed, refusing to believe he had bleeding-out down to a science. “SOG’ll be here in five, so give it a break.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but there was a man behind him, whom I put on the ground with one shot to the throat, then a second to the head.

Turning from the dead man back to me, Crouse’s eyes were huge. “Jesus, Jed.”

Thankfully, when I lifted to look over the table, there was no movement anywhere, only bodies.

“Okay,” I exhaled, slumping back down. “We’re clear.”

“I gotta get you out of here.” He moved to my side.

“Maybe we just wait,” I suggested, the idea of getting up sounding, at the moment, well beyond my capacity. “Where are your guys?”

There was no sight of Ortega or Kim, only Boyce, dead where he’d fallen.

He listened a moment in his earpiece. “Kim took two in the leg; Ortega is with him in the elevator. They’re good.”

That was excellent news. I would have liked it better if Ortega came back after getting Kim to safety, but he was probably putting pressure on his buddy's wound, so I understood. I wouldn't have left Bodhi in that same situation.

"We have to move," I announced.

"Yes," Crouse agreed, and I lifted my arm so he could loop his beneath my shoulder. He bore my weight as he pulled me to my feet.

"You're a pain in the ass," I told him, trying not to scream with the pain.

"I imagine the pair of us must look like an old-time double act," he said, grinning as we stumbled like a pair of drunken lovers toward the door. I could hear the blood rushing in my ears, my heart beating furiously inside my chest.

"You able to shoot?" he asked. "I can't carry you and do both."

"I'll kill anyone who gets in our way," I promised him, raising the muzzle of the machine gun, ready to fire.

He stopped moving suddenly.

"No," I nearly whined. "Keep going." I wanted out of that apartment so bad.

"That bastard Petrov is cowering in a room somewhere." He grimaced. "I say we go find him and end this."

It was the right thing to do, but the voice inside my head told me to say fuck that. I was badly hurt, and taking the elevator to the lobby, to where Bodhi was, seemed like the smarter move, and even more importantly, it was protocol. If a marshal was in any way compromised, be that mentally or physically, we were supposed to stand down.

Instead I said, "Yeah." If anyone else was still alive, hopefully Crouse and I would be able to neutralize them.

Moving through the wide-open space, I looked everywhere, as did Crouse.

Leaving the main room, we walked toward the kitchen, then beyond, to where an enormous marble-and-wood dining room table was, my finger tensed on the trigger, ready to double-tap any lurking targets, but found none.

We cleared the butler's pantry and wine cellar, and then I saw the breakfast nook facing out toward the patio. Crouse caught a glimmer of movement to his left and swiveled around. I arched my gun sights across the space as we moved toward the sliding glass doors.

Once we were outside, we saw Burian Petrov cowering beside a heavy wooden Adirondack chair. In the same beat, Crouse saw the blur of motion at our three o'clock. He spun around to a guy standing midway across the patio, his rifle pointed directly at us.

"Kayson, you fuck, you did this to me!" Petrov shrieked at Rasha's ex. I was hoping she was on her way to protective custody with Washington by now.

"Die!" Kayson yelled at me.

Bad guys always announced their intentions. I never understood that.

I fired in that half-second. Kayson had just enough time to register a look of dumb surprise as he heard the two rapid cracks of my machine gun before he could unleash a couple of rounds of his own. He dropped his machine gun and fell backward, his arms flailing as he flopped to the ground, blood pooling around him.

"Get up, you fuck," Crouse demanded of Petrov.

Petrov rose. His oily slicked-back blond hair and five o'clock shadow made him look like a nineties porn star. But hiding out took a toll on a person, and he'd been evading law enforcement for months. He looked leaner than the last time I'd seen him, and his eyes were hollow. He held his hands up in surrender.

"I give up."

I kept a bead on Petrov, finger on the trigger as Crouse put me in the matching chair to the one the mobster had been

crouched beside. Frisking him fast, Crouse shoved him back, away from him but didn't move, just held his gun on him.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

Crouse slid his gaze across to the Russian. "Change of plans." His expression tightened. "Now fucking move," he growled, waving the Glock at Petrov as they made for the balcony.

"We're going the wrong way," Petrov said, his voice cracking.

"No, we're not," Crouse replied tonelessly, marching him toward the edge of the terrace.

"What the fuck is going on?" he howled.

As soon as they reached the guardrail, Petrov turned around. Crouse kept just enough distance to see the sweat bead on his brow. Petrov looked at Crouse in stark terror registering on his face when he saw the Glock pointed at the spot between his eyes.

"You can't do this," he croaked.

"I can," Crouse told him, and shot out his kneecap. "But I won't."

Petrov screamed in agony, and Crouse limped back over to me, moved the other chair, and took a seat beside me.

"You should have shot him with something not yours," I said, having trouble forming thoughts.

"His word over mine. Are you going to back him up or me?"

I grunted.

"I should have thrown him over the side."

"Very *Untouchables*," I said, chuckling. "Very *Nitti is in the car*."

He groaned loudly. "Don't make me laugh. Everything hurts."

"Yeah," I said with a long sigh.

“Oh, Jed,” he gasped as I slid off the chair to the ground.
“We shouldn’t have—”

“Federal marshals! On your knees!”

“Don’t shoot,” Crouse called out. He raised his hands, seeing no point in getting shot after surviving a damn firefight.
“I’m FBI.”

Petrov was still shrieking, and then I felt a warm hand on my forehead and another on my side. I tried to open my eyes, but I was done.

“Jed,” Wes said sharply. “Open your eyes and fuckin’ look at me right fuckin’ now.”

I had to listen to him, but I could only manage squinting up at him, and he forced a smile.

“Say you understand. Stay here.”

He meant stay as in don’t die. “Yeah,” I murmured and closed my eyes.

“I need the EMTs up here now!”

There was scrambling and movement, but I was cold, my body so heavy.

“It’s clear! We’re all clear! Get someone in here!”

And I really tried to stay awake, but the spinning was too much, and because throwing up would be bad, I passed out instead.

FOUR

Blood loss is one of those tricky things. Most of the time, the injury itself is not that bad, it's what you do *after* you take the bullet or knife wound that determines whether you live or die. Basically, it's the blood loss that will kill you. So it wasn't that the bullet to my side tore through vital organs. It actually went right through me, in and out. The problem was, I didn't lie there and put a compress on the injury, both sides, front and back, but instead I got up and walked around, not trying to stop the bleeding in any way. In the end, it was the moving that very nearly killed me.

When I woke up in the hospital, Bodhi was asleep in the recliner beside my bed. He looked terrible. There were dark circles under his eyes, his hair was a mess, his clothes were the same ones he'd been in the last time I saw him, and his shoes were off. I was going to wake him up and tell him to go home, but the nurse who came in shook her head slowly, so I kept my mouth shut. She smiled when I nodded, poured me some water, then lifted the tumbler with the straw in it to my lips. I was only allowed a couple of sips before she moved it, shot something into my IV, and told me to rest. I was out like a light.

THE SECOND TIME I woke up, Bodhi was in the same recliner but now in old, threadbare jeans, a pale-blue crew-neck T-shirt, and an unzipped gray hoodie I was pretty certain belonged to me. He was typing on his government-issue

laptop, and I could see that he was working on a report. I knew the form well, the million boxes and the tabbing he was doing.

“Hey,” I whispered, and he jolted, almost throwing the computer off his lap.

“Shit, Jed,” he grumbled, getting up.

“Sorry,” I said, chuckling and regretting it instantly. “Ow, ow. Fuck.”

Moving to my bedside, he leaned over and put a hand in my hair, pushing it back from my face, and stared down at me. “You scared the shit out of me.”

He spoke softly, and because of that I could hear the depth of pain in every syllable. The way his jaw clenched, how red-rimmed his eyes were...my misadventure had been painful for me but had gutted him. I said the only thing I could. “I’m sorry,” I ground out.

“I’ve never seen you that pale. Your lips were gray.”

He looked so sad, broken, and I felt that deep in my chest. “I—”

“You can’t ever do that to me again,” he said in a hoarse whisper.

“No,” I agreed.

The breath he took was choppy. I wasn’t sure he realized he was stroking my hair. “Looking for Petrov was not worth your life.”

“I’m still here, yeah?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do.” I didn’t need to argue with him because I always knew exactly what he meant in any situation. It was what made us, *us*.

“You’re such a dick,” he muttered affectionately.

I grinned, so relieved when he bent, kissed my forehead, and then straightened up, still with his hand in my hair as he shook his head.

“Now go back to sleep.”

“What day is it?”

“Wednesday midmorning.”

“Okay.” I closed my eyes.

WHEN MY EYES FLUTTERED OPEN, I saw that the curtains were pulled back and it looked like dusk outside. Bodhi was typing again on his work laptop and watching what looked like *Aquaman* on his personal one.

“What are you doing?”

He turned his head slowly. “Clearly, I’m watching Zack Snyder’s director’s cut of the *Justice League* and writing a mind-numbing report at the same time.”

“Why?”

“Because my boss will murder me if I don’t get this done.”

“No. I mean why the movie?”

“First, it has a run time of 242 minutes. That will take up many hours which is a very good thing. And second, I like this movie.”

“Okay,” I said, chuckling, realizing I felt so much better already just because he was there.

“You should rest some more.”

“I just woke up,” I grumbled.

“And?” he teased, eyes glinting as he smiled at me. He already knew what I was going to say, he was just waiting now.

I whimpered. “I’m hungry.”

He snickered.

“Come on,” I moaned. “You know I have to eat. I always eat.”

“Fine, I will check and see what you’re allowed to have, and if they give me the okay, I will go get you that disgusting burger with the onions and chili and cheese you like.”

“Oh,” I sighed. “You do still love me.”

He glared at me. “I never stopped doing that.”

I could only stare after him as he left the room. It was things like that, how he talked to me, that were confusing as hell. But he had worried I was going to die, so I needed to factor that into my thinking. Imminent death clouded things. And he did love me, I knew that. I would always be his best friend.

As I lay there, contemplating my life and everything else, I realized there was a catheter in me.

Oh, hell no.

“Bodhi!” I yelled.

In moments he leaned back into my room. “Yes, I know. I already told your nurse and explained that in another few minutes you were going to start bellowing about the tube in your dick and the IV in your arm.”

And now that I was thinking about that, that was going to annoy me too. It was the tape on my arm. Once I was fully awake, it would start to itch.

“Did you tell them I was hungry?”

“I was about to before you bellowed.”

“Bellowed,” I repeated, affronted. “I don’t bellow.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re definitely feeling better.”

My stomach took that moment to growl loudly. “You see?”

He made a cutting motion with his hand to shut me up and left. I waited as long as humanly possible—at least two whole minutes—and yelled again.

“Stop,” he shouted back from wherever he was.

Another ice age after that, he was back in the room with two nurses.

“Boy, you weren’t kidding,” the younger of the two said, scowling at me. “He really is an ass when he’s awake.”

“I told you.” Bodhi gestured at me. “He’s all rugged and handsome lying there quietly, but as soon as he opens his mouth, you’re gonna want to smother him with a pillow.”

I was going to say something to defend myself, but the older nurse made the sign for me to zip it. “I’m Grace, this is Letti, and we’re taking care of you tonight, Deputy Redeker.”

“Thank you,” I muttered.

“We don’t yell in the hospital,” Grace informed me.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now listen. This IV can come out now, but it can also stay until tomorrow morning. Tell me what you want to do.”

“Please take it out.”

“Okay, but once I do, you’re going to be in some pain. You have the strong stuff running through your veins at the moment, but it’s all oral after the needle comes out. You understand?”

“I do.”

“How do you feel now?”

“Hungry,” I whined again.

Her wide smile transformed her face into pure sunshine. “You’re right,” she told Bodhi. “He’s very cute.”

“What the hell? You told them I was cute?” I groused at him. “I’m not cute.”

“Sometimes you are. I’m going to get your hamburger. Be quiet until I get back, all right? Don’t piss anybody off.”

“What? I almost died, man. I’m a fuckin’ saint.”

He rolled his eyes again and was gone.

“You are very lucky,” Letti told me as she clicked off my IV. “If I had a man like that sitting at my bedside day after day, I’d keep him.”

“Not mine to keep,” I muttered. “And besides, he’s just my partner.”

“I don’t know about that. He seems awfully devoted for you not to make a play.”

“No, remember what I told you,” Grace scolded her. “Men are stupid. They don’t know what’s best for them. Better not to get involved.”

Letti nodded. “You’re right, you’re right. I know you’re right.”

“And now for the catheter,” Grace announced. “Did you want to do any more shouting?”

“No, ma’am,” I assured her.

“Excellent.”

I kept my mouth shut and didn’t look.

WHEN BODHI RETURNED, I was sitting up, waiting, flipping channels. I was very happy to see that the bag was big, meaning he was eating with me.

“Did you get hot dogs for you?” I asked, hopeful.

“No, I got the veggie burger.” He put everything on the rolling table and moved it next to me. “And I got you a chocolate shake *and* a Coke. Since you almost died.”

I grimaced. “That was crappy. Forgive me.”

He grunted.

As we ate, he explained that Washington, Rasha, his mother, sister, Greta the golden retriever, and Daisy the Himalayan cat—that was what she was, not a fluffy Siamese—were all off on their new adventure.

“Do we think Rasha will be happy with Terry?” I asked seriously.

He nodded. “She really likes him, and just as important, she’s crazy about his mother and sister. You’ve been doing this long enough to know that family compatibility is huge.”

True.

His phone rang then, and seeing the number, he turned around. “Hey,” he said, and from the soft tone, I knew it was Hayden. “I was going to call you later.”

He was quiet, and I went back to eating.

“No,” he replied curtly to whatever question had been posed. That fast, from sultry to sharp in a single breath, was not good. “I know you want him to meet Davis, but it’s not going to be while he’s lying in the hospital.” Silence again, then, “I told you, as soon as he’s out, I’ll be home. This is not only my partner, but my best friend in the world. You get that, right?”

At times, Bodhi could be a real asshole. Not often. I teased him, but as a rule, the man sailed a steady boat, even through rough seas. That part, staying calm in both physical and mental confrontations, was one of his very best qualities. Conversely...when he’d made a point and, for whatever reason, you were making him reiterate it, he got surly, and even worse—he got snide. This was to remind you that he was repeating himself. I knew from watching others go through it that it was uncomfortable. Why he’d never done it to me, I couldn’t say, but the absolute coldness of it, I was happy to have missed out on.

“Perfect.” He bit out the word. “I’ll see you later.”

When he turned to me, I was grimacing.

“What?”

“Since you’re marrying him, maybe you don’t want to be your regular prickish self.”

I got a scowl.

“You know what I mean.”

“But I went over what was happening.”

“He just misses you,” I reminded him.

Quick shake of his head. “I’ll see him Friday when we leave.”

“And then I’ll miss ya,” I teased him, though my heart hurt with the words.

“Or not,” he said, his lip curling at the corner.

“The hell does that mean?”

He shrugged. “Eat your burger. I promised the nurses it was a regular one, not a cardiac event on a bun, so hurry up before I get in trouble.”

“How come you never get mad at me like you do other people?”

He tipped his head and stared at me. “My fondness for you is boundless.”

“So that’s a good thing, then,” I baited him.

“Apparently so.”

As we ate, we went through the report he was filing for his portion of what had gone on, and I made the same suggestions for clarification I always did. It felt so very normal, which did nothing for the ache in my chest. I fell asleep before the rest of the Justice League got Superman back, but that was okay. I knew it would all work out.

THURSDAY MORNING I was *so* ready to go. Bodhi had brought me a racquetball ball the day before, and I’d been bouncing it against the wall until one of my nurses, Chantal, came in and took it away from me like I was a child. She looked at the ceiling on her way out and asked Allah to please have me discharged.

“That’s not nice,” I called after her.

She walked back in, squeezed the ball in her hand really tight, like maybe it was my head, then spun around and left again. Clearly, I was not making any friends.

When Bodhi joined me an hour later, I asked him when I could leave.

“I just got reprimanded in the hallway and was ordered not to bring you any more toys,” he told me.

“I’m real sorry about that,” I rushed out. “Now, can I get outta here?”

“Your sincerity is overwhelming.”

“Just—come on,” I whined. “I wanna go.”

“Have you seen your doctor today?”

I shook my head. “I have yet to meet my doctor. What’s with that?”

His scowl was immediate. “First two days here, you were in and out, so it was a waste of her time to talk to you.”

I squinted at him. “But you talked to her.”

“Of course. I’m the emergency contact. You know this.”

He was more than that. Power of attorney was his if I was ever incapacitated. It was his choice to take me off life support, donate organs, or decide he wasn’t ready for anything to transpire but waiting. I had no doubt he knew everything that *had* occurred and what *was* going to happen to me now as a result.

“Tell me,” I prodded him.

“As you probably suspected, the bullet in your side went in and out.”

“I figured.”

“You lost a lot of blood, but there was no internal damage.”

“Okay, good. Then I can—”

“The issue is your shoulder.”

“I got hit in the shoulder?”

“Yeah,” he replied softly. “The vest protected your subclavian artery or you would’ve bled out right there.”

“I think that’s what Crouse thought happened. He had me on a death timer.”

“Don’t mention fuckin’ Crouse to me,” he warned, his eyes hard. “You should have been his priority, not Petrov.”

“Petrov needed to be found and stopped.”

His jaw clenched tightly, and I understood we were not coming to any kind of agreement about Spencer Crouse’s actions on Monday evening. “Tell me the rest about my shoulder.”

Taking a deep breath, then exhaling, he nodded. “The bullet abraded the joint between the humeral head and the glenoid fossa, meaning that—”

“English, please.”

“Basically, if it had hit you straight on, it could have destroyed the joint, which means you’d have to have surgery to replace it or repair whatever was left.”

“Shit.”

“Yep,” he agreed. “The bullet grazed the joint on its way out of your body, and thus far, your doctor sees no major structural or vascular damage.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

He grimaced. “It’s the best-case scenario for now. The issue is it’s all still really swollen, and until the swelling goes down, your doctor can’t tell how good or bad it all is.”

“Okay.”

“So that leaves you in a sling for at least a month while it heals and the swelling goes down so she can see what the fuck she’s looking at.”

“A month,” I moaned as three doctors walked into the room.

“Yes,” said the one closest to me, a tall, willowy woman with deep-umber skin and gold undertones. Her long hair was pulled up into a high bun, and she folded her arms as she glared at me. “A month. And I understand from your partner here that you’re a bit of a rebel deputy, but I promise you that if you ever want to have full, or even partial, use of your left shoulder again, you will heed my instructions.”

I glanced at Bodhi, then back to her. “Doctor”—I checked her white coat for her embroidered name—“Nkosi, I promise you I will be a model patient, but see, I have to be able to hold a gun and—”

“Absolutely not,” she said brusquely. “The only kind of field work you’ll be doing is making house calls on children.”

I smiled at her. “Doctor, I don’t think you know what it is that I do.”

“No,” Ian said as he walked into my room, grinning in a way that told me I was really screwed. “She understands your new assignment.”

Children? Oh no. “Please no,” I told him.

Really, the smile was horrible. Fucking Ian.

“You,” he said, “and your partner, will be working with Miro in Custodial WITSEC for the next month until Dr. Nkosi can determine if, or when, you can return to normal duty.”

“That can still get dicey,” I reminded Ian. “The last time I was out with Miro—”

“Was back when he first got the promotion,” Ian replied snidely. “He’s been in charge for a bit now, and you know as well as I do that he can tell you, if not off the top of his head, then with a few strokes of his keyboard, what’s going on with each and every one of those kids.”

And I knew that. Miro had completely revamped Custodial WITSEC, and a department that ran better would be hard to find. He was one of the nicest guys I knew and always fun to be around, but he was drop-dead serious about the children in his care.

“It will be a lot of boring-ass visits where the worst thing that could happen would be a paper cut,” Ian finished with a cackle.

“Excellent,” Dr. Nkosi said, giving me a smile that was lovely as opposed to Ian’s shit-eating one. I already liked her better. “You will be ready to leave the hospital tomorrow morning, and as we already have you off all the good drugs,

which was at your request, I can tell you're done with being here."

"You would be correct," I agreed.

"Well, three and a half days is more than enough."

I groaned like I was actually dying.

"I will be back," she told me, and with that, she and her team left.

Alone in the room now with Bodhi, who was standing beside my bed with crossed arms, and Ian, who was at the foot of my bed, smirking at me, I wanted to scream.

"Why not send just me to Custodial WITSEC?" I asked Ian. "Bodhi shouldn't be punished because I got shot."

"What are you talking about?" Ian asked, squinting at me. "You didn't do anything wrong. You got your witnesses out, and you got Petrov."

I was quiet, waiting.

"Do I wish you'd called Wes *before* you breached? Sure. Do I wish Crouse was more concerned for *your* life than getting Petrov? Absolutely. Will his office ever run anything with ours without my oversight and personal attendance? Fuck no," he growled. "I get it because I was a cowboy once upon a time too, but never did I gamble with anyone's life but my own."

"Wait now, he—"

"No, Jed," Ian snapped at me. "You were hurt, bleeding, he had no idea of the extent of your injuries, and he thought—and this is in the official report—that you had a finite number of minutes left on this earth before bleeding out."

"Yeah, but—"

"No," Ian said again, his voice going low and dark. "Petrov could not have gotten out of that building. It was surrounded by CPD, a SOG team was coming up the elevators, and there were more officers on every floor of that building. What you guys didn't want to be a big deal ended up huge. It's

eating up newspaper headlines and airtime on every news channel in the city and beyond. Eli has been center stage, talking to the press for the last three days, speaking not only for us, but the CPD and FBI as well.”

“I never meant to embarrass the marshals service or—”

“You didn’t. Again, your partner secured the witnesses, and you helped bring down Petrov. We came out of this clusterfuck looking very shiny.”

But he didn’t look or sound happy.

“Crouse is on administrative leave pending a formal investigation.”

“That’s not—”

“If you so choose,” he said, scowling, “you can speak at his hearing in a month. Mabe and Salazar are going to as well.”

Nice of Ian to throw that in. He wasn’t thrilled with Crouse at the moment, but he didn’t want him run out of the FBI.

“I don’t think you should. Crouse is always looking for credit. He wants the glory. He’s a waste of space and should be demoted or just be out.”

Or I was wrong and Ian thought Crouse was a fuckup.

“You go with your gut on that.”

“Thanks.”

“When you get back, you’re going to Custodial with your partner and—”

“When I get back? Where am I going?”

“Since we all know you need a keeper, you’re going with Bodhi on vacation starting tomorrow, Friday, and we won’t see you back here, reporting to Miro, until July sixth, next Thursday.”

“What?” I suspected I still had the good drugs in my system.

“You’ll leave here in the morning, and your doctor has cleared you to fly to Seattle with your partner.”

“No,” I said, glancing up at Bodhi, who was now the one smirking at me. “You can’t make me do that.”

“You haven’t had a vacation since you transferred here, Jed, so now you are mandatorily taking one with your partner to look out for you.”

“Fine, I’ll take the week, but I don’t have to go with Bodhi to—”

“You do,” Ian assured me. “You can’t be alone, and there’s only your partner, unless there’s someone else who should be listed on your emergency form.”

You could hear a pin drop in the room as Ian waited for me to speak.

“I could visit my sister.”

“On her livestock sanctuary,” Ian said, nodding. “Yeah. Sounds restful.”

It did not, in fact, sound the least bit restful.

“And she’ll have so much time to keep an eye on you between everything the animals require and her two sons,” he said sarcastically.

“I don’t need watching. All I need to do is sit.”

“Bodhi called your sister, by the way, because all this made national news and he didn’t want her to worry.”

“You did?” I asked, looking up at him.

He glared at me. “Of course I did. And for your information, she and her husband and all the hands on their ranch are busy moving the cattle out to pasture for the summer. The bulls join the cows, yearlings, and the calves in late June, which this is, and they also have to get ready for winter.”

“She still has cattle?”

“It’s a sanctuary and a ranch in one.”

“That doesn’t seem likely.”

“Well, it is. Nothing dies on her place.”

“Why do you know all that?”

“Because I’ve asked her questions.”

I groaned. “Yeah, but—”

“I told her she didn’t need to come here—which she was going to do, leaving her family—because I was going to look after you.”

Fuck.

“She was very thankful,” he stressed. “She expects a call from you today, and I told her I’d let her know precisely what was happening with your recovery since, as we all know, you are shit with details.”

“I’m not shit with—”

“You suck at relaying important facts,” he told me loudly.

Ian, that ass, was chuckling.

“Listen,” I said to Ian, needing him to see reason. “Bodhi is going to Seattle to spend time with his fiancé’s family and —”

“I understand they have a mansion on a lake or some shit,” Ian said with a yawn. “It sounds like a great place to convalesce.”

My body might heal, but my heart would be eviscerated. “I can’t do that. I’ll be spoiling the Fourth for everyone, and it’s not right to—”

“It’s done, Jed,” Bodhi told me. “You have to meet everyone anyway, so it works out great. Just let it be.”

“I don’t have the cash for a last-minute plane ride to—”

“They have a private plane,” Ian said, waggling his eyebrows at me. “And fuck you, Jed. This is not some fuckin’ suggestion. You do what I tell you or I’ll send your ass to Jer in Judicial Support and you can stand in federal court all day. Would you prefer that?”

I would die doing that.

“Well?”

Fucking Ian.

His smile was big and evil. “Now enjoy your goddamn vacation.”

It would kill me when the bullets had not.

FIVE

I was discharged early the following morning with a pretty fancy-looking titanium brace with a million Velcro straps that ran from my left shoulder to my bicep and stopped at my elbow. I looked like some half-ass cyborg. I also had a very fashionable sling in two shades of blue. When Elliot, my nurse, explained that I could have a neon-yellow one instead, I looked at Bodhi, and he turned and spit out his coffee.

“You okay?” Elliot asked him.

“Great,” he rasped in response.

I got to spend maybe a half hour at home, in time to have Bodhi explain that he’d packed me the day before with everything I needed for the week away, and since he didn’t just grab my go bag that all marshals had at the ready, but instead spent time and thought, making sure I was covered for any surprise or soiree, making sure I had extra underwear, I couldn’t very well argue. He’d packed duffels for me a million times, and since I’d showered and changed at the hospital, there was no protest to make. We were on our way to Midway while I talked to my sister on the phone.

“You can hear that I’m not dead,” I grouched at her.

“That’s charming,” she snapped. “I was terrified, you ass! I can’t lose you.”

Since I had her on speaker, I noted that Bodhi pressed his lips together tight in an effort to say nothing.

“Thank God for your partner.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Is that sarcasm? Because he keeps excellent tabs on you. I’m very appreciative that you have him in your life.”

“He’s a saint, that one.”

At the next red light, Bodhi pinched my leg so hard, I almost screamed. I hated it when he did that, and he was so lucky I was on the phone with my sister or I would have punched him. Not that it would have been easy with him in the driver’s seat and my left arm out of commission. Plus, I’d have to turn fast and hit him, and that would not be easy since I wasn’t at full strength at the moment.

“He is!” she assured me. “And not only is he kind and thoughtful, but he’s very easy on the eyes, Jed.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

I moaned like I was dying, and Bodhi waggled his eyebrows at me.

“You will call me as soon as you get home from vacation, and if you need—”

“How did you know I was going on vacation?”

“Bodhi told me,” she said, sounding annoyed. “Now listen, if you need me, call and I’ll be there. I love you dearly, and so help you God if you do not show up here for Christmas!” she finished with a snarl.

“I’ll be there,” I said, chuckling.

“Everyone misses you,” she said, her voice trembling suddenly, deflating—I knew—with relief. I’d known her all her life, could read her like a book. Losing me was not something she could do. Her husband and kids were her touchstones now, but I was the original, and she would need me for the rest of her life. I was the same. “And I just... You know I can’t... Jed.” Her breath caught, and she stopped speaking.

“I know,” I soothed her, feeling like absolute crap. “I had a moment of heroism. I promise you it’s passed.”

She laughed softly, and I was betting it was through tears. “No. That’s not you. You have to save everyone you can. It’s how you were made.”

I grunted.

“You were. You kept me safe after Mom left until Aunt Roz showed up.”

And I had. There were scars on my body from my father to prove it.

“You’re the only one who—who knows all the stories.”

I swallowed hard, looking out the window so Bodhi couldn’t see me tear up.

Before our mother left, my father had knocked her around, and when I could, I put myself between them. After she abandoned us, his alcoholic rages focused on me. Occasionally, he had looked to Lisa, but I made certain, by whatever means necessary, that his attention refocused on me. She was my baby sister; I could not let her get hurt.

“You’re the one person on the planet who never asks questions when I can’t do certain things. You know all my triggers, so just...take it easy, all right?” She yelled the last part.

“I will do my best.”

“And Christmas, yeah?”

“I promise to be there.”

“I’m doing a rustic theme this year. So much burlap, you’re gonna be impressed.”

“Or vomit,” I teased her.

“Lots of rusted stars and fairy lights.”

“Oh God,” I muttered, just imagining the horror.

From her laughter, I could only assume she found my reticence hysterical.

“I love you, Lise.”

“I love you back,” she said with a sigh. “And listen to Bodhi, will you?”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath on that one.”

“Well, try. And bring him for Christmas if you can.”

“He’s gettin’ married in September. He ain’t got time for us.”

She just hmped like she didn’t believe me.

“Give everyone a squeeze for me,” I told her.

“Even Reid?”

I groaned, she cackled, said again she loved me, and hung up.

“What’s wrong with Reid?” Bodhi asked me after several minutes of silence.

I squinted at him. “You’ve met Reid. He’s annoying as shit.”

“He’s just very political, is all.”

“Oh yeah, that’s it.”

He laughed and made the turn into the long-term airport parking.

“You know—”

“Just shut up already,” he ordered. “And play nice, or you’re not getting any of your pain meds.”

“You need to give me those. I might need one during the night, and I’m not above walking in on you and Hayden when you’re gettin’ your freak on.”

He snorted. “In a house with his parents?”

“I thought the house was big.”

“It is, but still.”

I stared at his profile. “Are you kidding? Since when don’t you take any moment to screw? Is something wrong? Do you need to see someone? Have a talk?”

“Funny,” he grumbled. “So fuckin’ funny.”

“One tries,” I baited him.

ON THE TARMAC, walking toward the plane, I saw Hayden waiting at the bottom of the stairs that folded up into the side. As usual, two things popped into my head. One, that he was perfect in every way, and two, that he made me think of money. He looked like what you’d conjure in your mind if someone said rich son of a corporate lawyer who followed in his father’s footsteps. The sports coat over the polo, the slacks and dress shoes, were a lot for a relaxing weekend at home. Short, thick brown hair, dark-blue eyes, perfectly sculpted features, built like a swimmer or a polo player—the latter being a game he participated in—and of course, a dazzling smile, courtesy, I was guessing, of braces early in life and now veneers. And while other men who looked like they’d walked out of the pages of *Town & Country* didn’t annoy me, because he possessed what I wanted more than anything, namely Bodhi’s heart, everything about him made me bristle with frustration and hatred.

Even worse, I was terrible about hiding how I felt. My face always betrayed me. I tried, but it never quite worked. If I hated you, you fucking knew it.

“Could you try and smile?” Bodhi asked hopefully.

“I would,” I said snidely, “but yanno, I’m in pain.”

He rolled his eyes, and we continued forward.

Reaching Perfect Hayden, Bodhi leaned in and kissed him briefly, and when he stepped back, I tried for a smile and offered him my hand.

“Oh, Jed, I’m so glad you’re joining us for the week,” he said, and it sounded genuine. “My extended family is coming to our compound, and this is the last time we’ll see them before the wedding.”

Super.

“I’m excited for you to see the venue.”

“Well, with me or without me, Bodhi was going, right?”

His brows furrowed. “Not with his partner hurt.”

I glanced at Bodhi, who was glaring at Hayden.

“What?” Hayden asked worriedly.

Bodhi gestured at me. “Way to make him feel like you didn’t really want him to come,” he said sharply, taking several steps back so he was shoulder to shoulder with me. “This might have been a mistake.”

I knew well that flat tone, the set stare, and the crinkle between his eyebrows. He was about to undo plans, as he always did when he was displeased. And while I didn’t want to go, and I would have preferred to stay home on my couch, and I might even get Bodhi there watching TV with me...it wasn’t the best thing for him.

Hayden Burdine the Third was.

“No,” I rushed out, moving forward to give Hayden a pat on the shoulder. “He didn’t mean it like that. He just meant he knew you were worried, so he wanted to make sure I was included.”

Hayden sighed. “That’s exactly right, Jed. I’ve wanted you along many times, and I’m thrilled you’re coming to meet my family and especially Davis.”

“See?” I said to Bodhi. “Now let’s get on the plane already before we all fuckin’ melt out here, yeah?”

Bodhi nodded, told me to walk in front of him, and I started up the stairs. When I bent to enter the plane, I saw that several seats were already taken, and so went quickly toward the back and took the first open one by a window. There were two seats there with another two facing them, and I put my duffel down to my left. A couple of minutes later a very handsome man, tall with wide shoulders, an easy smile, and dark green eyes, was standing over me.

“Are you Josiah?”

“I am.”

He offered me his hand to shake. "I'm Davis Warren, the other best man. It's a pleasure to meet you."

I stood up to greet him. "The pleasure's mine."

His eyes mapped me, and he squeezed my hand tight, not letting me go. "May I sit with you, or are you going to try and get some sleep? I know you're recovering from being shot, which is so completely outside of any frame of reference I have, I'm not even sure what I should say."

I couldn't help but smile. "You can say, 'I'm so glad you're not dead.'"

He laughed then, low and husky. "I am very glad."

"Okay," I replied, pleased that he released me so I could sit back down.

He took the one across from me and signaled for the flight attendant. Once she arrived, he said, "I could really use a Scotch and water, and do use Hayden's Macallan Lalique, the fifty-year-old one he told you not to open."

The immaculately dressed blonde woman with the perfect makeup and chignon gave him a hint of a nod and turned to me without uttering a word.

"Just a bottle of water if you would please, ma'am," I said softly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she said with a smile that crinkled her eyes. "Would you like it chilled?"

"If it's cold already, great. If not, no worries. It's just water. It ain't that big a deal."

She nodded and walked away.

Davis leaned forward, but Bodhi and Hayden arrived then, Bodhi picking up my duffel and putting it in the overhead compartment along with his, and Hayden taking the seat next to me. I wasn't thrilled, but it was fine.

Bodhi didn't sit, just stood there with his what-the-fuck face I normally was on the receiving end of.

"I thought this way we could all talk," Hayden said.

“Jed was in the hospital for the past three days,” Bodhi reminded him. “He’s gonna pass out halfway there, so you should sit over there.”

What?

Bodhi had basically made a statement that meant nothing. Like what did my falling asleep have to do with where he sat? That made no sense, but Hayden didn’t question him. I certainly would have. Instead, Hayden got up quickly and sat down beside Davis.

I could feel my whole body unclench as soon as Bodhi leaned sideways in the wide chair and his shoulder was shoved up against my good one. There was really no reason for any part of us to touch—the seats were like those in first class that I’d seen walking by to business the few times I flew by myself or was making my way to coach when transporting a witness. We didn’t need to have any physical contact, but I was not the best flier, and of course, Bodhi knew that. I realized suddenly how much I’d missed having him with me when I was paired up with Pazzi. He knew me so well, I didn’t even have to speak.

“You’re never gonna guess what Jed did,” Davis rushed out, and it was nice of him to fill the void of silence because it was starting to feel a bit awkward.

“What?” Hayden asked.

“Bridget spoke to him.”

Hayden stared at his friend. “I’m sorry?”

“She spoke to him.”

Bodhi’s fiancé turned to me. “Really?”

I squinted at him. “Don’t you get fired if you don’t talk to people on the plane and make nice and chat?”

“No,” Hayden assured me. “She’s ridiculously overqualified, is a concierge chef when she’s not doing this, knows both regular and infant CPR, and can fly the plane if the pilot becomes incapacitated. Most importantly for us, she’s also an amazing mixologist.”

“Wow.” I was genuinely impressed.

“There’s also a gun and baton on board that she knows how to use. She’s well-versed in several types of self-defense.”

I grinned at him. “So what you’re telling me is that she’s an all-around badass.”

“She is.” Hayden smiled back at me. “And for that reason, my father employs her, and only he could ever make the decision to let her go even when she threw my friend Michael off the plane a year ago.”

“In her defense, he was drunk and tried to touch her,” Davis chimed in.

“You don’t need to defend her for that,” Bodhi chided him. “He deserved to be removed in whatever way she did it for being in her personal space without her express permission.”

“No, I agree,” Davis replied. “I just meant that—”

“I bet she makes more money than I do,” I told Bodhi, trying to lighten the mood.

When he turned to me, he was smirking. “But you’re a lousy bartender.”

“Mixologist,” I corrected him, bumping him gently with my good shoulder.

“That either,” he said, chuckling.

I scoffed.

She returned then with a tray, her face a mask of indifference as she passed Davis a napkin and then his drink. When she turned to me, she smiled, and I got first a bottle of Fiji water and then a plate with cheese and almonds and sliced apples.

“Thank you so much.” I smiled up at her.

“I suspect you have to take pain meds for that shoulder, and we don’t want to do that on an empty stomach now, do we?”

“No, ma’am,” I agreed, looking at her flawless complexion and her sparkling brandy-colored eyes and liking her face quite a bit.

She laughed softly and then turned to Hayden, her face instantly changed, back to business, like a statue, all her humanity gone.

“I’d like an old-fashioned with the rye whiskey,” he told her.

She regarded Bodhi next.

“Oh, he’ll have one too,” Hayden said. “He loves them as much as I do.”

I scoffed, and Hayden looked at me.

In that moment I thought, shit, I shouldn’t have contradicted him. The man was Bodhi’s fiancé, I shouldn’t come between them even in such a small way. In any way. Keeping my big mouth shut was the right, and smart, thing to do. But I just wasn’t that way. I never had been. There was no filter even when I tried. Scores of people had mentioned it to me and only one person never had. As usual, he was sitting beside me.

I turned to Bodhi and he gave me a shrug along with that look of his that said whatever it was didn’t matter now anyway.

“He doesn’t like bourbon or whiskey or any dark liquor,” I said, then looked back at Bodhi. “You’re wastin’ the man’s good booze if you’re just gonna let it sit and get watery from the ice.”

He narrowed his eyes, not saying anything.

“Ask this nice lady for a gin and tonic. I betcha she makes a kickass one.”

Her lip curled in the corner, and she put her hand on Bodhi’s shoulder. “It’s true. I do.”

He smiled up at her, and I saw her take a breath because really, Hayden was a very handsome man, and Davis was as well, but Bodhi with his long, thick gold lashes, chiseled

features, the freckles splashed across his nose and cheeks and all his golden skin, was a sight to behold. Everyone I'd ever met responded to him viscerally. There was no way not to.

“Then I would love one, please.”

“Absolutely,” she agreed, then glanced at me. “And it's Bridget.”

“Bridget,” I repeated. “I will remember.”

She gave me a playful, exaggerated nod and left us.

Hayden looked crestfallen. “You don't like bourbon?”

Bodhi cleared his throat. “I don't, no.”

He glanced at me, then back to Bodhi. “But I've been ordering you so many drinks with—and you went to that tasting with me in Louisville.”

“You like it,” Bodhi replied simply. “It wasn't important enough to make a big deal out of, but Jed's right. Wasting your good bourbon is doing you a disservice.”

“Yeah, not like ordering a Scotch and water with your fancy Macallan Lalique,” I said, indicating Davis with a tip of my head.

Hayden jabbed Davis in his side with his elbow. “You shit.”

“Way to violate the bro code, man,” Davis apprised me with a shake of his head.

I laughed, and he smiled back, and I heard Bodhi sigh beside me like everything was going to be okay.

When Bridget returned, she waited while Bodhi took a sip. His eyes widened, which made her smile.

“This is awesome,” he told her.

She gave him a waggle of her eyebrows, passed Hayden his drink, and then passed me a small quiche that smelled amazing.

“It's just cheese and spinach. I didn't know if you were a bacon man or not.”

“I am, but this is perfect,” I assured her, and noted that her smile lingered on me before she left to take other orders.

“She is smitten as usual,” Bodhi said with a grunt.

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“As always, you’re effortlessly charming.”

“Me?”

“Yes,” Davis said, and when I looked at him, he was grinning. “I had no idea. Bodhi never said this about you.”

“No? He didn’t tell you how awesome I was?”

Davis chuckled. “He didn’t, but he did say other things.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Just how long you’ve been partners, and that for his entire career, there’s been you.”

“That’s true,” I agreed, digging into the quiche.

“You could share,” Bodhi goaded me.

“It’s tiny,” I griped at him.

“Remember to chew.”

“I always chew, unlike Dorsey.”

“All those brothers of his, remember?”

I grinned at him, and he shook his head, taking from my lap the cloth napkin Bridget had brought me and wiping my face.

When Bridget passed us with a tray full of drinks, Hayden asked her if they might all have quiche.

“We’re about to take off,” she informed him, her tone icy. “And I brought that from home, Mr. Burdine.”

He nodded as she left.

“She hates me.”

Bodhi snickered, I shrugged, and Davis agreed that yes, she certainly did.

DURING THE FLIGHT, Hayden walked Bodhi around the plane to meet friends of his father's who would be at the wedding and had caught a ride on the Burdine private jet. These were favors rich people did for one another. But I gave rides to friends too, albeit in my car; it was basically the same.

We had left around eleven in the morning, and after the nearly five-hour flight, arrived right around two in the afternoon Pacific time. It was a Friday, so there was no traffic at that time, and the twenty of us got off the plane. I thanked Bridget before I left, shaking her hand, holding tight, and she did the same. She even waved when I turned and looked back.

"Did she wave at him?" one of the other passengers asked.

In the terminal, we all made our way to the arrivals area and walked outside just as it started to rain, but fortunately, we were under the parking structure before the sky exploded. There was a van, like the kind that picked up people for tours, to get us out to Hayden's family compound on Mercer Island.

I'd thought, when Hayden said *island*, that there would be a bridge, or that we'd have to get on another plane, or that, at least, it would take a while to get there. None of that was the case. It took us maybe fifteen minutes to get there, and since I had the window seat and was rested after my nap on the plane, I was admiring the scenery.

"It's beautiful here," I said to Hayden, leaning forward around Bodhi to look at him across the aisle.

"I agree," he replied, smiling. "Wait until you see the house, Jed."

I nodded, leaned back, and noted how weird Bodhi looked.

"What's with you?" I asked under my breath.

He shook his head.

"Fuck you, don't blow me off," I warned him. "What? Do you need to go to the bathroom? Got a headache from day drinkin'?"

His scowl was dark. “Will you just sit there and shut the fuck up?”

“I will remind you that you’re the one who wanted me here.”

“I know, and I’m rethinking.”

I grinned at him. “Oh, buddy, I could be on a plane home, like, right now.”

His jaw clenched.

“Seriously,” I said, my hand on his knee. “What?”

His brows furrowed. “I don’t— I just feel...off.”

“Sick or somethin’ else?”

“Something else.”

I nodded. “Okay, then. Tell me if you need me.”

“That might be the issue.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” he grumbled. “Are you okay? Do you need another ibuprofen?”

“Not at the moment,” I said, moving the small pillow Bridget had given me to put between my bicep and my chest. “This is helping quite a bit.”

“Yeah, who knew she was trained as a nurse too.”

I cackled.

“I hate you.”

“I am aware,” I teased him, moving my hand away from his knee and going back to admiring the view outside my window.

I HAD no idea what a compound was in this context, but I imagined something more like a French chateau or an English manor house than what we rolled up on. I had an image in my mind of the word *mansion*, and that was not at all what I was

looking at. It was a glorious marvel right on the lake. I'd never been in a more gorgeous home in my life.

Hayden's parents' estate on Butterworth Road sat on five acres, with trees all around the property and a spectacular view of Mount Rainier. It was like a resort, that's how big it was. It was just shy of twenty-five thousand square feet, with ten bedrooms, fifteen bathrooms, and a great room you could walk right out of onto the enormous back patio. There were so many sets of French doors... Then two kitchens and, Hayden said, butler's pantries, which I nodded when he said it but had no idea what that was. They had a movie theater, a room with a pool table and Ping-Pong, and even a pinball machine. I noted a full bar, me and everyone else taking the tour, saw the wine cellar and then the basketball and racquetball courts, the sauna and weight room, the tennis court and a putting green and sand trap. You could also moor your yacht, and a friend's, in the slips at the end of the dock. I mean, it was crazy. Plus, the inside was all marble and gold and crystal chandeliers. There were a million places to sit inside, room after room of white couches and fireplaces, and outside, the grounds were pristine, with stone benches beside fountains and man-made ponds. It looked like some Greek temple with marble dolphins and columns and vases filled with flowering plants.

In Mrs. Burdine's bathroom, there were steps that led up to her bathtub, and the bathroom itself was nearly as big as my house. It was a jaw-droppingly spectacular place, and I laughed at Bodhi when I got back with Hayden from the tour and met him in the great room.

"What?"

I shook my head.

"No, come on," he goaded me.

"Man, are you kidding?"

"It's not my home, Jed. It belongs to Hayden's parents."

I snorted as I walked over and took a seat on the end of the couch. He was right behind me, taking a seat close so that, as usual, our knees were wedged together.

“Bodhi,” Hayden called out.

When he turned, Hayden must have gestured to him because he got up and left.

Moments later, a little girl, I was guessing maybe seven or eight, plopped down next to me. She was in jeans and a long-sleeve T-shirt which seemed odd on such a warm day. She had sneakers on too. I didn’t say anything—I’d learned from years of dealing with kids in many different situations that waiting was best.

“Hi,” she said after several moments.

“Hi,” I returned, smiling at her.

“What’s your name?”

“My name’s Jed. What’s yours?”

“Stella.”

“Nice to meet you, Stella.”

“Is Jed short for something?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because Ted is short for Theodore.”

“How do you know?” I asked, because it was what I did with kids.

“My desk partner at school, that means our desks face each other,” she explained, “his name is Theodore, but he goes by Ted, not Theo.”

“I see,” I said. “Well, my name is Josiah, which technically should shorten to Joe, but my mother didn’t like that, so she called me Jed. Normally Jed is short for Jedidiah, but that’s not how it worked out for me.”

She nodded like she understood. “Okay.”

There was a lull, and then she took a breath. “How did you get hurt?” she asked, getting right to the heart of the matter.

“I was shot,” I stated, because lying to kids was dumb.

“Why did someone shoot you?”

“I’m a deputy US marshal,” I said, lifting the Henley I was wearing over my T-shirt so she could see the star on my belt. “So every now and then, I get shot at.”

“Because bad guys.”

“That’s right.”

She appeared skeptical.

“I don’t usually get hit, you understand, and even when I do, I have a vest and the bullets get stopped so they can’t go into my body and make me bleed.”

“Like on TV.”

It was easiest, so I went with that. “Correct,” I agreed, looking out at the lake.

“Does deputy US marshal mean like a police officer?”

“It does. We all catch bad guys.”

“That’s good.”

The question was, why was that good? And yes, to a child, catching bad guys would always be a positive thing, but she didn’t say it offhand, like a throwaway piece of conversation. Her words had more weight and I heard it in her voice. “How old are you?”

“Seven.”

“Where are your folks?”

“My mom is in New York, where I live most of the year, and my dad is in a speedboat on the lake, teaching Vanessa—that’s his girlfriend—how to ski.”

“She doesn’t know how to ski?”

She shook her head.

“I don’t either.”

“My dad could teach you, but you wouldn’t be able to hold the handle ’cause you’re hurt.”

“True. So probably right now isn’t the time for me to learn.”

She nodded.

“You didn’t wanna go with your dad and Vanessa?”

“No,” she whispered.

“Do you know how to water-ski?”

“No, but Vanessa likes to spend time with Dad by herself.”

“Yeah, but I’m thinking this is your time with your dad too, right? I mean, he lives here, and you live in New York.”

“But Vanessa told me this morning she wanted some alone time with him.”

I nodded. “Well, then, that’s very nice of you.”

“Thanks.”

We were quiet for a bit.

“How long’ve you been here?” I prodded her.

“Since Wednesday.”

“I just got here.”

“I know. I didn’t see you before.”

I squinted at her because she was staring up at my face.
“What’s wrong?”

“Are you hungry?”

“A little. Are you hungry?”

She nodded.

“Yanno, the food is on that big table in the dining room. I can see it from here. Why don’t you just go get a plate?”

“I was going to, but Uncle Luke is by the macaroni and cheese, and if I go over there when he’s there, he’s gonna ask me to go swimming in the pool or see if I want to play hide-and-seek again.”

“And you don’t like to do that stuff?”

“No, I like it. I just don’t like to do it with him.”

Instantly, I bristled, all my protective instincts hitting me like a wave. “How come?”

She shrugged. “If he finds me when I’m hiding, he tickles me or kisses me, and when he kisses me, he tries to put his tongue in my mouth, which is gross, and when he tickles me, he always pulls up my shirt.”

I nodded. “I wouldn’t like that either.”

“That’s not how me and my friends play at home, but he says that’s right.”

“It’s not right,” I assured her. “When you’re found, you’re supposed to race whoever finds you back to home base, and if you beat them, you get to hide again.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, nodding vigorously.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah.”

I took a breath, afraid to ask but needing to know. “Uncle Luke, did he touch your chest under your shirt?”

She shook her head. “No. I ran away.”

I hadn’t realized I’d been holding my breath. “Good.”

“He didn’t take off my pants either.”

That was my next question.

“Mom says the only people who can see me naked are her or my doctor, and she said she has to be with me if the doctor ever has to look at my private places.”

I smiled at her. “That’s correct.”

“Uncle Luke didn’t try and take off my pants, but I was afraid he was going to since he kept lifting my shirt.”

“So you stayed away from him.”

She nodded.

“That was very good thinking.”

Her face brightened. “It was?”

“Oh yes,” I assured her. “If you feel like something is wrong, you have to go with your gut. That’s important.”

“My gut?”

“Like how you feel inside. You have to listen to that and follow what you think is right. Run away from what you think is wrong.”

“Okay.”

“You did really good.”

She was beaming up at me.

“Now listen, how about you and me go get some food together, and you can show me which one is your Uncle Luke. Would that be okay?”

“You’ll stay by me?”

“Yes, ma’am, I will.”

She bit her bottom lip. “You’re kinda hurt, though.”

“That’s true. But lemme show you something, all right?” Watching me, I saw her eyes get big when I stood up. “You see? I was sitting down so you couldn’t tell, and you probably thought I was small.”

“You’re really big.”

“And it’s only this arm right here that’s hurt. All the rest of me is good.”

“Yeah. You’re bigger than Luke—I mean, Uncle Luke.”

Little slip there. “Luke isn’t your uncle, is he?” I asked as she stood up beside me, slipping her hand into mine as we walked toward the two enormous tables covered in food.

“No. He’s my Uncle Giles’s friend, and he said I should call him uncle because everybody does. I understand because my mom has friends like my Aunt Viv and my Aunt Marta who aren’t related to me but I call aunt anyway.”

“Sure, that makes sense.”

At the table, I took a plate and passed it to her, surveying the other kids: five in the pool and another three playing what

looked like tag. Four women sat by the pool, observing them; two men were racing the kids who were running around, while a man and a young boy were flying a kite. All the children were supervised except Stella.

“Hey, Star,” a man said, stepping up on the opposite side of the table and grabbing a plate, his entire focus on the little girl. “I’ve been waiting for you. I thought you were hungry?”

She nodded and looked up at me.

“Macaroni and cheese, right?” I asked her.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, here’s the spoon,” I said, passing it to her. “Pile it on.”

“Don’t eat those beans,” she said, pointing at the baked ones. “My mom says that most people make them with way too much brown sugar and they’ll give you the runs.”

I snorted. “Do you even know what the runs are?”

She gestured for me to bend down close, then whispered in my ear, “Squirtles.”

“Ah,” I said, straightening. “Well, we don’t want that.”

“No,” she agreed. “Do you want macaroni too?”

“I do. Just not as much as you,” I said, lifting my eyes from her to the man staring at me. “Hi. You must be Luke.”

“I...yes,” he said, smiling at me. “I didn’t get your name.”

“It’s Josiah Redeker,” I answered. “And Luke what?”

“Luke Stoker. How do you know my little star, Josiah?”

His little star? I hated that. He was already creeping me out. “Hey, Stel, do me a favor.”

She nodded.

“You see that blond guy over there?”

“The one with my Uncle Hay and Grampa?”

“Yeah. Just run over there and tell him I need him, okay?”

She didn't ask questions, just put her plate down and bolted. When she reached Bodhi, he did what he always did with kids—he crouched down, going immediately to their level. When she pointed and he saw me, I tipped my head for him to come.

“Josiah?” Luke asked, laughing. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I'm good,” I told him as Bodhi and Stella reached me.

I leaned my head to the right, and my partner, who knew exactly what I wanted, slipped by me and walked around to the other side of the table, beside Luke.

“Bodhi, this is Luke Stoker,” I stated, pulling my phone from the back pocket of my jeans, my eyes flicking to Stella and then back to him.

“Luke,” Bodhi announced like they were old friends, offering him his hand. “Hey. It's a pleasure to meet you.”

“Thank you. I—oh, you're Hayden's fiancé. Giles was telling me all about that,” he said, his gaze on Stella for a moment and then back on Bodhi. “He was saying that there will be a wedding come September. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Bodhi replied, still holding his hand.

I pressed the number for our Chicago office.

“What?” Ethan Sharpe answered irritably. “I thought you were on a forced vacation.”

“I need a warrant check on a Luke Stoker from...” I looked at him. “Where are you from, Luke?”

“What?” he gasped, trying to pull his hand from Bodhi's, who only tightened his grip.

“Tell him, Luke, or I will put you on the ground to get your wallet,” Bodhi warned him. “And it's gonna hurt when I do that.”

Luke swallowed hard. “Denver,” he barely managed to get out.

“Denver, Colorado,” I said to Sharpe.

“Would you please let go of my—”

“Quiet now, Luke,” Bodhi ordered him.

Sharpe asked, “Why are you and your partner running warrant checks on—”

“And can you check the sex offenders’ registry in that state for me?”

“Oh,” Sharpe said tightly. “Yes. Running now.”

I heard the keys clicking as Hayden moved up behind Bodhi.

“Hey, baby, what are you—”

“Would you mind taking Stella to the table right there so she can eat but still see us?” Bodhi suggested, smiling at him. “And she needs something to drink with her mound of macaroni and cheese,” he teased her.

Stella was beaming at Bodhi. Hayden looked confused, but then he looked at Stella and smiled, walking around the end of the table, by Bodhi, by Luke, and finally me before reaching the little girl.

“Come on, kiddo, you need a napkin.”

“But I don’t wanna leave Jed.”

“You’re not leaving me. You’re just gonna be right there, yeah?”

She looked like she might cry.

“I will not leave you, you understand? I will not,” I swore, my voice firm for her.

“You promise?”

“Cross my heart.”

“I’ve got no warrants,” Sharpe rushed out.

“Hold one sec,” I told him, then pointed at the table. Stella moved then, walking the six or so feet to the end of the eating table, taking a seat, and watching me as Hayden darted over to another table to get a juice box from a large bowl of cubed ice.

“Go,” I told Sharpe.

“No warrants, but yeah, sex offender. Two girls, one five, one seven, he served three years, been out for five, works at his father’s law firm in Denver, and it looks like he’s a title examiner there.”

“Okay.”

“What do you need?”

“Seattle PD to my location.”

“Done. What else?”

“What’s the requirement for sex offenders vacationing in Washington?”

“Lemme check,” he said, and there were more clicks of his keyboard. “They have to check in with local law enforcement within three business days if the stay in the place they’re visiting will be for ten days or more.”

“Thank you.”

“Course. Call me if you need me.”

Hitting the END button, I lifted my head as Bodhi walked Luke around the table to me, and then the three of us moved away from the table but stayed in sight of the little girl.

“So Luke here is a registered sex offender,” I told my partner.

“Okay,” Bodhi replied flatly, turning to Luke. “Think now before you answer, because what you say will either have you leaving here in a police car or an ambulance. It’s up to you.”

He nodded quickly.

“Did you molest Stella?”

“What? No, I would nev—”

He was cut off when Bodhi grabbed hold of his face, both cheeks, and squeezed tight. It hurt; I knew it did. Enough people who’d been on the receiving end of his painful grip had made complaints about it that never went anywhere.

“What did I say?” Bodhi asked, sounding utterly bored. “I will hurt you, Luke. I can even hurt you permanently, and it would be your word against mine.”

Luke just stared at him with wide eyes.

“I’m a federal marshal with a spotless service record. You are a piece-of-shit sex offender. Who do you think people will believe, Luke?”

“I didn’t touch her,” he whispered.

Bodhi let his face go, and Luke whimpered.

“Tell me again.”

“I promise you,” he said shakily. “I didn’t touch her—she doesn’t trust me. We were never alone.”

“But that’s not true,” I countered, keeping my voice low, my tone flat so I didn’t yell. “Stella said you kissed her and lifted up her shirt.”

“So you did, in fact, touch her.” Bodhi’s voice was strained, growing colder with every passing second.

“Yeah, I—but I didn’t—I mean, I didn’t do anything more.”

“Anything more,” I repeated.

“Only because there wasn’t time.” Bodhi clipped the words. “Because she didn’t trust you and the two of you were never alone.”

“I—”

“Yes?” Bodhi barked at him.

“Yes,” he whimpered.

“Listen,” Bodhi whispered, taking a breath. “Here’s what’s about to happen. We’re going to take a walk to your room together. Once we’re there, I will pack up your shit, and then we’ll go outside and wait for Seattle PD to get here. Do you understand?”

“But I—”

Bodhi gut-punched him so fast, so hard, he doubled over and would have dropped to the ground if Bodhi wasn't there to grab him.

“What’s going on?” asked a man in board shorts, an Aloha shirt, and a Panama hat, with the print on the shirt matching the one on the hat. “Bodhi, this is my buddy Luke Stoker. Is there some issue?”

“Yeah, Giles, there is,” Bodhi told him. “Your friend Luke is a sex offender, and since your kids are here along with everyone else’s, he’s gotta go.”

It wasn't just Giles; there were two women with him, ready to give Bodhi hell, to defend Luke, to stand up for him. But at Bodhi's clipped, cold words, their faces went from angry to stunned horror in seconds.

“No,” Giles rasped, sounding gutted. “That can't— I have daughters and—”

“It can, and it is,” Bodhi explained, calming, modulating his tone. “This is my partner, Josiah Redeker, and he just checked with our office in Chicago, so I'm gonna walk Luke to his room, get him packed up, and then deliver him into the hands of Seattle PD so they can drive him to the airport and make certain he gets on a plane.”

“Oh my God,” one of the women gasped, hand over her mouth.

“Did he touch one of my girls?” Giles asked, beginning to shake.

“No,” I told him, “because you're all here, around, watchful. Stella is the only one without any supervision.”

The dark-haired woman to Giles's left, her eyes went wide, but I saw the difference, the instant murderous intent. “He touched Stella?” she asked in a whisper.

“Yes,” I answered, “but because Stella is a very smart little girl who made sure to stay away from a predator, and who then came and talked to me, she stopped the escalation of abuse. I do need to speak to her father, though. What's his name?”

“It’s Keith, and yes, of course you need to speak to him. I’ll have him here in a few minutes,” she promised, pulling her cell phone from the pocket of her walking shorts before spinning around and heading outside.

Luke had his head down and would not lift it even when Bodhi asked if he was going to give him any trouble.

“No,” he replied quickly.

Bodhi looked up at me and mouthed the words *I don’t have cuffs*.

I shook my head because no, I hadn’t packed mine either. This wasn’t some kind of law-enforcement procedural retreat we were on. It was supposed to be a vacation.

“Wait,” I said, darting over to where Stella was watching everything, sitting next to Hayden, eating. “Hey, is it okay if you stay here with your Uncle Hayden while I go with my partner to pack up Luke?”

Her big brown eyes were locked on my face. “He’s gonna be mad at me now. He said if I didn’t play with him, he’d play with Margo.”

Hayden, whom she wasn’t focused on, put his hand over his mouth.

“Well,” I began, smiling at her, “because you were so brave and talked to me, Stella, Luke is going home to his house and you won’t see him anymore.”

“Really?” She sounded so cautiously hopeful, it was heartbreaking. “He’s going home?”

“Yes, he is.”

She turned to Hayden then, who instantly dropped his hand and smiled at his niece. “You won’t let him come anymore?”

“No, honey,” he said, and though his voice was rough, it sounded strong. “He won’t come here again. Not ever.”

“Will you stay with me while Jed goes with his partner?”

“I will not move from this spot,” he assured her, looking up at me.

“Thank you, Uncle Hay.”

He nodded, but his eyes narrowed like he was in pain.

“Hey,” I said to Stella, “do you have a cell phone with your mom’s number in it that I can borrow and call her?”

She had it in her pocket, a cute flip phone covered with an inordinate number of shiny jewels.

“Wow,” I teased her, taking it slowly, putting it on for her benefit. “This is fancy.”

Instant glare from her. “I bet it’s nicer than yours.”

“It’s nicer than everybody’s,” I baited her, and she suddenly giggled, which was the best sound I’d heard all day. “I’ll be right back.”

Before I could go, she got up and slammed into me, hugging me as hard as she could. And yes, I was hurt, but not hurt enough to stop a scared seven-year-old from loving on me.

After putting my hand on her back, leaning over and reassuring her that she was going to be all right, I had her sit back down next to Hayden and then joined Bodhi as all the adults converged on Stella.

Bodhi led the way, his grip tight on Luke’s bicep, the hold the uncomfortable one we all knew how to do with dangerous fugitives. And not that Luke was scary or deadly. Bodhi simply hated him and what he’d done. I followed behind them, scrolling through the recent calls on Stella’s phone, finding her mom’s number easily.

“Hi, bunny,” was the warm greeting from her mother. “Are ya bored already? I can put more books on your phone.”

There was no way to begin without scaring the hell out of her. If I said who I was—terror. If I explained what happened—the same. I went with my go-to. “Ma’am, let me begin by saying your daughter is fine. She was not hurt.”

Catch of breath. “Oh my God, who—”

“My name is Josiah Redeker, but please call me Jed, and Stella loaned me her phone so I could call you.”

She was on the verge of tears; I could hear it in her voice. “Who are you?”

“I am a deputy US marshal, and I’m staying with your former in-laws at their home on Mercer Island. There’s been a situation, but again, your daughter was not hurt. She’s very smart, and she trusted me to help her.”

Deep breath in, deep breath out, trying to keep herself calm. I appreciated the fact that she was working very hard not to fall apart.

“Ready?” I asked gently.

“Yes, I’m ready.”

I explained from the beginning as Bodhi asked Luke which room was his, and when he pointed, the three of us went there. I didn’t miss the fact that the room we passed on the right had toys in it, a Wonder Woman and Little Mermaid backpack, and several Barbies scattered on the floor.

Bodhi had Luke sit on his bed with his hands in his lap before he pulled his phone from his back pocket and began making a video record of packing Luke up. He grabbed the rolling suitcase from the closet and started shoving things in. He wasn’t careful, just wrenched clothes off hangers, balled them up, and threw them in. Everything in the en-suite bathroom went into the plastic bags in the drawers and into the suitcase as well. Once that was done, Bodhi went to the nightstand, picked up Luke’s wallet, removed his driver’s license, paused the video to take a picture of it, and then started recording again. We needed the picture of the physical ID so we could add it to the file Sharpe was compiling. Always best to show the court, if needed, that we weren’t just going on what we saw on a screen but also what we had in front of us. Always best to have that extra layer of corroboration.

“You’re certain he didn’t...violate her,” Stella’s mother, Meredith Goldman—she’d gone back to her maiden name—

asked me for the third time in minutes. She must've had a million horrors running through her mind, all of them worse than the ones before.

“He kissed her with an open mouth, he tickled her under her shirt, but that’s the extent of what occurred. And if you heard how Stella and I conversed, you’d understand she trusted me enough to relate it all to me.”

“Yes, I—she’s a keen judge of character.”

“Do you have joint custody?”

“Yes, but I have physical custody because she lives with me.”

“Okay.”

“I need to speak to my daughter, please, Jed.”

“Of course. My partner and I are walking Luke Stoker to the door, where Seattle PD will take him into custody, and I’ll give her the phone on my way there.”

Shuddering breath, and then I heard the soft sobs.

“She’s okay. I even teased her about her really frou-frou phone.”

She laughed then, and it was the second-best sound I’d heard all day.

“Ready?” I asked Bodhi.

Nod from him as he did a final sweep of the room, still recording, and then shut it off. I took the tissue he passed me, wrapped it around the handle of the rolling suitcase, and followed them back down the hall.

Back in the enormous great room, I realized that everyone was now inside. There was a man who I was guessing was Keith, Stella’s father, crouched down beside her, hugging her, and she had her head on his shoulder, hugging him back. A woman in a sequined pink bikini was standing behind him with a sheer wrap around her.

“Jed,” Stella announced, lifting her head up off her father’s shoulder, and beaming at me.

He stood up and offered me his hand. “Keith Burdine, Stella’s father.”

“I’ve only got one hand at the moment, sorry,” I told him, passing Stella back her phone. “Your mom wants to talk to you, okay?”

She nodded and answered cheerfully. “Hi, Mommy.”

I saw the defeat on her father’s face, knowing that his vacation with his daughter was over. Taking the hand he was still holding out, I startled him, and he looked quickly from Stella to me.

“Why didn’t she tell me?”

“I suspect she didn’t want to ruin your time with Vanessa,” I said, glancing at the young woman. “She’s a very considerate child.”

He turned to his girlfriend, who covered her face with her hands. “I just wanted some time alone with you. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“She didn’t,” I agreed. “And Stella’s a smart cookie, so she knew to find an adult, and once she saw the badge, she was good.”

The front door opened then, and two uniformed officers and one plainclothes one walked into the room. Bodhi lifted his hand to direct them, and they all reached us quickly.

“Deputy US Marshal Josiah Redeker,” I said, then tipped my head at Bodhi. “And Deputy US Marshal Bodhi Callahan, out of the Northern District of Illinois.”

The woman without the uniform introduced herself as Detective Naomi Dawes, and then the officers with her, Torres and Phelps. She pulled up paperwork on her tablet as Torres cuffed Luke. There was something about the cuffs going on that made me feel so much better. I would have to remember to pack mine going forward.

“Which one is the father?” Dawes asked.

I introduced her to Keith.

Torres escorted Luke out of the house, and Phelps, who had latex gloves on, took possession of the rolling suitcase from me. I explained, for their report, that Bodhi's fingerprints would be there along with Luke's but not mine. Phelps thanked me.

"Thank you, Marshals," Torres said when he returned. "We don't want sexual predators in our city, so we thank you for finding him so we can put him on a plane."

"Thank you for your prompt response."

Bodhi took a breath once they were escorting Luke out of the house. "I always feel better once the cuffs are on."

"I was just thinkin' the same thing."

He leaned in, slipped a hand around the side of my neck and held me there a moment, smiling at me before he gently patted my cheek and let me go. "Now I could use a beer."

"Me too, and I'm hungry."

Stella was there suddenly between us, slipping her hands in each of ours. "Are you gonna eat now?"

"Yes," Bodhi told her. "But I bet that plate of macaroni and cheese you made Jed is cold now, though, yeah? We have to put it in the microwave."

She shook her head. "It's gone already. The people who bring the food took it. You both have to make new ones."

"Okay, good," Bodhi said, pointing at something white. "What is that?"

"Ambrosia salad," she told him. "My mom says you should never eat that if it's not in the refrigerator or is sitting in a bowl of ice because you could get sick."

"What kind of sick?"

"Squirtles," I whispered to him.

"Well, that sounds horrible."

Stella and I both laughed.

SIX

An hour later, Stella was running around like a crazy person, barefoot, in shorts and a crop top, no longer in her jeans and tennis shoes and a long-sleeve shirt.

“That’s another indicator,” Bodhi explained to Keith, who was sitting next to Hayden, Davis, and Hayden’s parents—Hayden Burdine the Second, who wanted me to call him Hank—apparently everyone did, which, in my opinion, made things easier—and his wife, Emily. Hayden’s sisters, Josette and Angela, sat with us too, on the couches around a coffee table. Hayden’s brother Giles had to take a Xanax and was now outside on a chaise with a cool compress over his eyes, while two of his cousins watched the kids. “Stella wanted to cover her body while Luke was here, but now she’s comfortable because she trusts all of you.”

Keith’s forehead was in his hand, and Angela, who had called him, was glaring, clearly unhappy with him, while Josette was rubbing his back.

There were a lot of questions, which made sense, and Bodhi was patiently going over them, as he was always better at that part than me. He massaged things, had more finesse than me, bluntness being my cross to bear. Watching Stella screaming with excitement as she played with her cousins was a wonderful sight to behold. There was a day-and-night difference in her.

“That’s why she locked her door,” Emily said, looking sad. “I got on her about that, and now I feel terrible.”

Bodhi shook his head. “No. She didn’t tell you. There was no way for you to know. But it says a lot that her conviction was so strong, she risked your anger for her own safety. Most seven-year-olds aren’t so self-assured,” he told Keith. “You and Meredith are good parents.”

“Meredith certainly is,” Angela snapped.

“Oh, fuck off,” Keith railed at her, getting up and walking around the other side of the couch. “You don’t think I feel like shit enough?”

“You get to see her twice a year, Keith. Once in the summer, once at Christmas, and when you do, you bring your fuckin’ bimbo along instead of making your kid your entire focus? What the hell is that?” she shouted, getting up to face him. “Did you hear her tell that nice lady detective that if she didn’t play with him, he was gonna play with Margo? That’s my kid!” she roared at him. “Your daughter was protecting her cousin while you were out on the fucking lake with your fucking whore!”

“Giles is the one who brought him here. Why isn’t he in trouble?” he bellowed back.

“Giles had no goddamn clue, but you know what? Giles fuckin’ watches his kids! So does Josie, and so do I! You were the only one who wasn’t here, so guess which kid the sexual predator went after.”

It was really loud, and everyone was up and on their feet, more husbands and wives coming inside, so I stood and walked outside in the sun as all the kids dove into the pool. Everyone was screaming, and no one was making sure nobody was drowning. In their defense, though, all the kids were swimming underwater, doing laps, racing, and they were all like fish. I was impressed. I couldn’t swim at all when I was their general age.

“Jed! Are you watching?” Stella yelled.

“I’m watchin’,” I assured her, moving an Adirondack chair close to the edge so I could see her underwater.

Pretty soon all the kids were calling my name, and then they were throwing the beach balls out of the pool and I had to run and get them and throw them back in. They all squealed when I told them they had better look out for sharks.

“There are no sharks in a pool,” explained Thomas, very worldly and wise at six—he told me how old he was right off the bat.

“What if the bottom breaks open and a shark gets in?”

He shook his head like I was stupid. “Sharks can’t be in chlorine or fresh water. Everybody knows that.”

“Chlorine, I’ll give you, but you’re wrong about fresh water. Bull sharks can live in rivers and lakes. Look it up.”

He got out of the water and consulted his tablet; eight other kids were hanging on to the side of the pool, waiting for whatever he was going to say.

“What’s happening?” Angela asked as she joined me.

“Shhh,” I hushed her. “Thomas is looking something up.”

She sighed deeply and took hold of my bicep. “Thank you again, Jed, for checking on everyone. I promise that tomorrow you can relax and be off kid duty.”

I shrugged. “They’re all right. Which ones are yours, Angela?”

“Call me Angie, and Thomas is mine,” she replied, chuckling. “He was well named, as he doubts everything and never takes a word I say as gospel. Brandon, right there, who’s five, and my baby, Margo, who’s four.”

“No shit? Four?”

She nodded quickly.

“Man, she swims amazing for only being four.”

“Yes,” she agreed, dissolving into tears and leaning into me.

I put an arm around her and pulled her close. “Listen, he’s gone, and let’s face it, you were out here, watching, I saw you.

And you weren't doing it because you thought some piece of filth like Luke Stoker was here and you had to protect your kids from him, but just because pool, water, lakefront, stupid stone benches they could run into and—”

“I know,” she gasped, lifting her head, her gaze locking on mine. “The hell is with all the stone shit?”

I grinned at her. “Plus, I figure you like them, even though Thomas is really annoying,” I said, raising my voice on purpose so her son could hear.

He growled at me, which was adorable, and then groaned as he lifted his head.

“Well?” I baited him.

“Yeah, okay, fine. You're right. They can live in fresh water, and they've even found some in the Mississippi River.”

“Told you.”

“But the pool won't crack,” he said arrogantly.

“You're a construction engineer, are you?”

He crossed his little arms and scowled at me.

“I would check for any fissures, because we don't know what's in that lake.”

They all turned and looked at the water.

“Oh my God, you're so bad.” Angela laughed, stepping free but taking hold of my hand. “I can't wait until my husband gets here tonight so he can meet you.”

“I look forward to meeting him as well.”

“I don't wanna go waterskiing anymore,” Stella announced.

“That's good thinking,” I said, and all the kids agreed, even Thomas.

I WAS FINALLY GETTING some lunch, having an enormous roast-beef sandwich and a beer with an ibuprofen chaser.

“You can’t have that,” was the first thing Bodhi said when he took a seat beside me on the patio, his own plate all vegan, and I was guessing, from the looks of the salt on the rim, having a margarita to wash it all down.

“Just let it go,” I told him. “How many times have you watched me have a drink with a painkiller chaser?”

He grunted because yes, there were far too many to count.

“Just roll with it,” I suggested and then saw him smile. “What?”

“As usual, everybody loves you.”

“Well,” I said with a shrug, “that’s just gonna happen this time.”

“Every time,” he assured me.

“That’s the Redeker charm at work,” I teased him, waggling my eyebrows, and watched as he had a sip of the margarita, made a face like he’d drunk poison, and put it down. “No?”

“I have no idea what that’s supposed to be, but it’s certainly *not* a margarita.”

I lifted my bottle of Barrel-Aged Abraxas that I loved but could never get at home. “Take advantage of your soon-to-be father-in-law’s refrigerator in his wine room,” I suggested. “Seriously. He’s got some good stuff down there.”

“We’re all supposed to be going to a party tonight,” he informed me.

I scoffed. “Not me, buddy. I’ve had enough excitement for one day.”

“I figured,” he said, reaching out to put a hand on my knee before taking another sip of the margarita. “Oh God.”

“What, did you forget it was bad?” I chuckled. “Push it way over there.”

The sound of him laughing with me, I never got tired of.

WE WERE OUTSIDE, under the shade, on a double chaise big enough for both of us, just drinking beer and talking about stupid things like we used to before he got engaged and I worried I'd ruined my life by not saying something. It was so comfortable, I dozed off. When I woke up, Bodhi was asleep beside me with his head on my good shoulder, and I turned and pressed my face into his hair for just a second before yawning. I was about to stretch when I realized that Stella had crashed on my other side, turned away, her back pressed to the length of my right leg.

“You're both really lucky I don't have to pee,” I told them.

After a few minutes, I realized the sky was cloudy and dark and some of the lights had come on. I always enjoyed the feel of the air and the smell of it right before rain.

Moments later, Hayden, his father, and Keith came and carried chairs over to sit near us. They all had drinks, but I still felt like I was in the middle of an intervention.

“Jed,” Hank greeted me with a smile. “I wanted to see if you might change your mind about this evening's festivities.”

“Sorry?”

Hayden cleared his throat. “I'd really like it if you would come out with us tonight.”

“Why's that?”

He took a breath. “Because if you don't, then Bodhi won't, and this is our last time with the whole family before the wedding.”

I was quiet.

“I mean, tomorrow we're all playing golf and—”

“Who's playing golf?”

“Me, my father, Davis, Bodhi, you, all of us.”

I nodded. “I can't play golf, right?”

“Oh no, I know. But you can sit in the golf cart and drink with the rest of us.”

“I won’t be doing that,” I informed him, “because I’m supposed to be resting, since I was shot and all.”

They were all silent, staring, like perhaps I’d just reminded them.

“Of course,” Hank said after a moment. “The house is yours, Jed. You just relax.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And I’m sure we can talk Bodhi into coming along with ___”

But he shifted then, curling into me, arm sliding around my waist, face pressed into the side of my neck, leg over both of mine. He was so comfortable in my space, as I was in his, but still, it had to have looked odd from Hayden’s perspective.

It felt tense until Stella mewled beside me, jerking in her sleep. Gently, I put a hand in her short black curls, scratching her scalp until she quieted.

“Bodhi hasn’t slept in days, and I think Stella’s still spooked.”

“Yes,” Hank agreed, glancing at his son. “Perhaps we’ll just have tonight’s meal catered and have a game night. We can go out tomorrow. I’m sure Zach will be tired from his flight out anyway, so that will be good.”

“He’s Angie’s husband?”

“He is, yes,” Hank said with a smile. “He normally can’t take time off to see us, but Angie insisted once everything happened.”

I looked at him. “I really like her.”

His smile lit his face. “She’s quite fond of you as well.”

The silence was odd, just ticking by. When Emily joined us, everyone was so happy to see her.

“So I assume we’re staying in tonight instead of going out,” she announced, sitting down, bringing me a margarita. “I think we should just have a veg night instead of doing anything, don’t you all agree?”

I nodded and took a sip of the margarita, which was amazing. She must have noted the surprise on my face because she snorted out a laugh. “You were worried.”

“Bodhi had one earlier,” I said as he turned over, getting comfortable, wedging himself up against me, just as Stella was on the other side, but no longer worrying anyone with the closeness. And yes, he was still plastered to my side, but not entangled like we were lovers. “And he said it wasn’t great.”

“Oh, he’s right, they were terrible,” she agreed, shaking her head. “The catering company brought a bartender, and he was *not* good.”

“Did you make these?”

She nodded.

“Outstanding,” I praised her.

“Thank you,” she replied, beaming. “Now tell me all about yourself, Jed. Bodhi’s a bit tight-lipped when it comes to you.”

“Not much to tell.”

“But you’ve been partners quite a long time.”

“We have. Nearly six years now.”

“And I feel you have a bit of shorthand going between you two. Do you?”

“No,” I lied, thinking that Hayden didn’t want to hear that. “Not any more so than any other team.”

“Well, then,” she said with a cackle. “If that’s true, then the two of you should be no challenge for me and Hank.”

I glanced at her husband, and he wagged his eyebrows at me. “Pictionary, my boy,” he said, though I was far older than all the other men but him. “We’re going to murder you.”

“I have no doubt,” I agreed.

DINNER WAS FINE, barbecue with more fixings than I’d ever had in my life. Afterward, the kids went to watch movies and

the adults stayed in the great room to split up into teams and play games.

I was tired, so I ended up heading back to my room. On the way there, Stella saw me, grabbed my hand, and took me down the stairs to the basement, where there was a popcorn machine with butter and everything you could want on it, along with juice boxes and s'mores.

"You're all gonna get diabetes," I told her.

"Is that bad?" Stella wanted to know.

My phone rang, and it was Bodhi on a FaceTime call. "I thought you were taking another nap."

"No, I'm watching—what am I watching?"

"*Encanto*," Brandon told me.

"I'm watching *Encanto*."

"I see. Well, I have to draw Usain Bolt. Thoughts?"

"Where are you?"

"In the kitchen pantry."

"Why not," I teased him.

"Just, c'mon," he urged me.

"Draw the flag of Jamaica and a lightning bolt."

"Ah. Good. Thanks," he said and hung up.

Five minutes later he came downstairs with a bottle of water, pain meds, and a creamsicle.

"Oh, you're a nice man," I said playfully.

He took the chair beside me, I passed him the fresh popcorn Stella had just made me, and I got the creamsicle.

"It's good, right?" she asked him from the other side of me.

"It is. You did a good job," he told her.

She shrugged. "It's kinda easy, but you can't overfill it, and you hafta put the butter in from the mini fridge. Last time

Uncle Hayden forgot to take the wrapper off the stick of butter,” she said, rolling her eyes. “There was a fire, and Grampa had to get a new machine.”

“Rookie move,” he told her.

“Yep,” she agreed, and it was a really good impression of my voice.

Encanto was good, and *Coco*, after that, as well.

“Okay,” I announced loudly, putting the TV on the home screen since I had the clicker. “It’s a little after nine, so everybody has to go wash their faces, brush their teeth, change into their jammies, and we’ll watch one more movie before you hafta go to bed.”

They were instantly up and moving, running by in a stream of children as Angie, Keith, and a man I didn’t know walked into the room.

“You two should come upstairs,” Angie suggested, and I noted she was holding the stranger’s hand as she led him over to me. “Jed, this is my husband, Zach. Zach, this is Josiah Redeker, and you remember Bodhi from New Year’s in Vail.”

“Oh yeah,” he said, grinning at Bodhi but offering me his hand. “Thank you so much, Jed, for looking out for my kids. I really appreciate you.”

“You’re so welcome,” I said, clasping the offered hand.

He went after his kids then, and I could hear their happy shouts of *Daddy* because they hadn’t noticed him when they ran by.

“Everything’s gonna be all right,” I assured Angie.

“Thank you,” she said, taking a deep breath so she wouldn’t cry.

Once I was sitting, Angie asked me about the severity of my injury, and I told her it wasn’t that bad as Bodhi cleared his throat. Before she could ask him a question, the kids came back, ready to rush by me.

“Oh no, no, no,” I told them. “Line up so I can check you out.”

Quickly, they got in a row with Stella first.

“Show me the face,” I ordered.

She leaned in close, pushed her curly hair back from her eyes, turned her head left and right, and then waited. They had all had showers after the pool, so they were basically clean. I just wanted any chocolate off, along with the popcorn remnants.

“Blow on my face. I’m checking breath.”

She did, and then I asked her to smile for me, which she did, crazily, cracking me up.

“Fine, you pass,” I grumbled, and she clapped her hands and took the seat beside me.

“Honey, do you want to come upstairs and watch a movie with me?” her father asked hopefully. “That’d be fun, huh? And that way you’d already be in bed if you fell asleep.”

“No,” she said flatly like little kids did, not worried about your feelings at all, just spitting out their answer. “I wanna stay here with everyone else and Jed and Bodhi.”

“Yes, but Bodhi has to go back and help his team and—”

“No he doesn’t. He’ll stay here with Jed, and Jed won’t leave me.”

The insinuation was clear. And it was probably a bit of him going out on the lake earlier with Vanessa, and had even more to do with her parents’ divorce and that she lived with her mother and saw her father so seldom. I had to wonder who left whom. If I had joint custody of a child, I would have never let them go out of state.

Earlier, after a long talk with Stella and then with Meredith, it was decided that instead of Keith flying his daughter home, where he would spend the rest of their vacation together, with him staying in a hotel in the city, that Meredith would fly out that evening and would be there the following morning. She would stay here with him and his

parents and Stella. The little girl wanted to remain at the house and have fun with her cousins and swim and show everyone what a champ she was at hide-and-seek when she wasn't too scared to play. The thing was, she wanted both her parents, and while normally that wasn't possible, at the moment no one was going to say no to her. Apparently, she was already seeing a therapist because of the divorce, and now the situation with Stoker would be added. But all of it, her whole life, was being processed by a little girl whose base security had been shaken. And her father, who was not the villain, was being cast in the role of an uncaring parent, which was not the case. He'd been distracted, not indifferent. But Stella was seven. She didn't process like an adult. Me and Bodhi, to her, equaled safety. Until her mother showed up tomorrow, we were it.

“Okay, then,” Keith agreed, looking a bit bereft, and left.

“I'm ready,” Thomas demanded, sounding annoyed since he'd been kept waiting.

This kid. “You call that clean?”

“I'm squeaky,” he assured me.

He passed, and then went and took a seat next to Bodhi. Brandon's breath was not good, so he had a do-over. Margo did a good job, but her right eye was red.

“Sir,” I said to Zach, “this child has soap in her eye. Would you please remedy that and then return this person so they may be reinspected?”

“Yessir,” he said, chuckling, scooping up his daughter and tickling her, which made her squeal with delight as he carried her out of the room.

“How many kids do you have, Jed?” Angie asked me, returning with Brandon, who, she reported, had in fact brushed his teeth that time.

“What? None.”

“You have no kids?”

I shook my head.

“Huh.”

“He has a little sister,” Bodhi told her. “And he practically raised her.”

“Oh, that’s what it is.”

When we were growing up on the ranch, my Aunt Roz was really good to us, but maternal she was not. I had to mother Lisa, and I had. It was how I was made, a bit parental, which was why I had been the person new deputies always got paired with. It was how I originally got Bodhi. The difference was, he stuck. I’d never met another person, ever, who soothed me just by being around. He felt like home, and that had been the case from the beginning. From the first day we met, it was like, oh, there you are. Old friends, not new ones. Too bad I’d missed that it could have been more, but that was okay because I knew in my heart he deserved far better than me. And also—and the thought was really petty when you got down to it, but honestly—as my partner, he would always spend more time with me than anyone else. No way around that. Hayden would never be rid of me.

Checking the rest of the kids, telling them they all passed, I ordered them to grab a blanket and a pillow and get back to their seats. The chairs were all recliners, and Bodhi and I got up and reclined them all, made sure everyone was situated, and if they needed to be propped up higher, we got them more pillows so they could see before we started the next movie. It was supposed to be *Bambi*. I gave that a hard no, and we ended up watching *Zootopia*, which I didn’t mind since it had a law-enforcement component. I had watched it with Lisa’s kids years ago.

“You’re really going to stay down here and watch this movie with the kids?” Angie seemed utterly stunned over this development.

“Yeah, why not?”

“But...” She pointed up. “Drinks and snacks and game night.”

Zach scoffed. “Not game night. That’s not gonna lure anyone away.”

She looked from me to Bodhi and back. “I just don’t want to take advantage.”

“Beat it,” I told her, and she grabbed hold of her husband’s hand and left.

“What’s wrong with you?” Bodhi asked once the movie started.

“Nothing. Be quiet. Backstory is important.”

Leaning sideways in his chair, he gestured to me. I met him halfway. “What?”

“Listen, Stella and her dad, that’s not your crap to fix, yeah?”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t know, not in your heart. I know you, and I know that look on your face, and I know what you’re thinking.”

“Lotta *knowing* in there.”

“Be serious.”

“I am.”

“I understand precisely what’s going on in your head.”

“You do not.”

He scoffed. “You’re thinking, I could fix this. How can I fix this?”

It *was* possible I was thinking about that. And about him because, of course, I always thought about him.

“He’s her dad,” Bodhi reminded me, shooting me a look meant to make me use my brain. “She won’t feel like this forever. She’s seven. It’s just, at the moment, her whole life was shaken in a horrible way for several days, and then you show up and voilà, all fixed up. I mean, c’mon, Jed. You saw her, you listened, give her a minute to work it all out.”

“I get it. You know I do.”

“You do and don’t, because you’re the king of downplaying the whole knight-in-shining-armor thing. I don’t

understand why you do that, but you always do.”

“Watch the movie.”

“Really?” He shot me a look. “Orders?”

I groaned.

“To stop me from talking and making you feel uncomfortable?”

God, I hoped so. “Maybe just this once? As a favor?”

He was quiet for a moment, which was a surprise.

“I really missed being your partner,” he said but didn’t look at me, and I knew that because I checked to see if he was.

“Me too,” I murmured, not turning to him. “It’s not good without you.”

He grunted, smug and self-satisfied, and I would have hit him if I’d had the energy. When I was fading in and out, Bodhi said that, much like Judy Hopps, he too needed a pen and recording device all in one. He also liked the look of the carrot one she had.

“You’re a child,” I assured him. “You have your phone for that. You can write on it *and* record conversations.”

“Yeah, but the carrot has pizzazz.”

I glanced at Stella, who looked as concerned as I felt.

The movie went on, and I fell asleep. I woke up to parents coming down and picking up dead-to-the-world children out of chairs. Stella, of course, was not asleep, and when I turned to her, she smiled at me.

“Aren’t you tired?”

She squinted at me. “Why would I be tired?”

“Mark my words, one day you’ll really want to go to bed early and take naps.”

The look I got, like I was nuts, made me smile even though I was trying to glare at her.

“This was so wonderful of you both,” Giles’s wife, Shae, said, moving my attention from Stella as she picked up her middle daughter, Tilly. “It was so nice to not have to worry and know they’re safe.”

“Well, your kid is very sweet,” I told her. “Tilly made sure the blanket covered my feet so I wouldn’t be cold.”

Her tears came fast, because really, it had been a strange day for everyone. She bent down with Tilly in her arms and kissed my forehead. Giles was behind her, carrying his youngest girl, Bedelia, and the oldest, Katherine, who liked to be called Kat.

Giles said, “Jed, I—”

“Go to bed, man. Tomorrow will be a better day.”

After a moment, he nodded and left.

I turned to Bodhi. “For the record, I don’t golf.”

He was sort of half-awake, so he just stared at me a moment. “What?”

“Apparently everyone is going golfing tomorrow, and I don’t do that.”

“So? I don’t do that either.”

“But you always expect me to go with you when you do stupid stuff.”

“Like?”

I glared at him. “Oh, I dunno, the fuh—” There were kids too close that could hear, so I amended, “The time we had to take those two guys to Lexington, Kentucky, and you thought it would be a great idea to go to Mammoth Cave after.”

He huffed out a breath. “Whatever. If that lady hadn’t passed out when we were going through those really tight spaces, it would have been fine.”

Three hundred feet underground, carrying another human being, was not my idea of a good time. “The Knott’s Berry Farm thing in California,” I reminded him.

“That was how we found out you had an inner-ear infection after you did all that barfing,” he said, trying not to laugh. “I stand by that decision.”

I groaned as more people came for their kids. When they were all collected except Stella, the three of us went upstairs to find Hayden, Davis, Hayden’s folks, and Keith in the kitchen.

“Okay, kid, time to go to bed,” I told Stella.

Instant panic, you could see it on her face. Logically, she knew Stoker was gone, but she was tired now, even though she wouldn’t admit it, and her anxiety was in full control.

“You know,” I said, gesturing for Keith, “I bet your dad would let you sleep in his room with him tonight if you wanted.”

She immediately turned to him.

He rushed over and went down on one knee next to his girl. “That’s what I was talking about earlier. We should have a sleepover.”

Studying his face for a moment, she slowly leaned into him, wrapping her little arms around his neck and squeezing.

I saw him shudder, he was so happy.

“Okay, so we’ll see ya in the morning,” I said, prodding him to move, and when Keith looked up at me, I nodded.

He stood up with Stella in his arms, and she leaned so she could hug me. I was gentle hugging her back, and then they left.

“You’ll be here tomorrow, right, Jed? To meet my mom?” she called back to me.

“I will. Now zip it and go to bed.”

She was giggling as Keith walked her out of the kitchen.

“Was your plan really to golf tomorrow?” Bodhi asked Hayden as he joined us at the kitchen counter.

“Well, yes. We all love it, and Dad got us spots at the club for—”

“And everybody is doing that?”

“Well, no, Josette and Angie are going to Pike Place Market and—”

“That sounds fun,” I told them.

Angie walked in and filled a tumbler with water.

“Hey, can I come along to Pike Place Market tomorrow?”

“Of course,” she said, chuckling, “but what about golfing?”

“I have an injured wing,” I reminded her.

“True. I mean, what would you do out there, sit in the golf cart and drink?” she said like the idea of that was really stupid.

“Right?” I said, glancing at Hayden.

“Count me in,” Bodhi told her. “I don’t golf either.”

“That’s true,” I seconded. “Tennis is his sport. And surfing, which he never does anymore.”

He shrugged.

“You play tennis?” Hayden asked him. “You’ve never said, and we have a court here. We should play.”

Bodhi sort of grimaced.

“I’ll go easy on you, I promise.”

I snickered and leaned over to check my phone.

Hayden said, “I would never just take him out there and be mean, Jed. That’s not me.”

He sounded annoyed, and I turned to apologize, but Bodhi put his hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently.

“That’s not what he meant,” Bodhi told him. “I don’t play because first, I get way too competitive. It’s like Jed when he plays chess.”

“You play chess?” Hayden seemed surprised, and I had the momentary desire to punch him.

“And second, I was a Division One All-American tennis player.”

“What?”

Bodhi shrugged.

“You were?”

He nodded. “I went to UCLA on a tennis scholarship.”

“You could have gone pro?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why didn’t—”

“Deputy US Marshal,” Bodhi said, smiling. “That was my dream.”

“Why?” Hank asked him.

“Justice. Integrity. Service,” he said, quoting the marshal creed.

Hayden sighed deeply. “You’re always going to be a marshal, aren’t you.”

“Yeah,” he said with that grin of his that made his eyes shine. “So that job at your law firm, the private investigator one? That’s not me. And I definitely don’t want to sit behind a desk.”

“I could sit behind a desk,” I chimed in.

He turned to me. “The hell you say.”

“Like Ian?”

His laugh in my face made me growl. “We both know Ian would rather be chasing down bad guys and dodging bullets.”

“I’m too old,” I whined.

“You just had a shoot-out with what, twelve guys, or however many there were, in a confined space and killed them all, just you and Crouse.”

Everyone was staring at me.

“That’s not what I’m talk—”

“It was on the news,” Bodhi told them.

Angie walked over to stand beside me and googled Chicago and marshals on her phone, and of course, it was the first thing that came up. “Holy shit, Jed, this is how you hurt your shoulder?”

I shot Bodhi a look that should have killed him dead on the spot.

“It says fifteen men here, Jed, just you and Special Agent Spencer Crouse.”

“They make things up in the press.”

“Just shut up and accept some praise for getting the bad guys,” Bodhi snapped at me.

“And Burian Petrov?” Angie gasped, and her eyes filled fast.

“What the hell’s the matter with you?”

She caught her breath and straightened up from her slouch next to me on the island. “My friend Gin Alstead, she was there in Chicago with her husband a year ago, and she was killed by Burian Petrov when he was leaving a hotel with some of his people. He was shooting at someone else, but...he got her.”

“Oh shit, I’m so sorry,” I soothed her, straightening up and lifting my good arm.

She leaned in, careful not to hurt me, and wrapped me tightly in her arms. “We had our kids at the same time, we took them to school together, we both dealt with feeling like shit for going back to work and leaving them, and we just—we leaned on each other like sisters.”

I stayed quiet, letting her tell me the story.

“She was amazing, Jed, you would have—everyone just loved her.”

Gently, I gave her a little squeeze.

“She went to Chicago for the weekend to surprise her husband who was there on a business trip, and instead, he

ended up identifying her body. He was so broken, he moved home to live with his folks, took his kids away from Gin's folks and me and my kids and all our friends... And I get it, I totally do, he needed his family, but there was a sense of community that we lost, and my kids still miss hers, and these people die in shoot-outs... No one thinks about the collateral damage."

Zach walked into the room then, checking, I was sure, to see what was taking his wife so long getting water.

Angie sniffled and used one hand to wipe at her eyes. "Jed caught Burian Petrov in Chicago this last Monday. That's why he's hurt."

"Are you kidding?" His eyes narrowed, and I understood that he didn't want any of us to see him cry.

She shook her head.

Zach crossed the room quickly and took hold of my good shoulder. "You and your partner here saved my kids, and now you get justice for a friend. What's next?"

"We have big plans for tomorrow," Bodhi apprised him, and everyone laughed.

SEVEN

Meredith arrived in the morning when I was barely awake and having coffee in the kitchen. I had planned to sleep in, but Stella slipped into my room around six thirty to tell me she was going to make pancakes. Since I didn't know if that was actually in her wheelhouse, I rolled out of bed, sent her to the kitchen, peed, and then staggered out there. It was her and me only, and I asked her where her father was.

“Snoring in bed. I didn't notice until this morning.”

She kept chatting while I looked for what I needed to make coffee. It was a chef's kitchen, really fancy, with lots of cupboards and drawers and accessories, but eventually I found a coffee machine and bags of whole beans. I missed my Keurig—and I could have one, even though Bodhi had disapproved, because I recycled the pods.

Stella found me the grinder, and once that was done, we hunted for filters, found some, and I finally got the coffee going.

“Thank God,” I groaned when I could smell it brewing.

Stella then started making the pancakes, and really, she was much better at measuring ingredients than I was—and was a disciple of the clean-as-you-go school of thought to boot.

I watched her with one eye, and when it was time to flip the pancakes, I was very impressed with how she did that. She tested to make sure it wasn't sticky, then using the lid of the

pan, slid the pancake onto it, then turned the pancake easily, putting it back in the skillet.

“That was pretty good,” I told her.

She nodded. “I used to flip the pan, but sometimes if you forget and put too much butter, then the butter comes out, and we almost had a fire one time at home.”

“Got it.”

“Mom says no pan-flipping.”

“Well, using the skillet lid is smart.”

“And I know we gotta wash the lid now too, but that’s okay.”

“It is okay, and since you’re cooking, I’ll wash.”

“But you only have one arm.”

“I’ll wash,” Bodhi said, joining us in the kitchen, looking as bleary and sleep-deprived as I did at seven thirty in the morning. “Is there coffee?”

“Jed made it.”

“Oh God, it’ll be like crude oil.”

Stella thought that was hysterical.

“Just drink it and shut yer pie hole,” I told him.

“That wasn’t *shut up* exactly, but it was still naughty,” Stella assured me.

I gave her a shrug. “Do I get eggs and bacon too?”

“You can have plant bacon, but we can’t eat piggies. They’re super smart and cute.”

I looked at Bodhi, who bit the inside of his cheek so he wouldn’t laugh.

“Fine. Where’s the fake meat?”

Bodhi had to help her, and when the three of us sat at the island, she showed us her new *Zelda* game on her Switch, and then Bodhi showed me the confirmation on his phone that Stoker was home in Denver, talking to the police there, and

that they appreciated our reports. I had written mine before I passed out last night, and Bodhi had apparently done his at the same time.

I then showed him an email from Detective Maxine King of the Denver Police Department that came in very early in the morning. She was the one questioning Stoker, and in her email to me, she explained that she might need to reach out to Stella and her parents. It might not be necessary, as she had reports from two marshals and a Seattle detective, but if she needed more, she wanted the family to be prepared. I emailed her back that I would make the family aware.

“He won’t go back to prison for what he did,” Bodhi said under his breath.

“I know. But they’re focused on him now, and that’s good.”

“You’re not eating,” Stella pointed out.

“Yes, I am,” I snapped at her, which made her smile. Already, she knew me.

Bodhi was chuckling.

“You know,” I said, taking another bite of the heaviest pancakes I’d ever had in my life, “you can go golfing.”

His brows furrowed. “Enough with that.”

I grinned at him.

“What?”

“Hayden’s gonna think ya like me better,” I goaded him.

But it didn’t work because I didn’t get the rise out of him I was after.

As we were washing dishes—I could hold with my left hand and dry with the right—the doorbell rang. Stella was off her stool and running, but I yelled and she froze.

“Check to see who it is first.”

She turned around to look at me.

“Always. No matter who you’re expecting. You check before opening the door.”

Quick nod, and then she leaned to check, since both sides of the double doors had decorative glass. “Mommy!”

Once the heavy door was open, her mother, looking exhausted but impeccably attired, dropped to one knee, and Stella launched herself at her. I could see that Stella got her gorgeous curls from the woman who had the same cloud around her head. She had thick eyebrows, a great nose, flawless skin, great laugh lines, and the same deep, dark-brown eyes as her kid. Hugging and tears and laughter came quickly, which was nice to see and better to hear. Bodhi and I returned to cleaning until Stella led her mother into the kitchen.

“This is Jed and Bodhi,” she said happily. “You guys, this is my mom.”

We were not, I was thinking, what she was expecting, because she stared like we both had two heads or something. I got how it worked with him. The man was catch-your-breath beautiful, but how she was looking at me was odd.

“Hi. I... You’re younger than I thought,” she said to Bodhi, then to me, “and you’re older.”

“I get that a lot,” I teased her.

“I—thank you,” she said, breaking down.

I put my arm around her. “Everything’s okay, and Stella just finished making us breakfast.”

She hugged Bodhi next and wiped at her eyes. “Breakfast?”

“Pancakes,” Bodhi informed her, passing her some tissues so she could blow her nose. “And I don’t think we’re going to need lunch.”

“No,” I agreed. “Those suckers are gonna stick all day.”

Meredith laughed then, and that was a good thing.

I EXPLAINED to Meredith what might happen with the Denver PD, and she appreciated my letting her know. Blindsided with that phone call would not have been good.

“It’s unlikely,” I explained, “but you need to be ready.”

She hugged me a little too tight over that—my chest was still sore—but I had never been one to turn down a hug.

I was surprised how happy everyone was to see Meredith. It looked to me like she’d been a fan favorite and everyone was sorry that she and Keith had gotten divorced.

“I would have picked you up,” Keith told his ex-wife, gently moving her curly black hair off her shoulder.

“It was early,” she replied softly, and I saw the warmth in her eyes. “I didn’t want to wake you, and I wasn’t sure if Vanessa was still here.”

He shook his head. “No. Vanessa won’t be here anymore.”

She tipped her head and looked at him.

“You were right.” He grinned at her. “She was too young for me.”

“It was the whole not knowing who Pearl Jam is, right?” she teased him.

“That’s right,” he agreed, laughing.

Bodhi took hold of my arm then and walked me out of the kitchen.

“What?”

“You’re watching them like they’re on TV.”

“It was just gettin’ good.”

He shook his head at me. “C’mon, you gotta take a shower.”

“You know I’m gonna need a vacation after my vacation if nobody lets me sleep.”

I got an exasperated huff. “You’re stalling.”

“I can’t take—”

“Yes, I know, that’s why I’m coming with you.”

Once we were in my room, he gently took off the sling, then the mechanical brace, and finally the ACE bandage, along with the gauze underneath. It was barely oozing anymore, but the last layer was still bloody.

It looked terrible, all swollen, but it wasn’t black and blue like my chest where the bullets had slammed into the Kevlar.

“Christ,” he groaned.

“I’m fine,” I grumbled.

“I will never leave you again,” he murmured, turning me around to check my back. “You’re not playing cowboy on my time.”

“Playing?”

“You know what I fuckin’ meant, Josiah,” he scolded, walking around me to see my face. “Don’t push me right now when I can see all the damage.”

I smiled at him. “Fine.”

“Okay, so the doctor said we don’t have to cover the stitches, but just quick soap and make sure you stay turned away from the water.”

“Got it.”

“And today we have to start with the compresses if it’s sore.”

I nodded, unable to speak suddenly with his hands on my bare skin and his big beautiful eyes full of concern for me.

“I’m gonna go take a super-fast shower, and then I’ll be back to help you put everything back on.”

I cleared my throat. “I should learn to do it myself, don’t you think?”

“No. Why? I’ll pick you up in the morning when we get home, and I’ll take it off at night. Don’t be stupid.”

Why would I argue? Well, because I was me. “If I were Hayden, I wouldn’t like that.”

He scoffed. “You’re my partner, idiot. Everyone knows that comes first.”

It didn’t, though, but to push was stupid.

“I...forgot,” he began, pensive.

I met his bright-blue gaze.

“I forgot what it was like to be around you without all the extra crap.”

He meant all the tension, sexual and everything else.

Our third year, living together in Chicago, we’d both started being careful, watching what we said, how we said it, and definitely aware of the other person’s space. But before that, it had been just us with an easy comradery between us, a seamless flow of give and take. And I’d known he wanted me, and he’d known that went both ways, but there was also more because we were friends first. In the ensuing mess of moving in together, then parting ways, then the forced separation as partners, we’d lost the closeness, but also, amazingly, the hurt and pain. We’d wounded each other, a lot, and somehow the time apart had rendered that unimportant. I loved him, but I also wanted the best for him, and it didn’t ache like being stabbed in the heart with a knife anymore. I was still not the best choice for him. I was still broken in many ways, and him having to mend my damaged heart wasn’t fair. But I would hold this part of him, my friend.

“We fit again,” he told me, and I saw the indigo in his eyes that made me think of the lines in turquoise. “And I remember how good that is.”

“Same,” I agreed, and smiled at him.

“But really, are you eating at all?”

“What?”

“I mean, you look great, Jed, all the definition is amazing, you’re all carved and shit, but you’re what, twenty pounds underweight?”

“I stopped cooking.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re not there to eat it,” I groused at him, slipping by, heading for the bathroom. “Now go take your damn shower.”

“We’ll go back to you cooking,” he said on his way out.

“How is that a good deal for me?”

I loved hearing him laugh and was very glad he didn’t see the boner I got in the shower just thinking about it again in my head.

KNOWING BETTER HELPED NOTHING. Like I knew better than to trust him to jump out of the shower and throw on his clothes. Just his hair took forever. There were a lot of products that went in to make the artful mane look effortless. He also had moisturizers for his face and lotion that made him smell like vanilla and sandalwood, or pistachios and lime with a hint of caramel. And there wasn’t just one tube, jar, or pump bottle. I knew from rooming with him that the whole process was some sacred alchemy he did that when he emerged from a shower, you wanted to press your nose to his skin and hair.

Since my own self-care regimen consisted of all-in-one shampoo and conditioner, deodorant, occasionally lotion, and moisturizer since I did sometimes shave the stubble, I was done, sitting on my bed, waiting for him for what seemed like hours. And since I didn’t have a lot of patience to begin with, I got antsy. Plus, I needed to take a pill since my shoulder was twinging. It didn’t feel like an ice pick was being driven into my joint yet, but it would get worse soon if the medicine didn’t hit my bloodstream.

Going to the kitchen with my supplies, I didn’t think about being shirtless until I put the bottle of water down and looked around.

“Sorry,” I said quickly, and was about to turn for the arch that led down the hall to my bedroom.

“Oh,” Angie said, her words stopping me, her playful leer making me scowl. “Well, lookit you, Josiah Redeker. What a gorgeous specimen of manhood you are.”

I flipped her off because we were friends now.

She laughed hard, then walked over to me, Davis and Hayden right behind her. “This is quite the wound, my friend.”

“It’s gonna be all right,” I assured her as Bodhi walked by on his way to the archway.

“Hey,” I called.

He stopped and came back, squinting at me. “Why are you in here?”

“Oh, I dunno, princess, are we done preening?”

“Fuck off,” he told me, chuckling, and Angie’s mouth fell open.

“Shit, sorry,” Bodhi said, glancing around. “I forgot about the kids.”

Since there were no kids around, I was thinking he shouldn’t have worried.

“No, it’s not...that,” she said, and I saw her looking at us. She could see one of his hands on my bicep, but the other, on the small of my back, she couldn’t.

“Good,” he said, tugging on me gently. “Let’s get you in the brace.”

Once we were in my room, he put the small piece of gauze on the wound, then began wrapping my shoulder.

“You can do this a little faster, yanno. You’re not wrapping my dick.”

For whatever reason, that struck him funny. He started laughing, and when you get the giggles, that’s it and it’s catching. And then, because it was a shared memory, we started talking about the guy we’d busted once who had his dick stuck in the neck of a beer growler, and there was only one way to get it off. That, of course, was how Hayden found

us: Bodhi on my bed, barely able to breathe, and me glaring at him, wiping the tears from my eyes.

“What’s going on in here?”

“Your boyfriend’s an idiot,” I told him.

He smiled at me. “Let me help you with the brace.”

“No,” Bodhi said, still chuckling, standing up, having the hiccups now. “I’ve”—hiccup—“got it.”

Holding his breath as he wound the bandage around my bicep and shoulder, as soon as he couldn’t hold it anymore, he did it again.

“What are you doing?” Hayden asked him.

“You don’t hold your breath to get rid of hiccups?” I asked.

“No. You drink water.”

I met Bodhi’s eyes. “Have you ever tried drinking water?”

He blew out his breath. “Yeah. It doesn’t work,” he said, taking a deep breath and holding it again.

“I’ve never even heard of that,” I told Hayden.

He stood there watching Bodhi finish the bandage, and then Bodhi pointed at my duffel.

“Just get me a T-shirt,” I told him, “and do you have my zippered cardigan with the hood? The lightweight one?”

His head tipped like he was confused.

“With the...yanno”—I moved my hand up and down, miming lines—“the vertical stripes.”

Head back like yes, he understood, he nodded and bolted from the room.

Deep sigh from Hayden.

“Are you all right?” I asked him.

“No,” he confessed.

“Anything I can do?”

He looked at me a moment and then huffed out a breath. “Sadly, no. Because if you go home, so will he.”

I understood. Our reestablished bond was eating at him, and no doubt it would have annoyed me as well if our roles were reversed. The Callahan and Redeker show was back on the rails, and at the moment he had to be feeling like a third wheel. Most people did when they were around us. “Listen, Hayden, if it’s bugging you to have me here, distracting him with work stuff and ’cause I’m hurt, I’ll take the next flight out. No problem.”

“But that’s what I mean, Jed. If you go, he’s out of here. I had no idea you two were so close. I thought you were just partners.”

“Yeah, but this, me and Bodhi, this is how all the partners I know in the marshals service work,” I explained. “Your partner is basically in your pocket all day, every day. That’s the gig. I would take a bullet for him. He’d take one for me. We spend eight to twelve hours together five days a week, and sometimes more. There’s no way not to know that person best.”

He took a moment. “I met him when he had just finished that assignment with the DEA, and then directly after, he was with Yamane.”

“Yeah...not his partner. He was babysitting him. I’m the real one.”

“Yes, I see that quite clearly.”

Bodhi returned then with my cardigan over his shoulder.

“That’s Jed’s?” Hayden asked. “You wear that all the time.”

“Yeah. That’s why it’s a little big on me. His chest is wider, and he’s a bit taller.”

“I’ve got two inches on you, buddy.”

“Like that even matters,” he said, going to my bag and pulling out a pale-blue T-shirt. “You know you could hang your stuff up so it’s not all wrinkled.”

I squinted at him as he gently put it on over my head.

“Fine,” he said, “yes, I am usually the one who does that for you when we’re stuck in some shitty hotel somewhere.”

“Remember that place where the moths were bigger than your head and ate your Foo Fighters hoodie?”

His glare was fast.

“It was a nice hoodie.”

“Fuckin’ West Virginia,” he growled, helping me put my bad arm through. “I was never that cold until we moved to Chicago.”

“Oh, I know. That first winter you gave up and lay down on the sidewalk.”

“Are you kidding? Do you not remember what happened?”

I remembered it like it was yesterday.

“I spent four fucking hours digging that car out of the goddamn snow, and that motherfucking piece-of-shit snowplow driver comes along and buries me and the fuckin’ car all over again! It was the end of the world.”

I was laughing again. I couldn’t help it.

“And I hated that car too!”

“Because it was a Gremlin.”

“Because it was a fuckin’ Gremlin!”

The vision of him, throwing up his arms, saying game over, doing his best Bill Paxton impression from *Aliens*, and then lying down on the newly snow-covered sidewalk, making angels, made me smile like an idiot. “You remember? People kept stepping around and over you,” I reminded him, chuckling. “And I had to tell the concerned police officer that came by that, ‘yes, sir, he *is* okay.’”

He had to walk away from me for a moment, and while I adjusted my T-shirt, only then did I notice we were alone.

“Hiccups are gone,” I pointed out.

“If I were a cop in Chicago, I would ticket the shit out of those snowplow guys.”

“I’m sure you would,” I agreed as he helped me with the brace, then the sling, and finally tied the cardigan around my waist and passed me my Apple watch. “Okay, let’s go.”

I noted that he said nothing about Hayden being gone.

IT WAS Josette and her two kids, Angie and her three, Shae and her three, Keith, Meredith, and Stella, and me and Bodhi going to Pike Place Market. Hayden was going to go, but I heard Bodhi stress to him that he would have a crappy time with us, and Bodhi would have a crappy time golfing. It was best for everyone to do what they wanted. That was what vacations were supposedly about. In the end, I could only assume Hayden found his logic sound.

We were there before noon on a cloudy day, and it wasn’t cold at all, but there were so many more people than I anticipated. And that was dumb, I should have known better, it was a world-famous indoor/outdoor market, but still. It was crazy. Since my idea of fun was not to get my shoulder bumped every five seconds, Bodhi took my bad side, and Stella got my good one and my hand. Honestly, I thought people wouldn’t care and would simply mow the little girl down, and I was ready to yell, a lot, but everyone was careful of the seven-year-old, just as we were of other kids. The jostling was endless, but it wasn’t like Chicago, where I wanted to turn and deck someone. It didn’t hurt that Angie, walking with her kids in front of me, Stella, and Bodhi, sort of plowed the road. She didn’t move for anyone.

“I’m from Boston,” she informed me. “I’m not screwin’ around.”

The first thing we saw—that Angie had seen once and proclaimed being one too many, plus she didn’t feel like carrying her four-year-old down the stairs—was The Gum Wall.

“What?” I asked, a bit horrified.

“You’ll see,” she assured me with a shudder.

It turned out to be precisely what it sounded like: a brick wall with gum stuck to it in every color imaginable. All I could think about was the germs, and that kind of stuff normally didn’t cross my mind.

Thomas, who had come with me, wanted to touch it, and I strictly forbade that. Stella, like me, thought it was disgusting. Bodhi gave us the facts, because he did that, and explained that it had been cleaned off once in 2015.

“Can we be done?” I asked, and apparently I was amusing the hell out of everyone, not just those in our party, as others around us laughed along.

Upstairs, Angie called me over and told me to call her phone.

“Why?”

“I want your number so I can call and talk to you when I get home or send you stuff on TikTok.” She stared at me, waiting, as if daring me to do anything but answer in the affirmative. “Is that all right?”

“Yeah, that’s all right.” I couldn’t help smiling at her as I dialed her number.

“Okay, excellent,” she said, lifting her phone to snap a picture of me scowling at her. “And look at that, I’ve captured your true essence with this shot.”

“You’re an ass,” I made known.

Cackling, she stepped closer. “And even if my brother and Bodhi don’t work out, we’re going to stay friends. Yes?”

“Oh, it’ll work out.”

She tipped her head slightly. “We’ll see. Either way, I’m keeping you. I haven’t met anyone I’ve liked this much in years.”

I grunted.

“And you?” she prodded.

“Yeah, fine. Whatever.”

She laughed, and I put my arm around her shoulders and squeezed.

“Oh, Jed,” she said with a sigh. “I love this long-suffering thing you’ve got going, but you’re not fooling anyone.”

“What?”

“You’re madly in love with that partner of yours. I can see it clear as day.”

I felt that jolt of fear run up my spine. “No, you’re misunderstanding how we—”

“I’m not,” she replied with a sweet chuckle. “I have eyes, and I can see he’d never leave you. And you can stand there and be all ridiculous and manly and try and tell me that you’re just partners, and it’s a life-and-death job, and you’re hurt, so he’s especially attentive, but come on. That’s total crap.”

I took a step away to really look at her. “I want Bodhi and your brother to be happy.”

“Why? Because my brother is the best man for him?”

“Yes.”

“And is that because Hayden’s so utterly amazing or because you believe you’re no good for Bodhi?”

“Both?” I offered lamely.

She laughed at me. “You’re a liar.”

“I—no,” I said, trying to sound firm, and then gave it another shot. “No.”

“Listen, I love my brother, but much like my parents, he likes to play it safe. When he told me what Bodhi did for a living, I nearly died. Zach had to cover for me with a fit of coughing that would have made Gollum proud.”

“Zach’s a keeper.”

“He is. And do you know what he does?”

“Oh shit. I don’t, actually,” I said, grimacing, feeling sort of crappy about that.

“He’s an FBI agent.”

“No shit?”

“No shit,” Zach said, chuckling, walking over to us. “But I’m a special agent, honey,” he reminded his wife. “Gotta put the *special* in there so he knows I’m one of the guys in charge.”

I shook my head at him.

“Special,” he repeated.

“Stop.”

He waggled his eyebrows for me and took a breath. “It was good, what you and Crouse did that night, Jed, getting Petrov and all. I don’t know Crouse, but you backed him up, and I appreciate that.”

“Course,” I murmured, studying him. “FBI... That’s why you never get away on vacations, am I right?”

“I get away for big holidays, like you, and I have time with my family, but stuff like this—*oh, let’s all meet in Seattle*—that’s not always gonna happen.”

“And Hayden thinks that’s insane,” Angie told me.

“Which is why when he said he was marrying a marshal,” Zach said, widening his eyes like that was nuts, “I had to wonder if he was drunk or stoned.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but Bodhi’s a smart guy. He would know if Hayden couldn’t handle the—”

“Bodhi looked shell-shocked when I met him at New Year’s, and even more so after Hayden proposed,” Zach apprised me. “And at first I thought, maybe Bodhi just wants to be married, but I see in him the same commitment I have to my job, so I was really confused until I got here.”

“What do you mean?”

He grinned and then walked away.

“What does he mean?” I repeated to Angie.

She gave me a smile that said I was an idiot.

“I’m missing something.”

“Yeah. You are. You’re missing Bodhi.”

“I—”

“Every time I’ve seen Bodhi, and yes, it’s only been three, no, wait, four—five? No, four,” she said firmly. “The four times I’ve seen him, he seemed nice but a bit overwhelmed, and I thought it was the whole *oh my God, I’m so lucky to have this man*, but what I realize now is that it was him convincing himself he was happy.”

“No. You’re wrong. He is happy, and he would never marry Hayden if he didn’t love him,” I stressed to her. “He’s honest in all things.”

“Except that I suspect he thinks it’s time to get the marriage part of his life wrapped up, so he’s checking a box with Hayden.”

“I think you’re deluded.”

“And I am, a bit, but this is Psychology 101. Bodhi’s estranged from his family, he needs a home base, he craves stability in his life, and so he’s going with the solid, financially stable, upstanding-member-of-society lawyer.”

I shook my head.

“Believe what you want, but my husband agrees.”

“You’re both—”

“Let me tell you a story.”

“Oh no,” I grumbled.

She grinned at me. “Once upon a time, I was engaged to a perfect man. I mean, he was kind, smart, handsome, his stock portfolio was robust, and if I’d married him, I could have been a stay-at-home mom and not felt guilty about buying myself whatever I wanted.”

“But?”

“*But* he didn’t get under my skin and make me want to scream, and he didn’t make me laugh,” she said with an exhale

as she looked over at Zach. “He also had no idea how to fix a washing machine, hang Christmas lights, build a treehouse, and there was no way he would have been able to catch the bats that got in the house and then put them back outside with a stirring rendition of ‘Born Free.’”

I couldn’t help smiling.

“He also wouldn’t have bought insulation and had his buddies come over after the house was bat-proofed for three thousand dollars—which is highway robbery, by the way—and installed it. His friends wouldn’t have done it just for beer and pizza.”

“I suspect that if you’d married the first guy, all the house stuff would have been taken care of, and you never would have had to worry about the bats.”

“Or have videos of screaming kids and my man yelling at the bats to, and I quote, ‘Come out of that vent, you fuzzy little fuckers!’”

Since I knew them all now, I could imagine the scene unfolding, Thomas explaining all the facts about bats, Brandon wanting one for a pet, and Margo running around thinking it was all a game. I couldn’t help laughing because I was certain, at the time, Zach had been very angry and forgot that his children were there, thus the swearing.

“What I don’t understand is,” Angie went on, lost in the memory, “the bat guys leave an exit for the bats to come out. Why would they be in the house?”

“You know, just because there was an exit doesn’t mean all the bats were in a place to be able to get out that way. Perhaps they got into the space in the walls while looking for a way out because they were too stupid to use the door put in for them.”

She made a face like perhaps.

“Listen, Ange, I—”

“Oh, Josie calls me Ange,” she said, waving at her sister.

Josette waved back, smiling crazily because, unlike their feelings for their brothers—they didn’t seem all that crazy

about Keith, Giles, or Hayden—the two women were deeply bonded. It was easy to see it in the way they talked to each other, whispered, and laughed. They also included Shae, which was nice. It was the same with lots of siblings; I knew that. You could love your family out of familial obligation, but then there were siblings, like me and Lisa, who were friends as well. Angie and Josette were actually friends first.

“Food!” Josette took that moment to yell over the crowd.

Angie gestured with her hands, first down, then straight, then to the left.

Josette gave her the thumbs-up. Apparently, they knew a place.

“Okay,” Angie announced, taking hold of my good arm and walking me toward the stairs. “Back to our discussion.”

“No, we don’t hafta—”

“When Bodhi is with Hayden, he’s lovely. I’ve thought from the beginning, what a charming, handsome, easygoing man.”

“Okay.”

“But what I didn’t know until this weekend is that he’s been lifeless.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, I’m sure you don’t because I can’t imagine you’ve ever seen him like that.”

“What does that even mean?”

“The man I saw yesterday is not docile, he’s actually more than a little loud, has an opinion on everything, and he laughs. A lot. He’s also a bit combative.”

“*A bit* combative?” Had she met him? Bodhi would argue about what color the sky was.

She laughed. “Yes. But see, before yesterday, I never saw that. With all of us he’s been the go-along-not-to-make-waves guy. I told Zach, he’s the most agreeable man.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “But see, yesterday, he said no, he wasn’t going out to dinner, and then no, he wasn’t going golfing, and hell no, he wasn’t going to a party with Hayden at friends of my parents’ tonight, and he’s very, like, *this is the way* about it.”

I grinned. “That was a pretty good Pedro Pascal impression.”

“Shut up. It’s terrible, but you get my point. When he says no, it’s like *move on*.”

“Yeah. It’s not great when he digs in.”

“And that party tonight is a big deal.”

“Then he should go.”

“He probably should, but he declined.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“And he might change his mind, *for you*, because you’ll tell him to, but think about the implications of that.”

“The what?”

“Oh, don’t play dumb with me. I’ve seen you outmaneuver small children, and that’s harder to do than people think. You have to be two steps ahead of them. I know you’re smart.”

I groaned, and she laughed at me. “Listen, Bodhi is—”

“Bodhi doesn’t want to leave you,” she said, talking over me. “And why not? You’re not going to die on him in the time it takes to attend a party, but he won’t go, not even for Hayden, to simply not rock the boat.”

“He’ll change his mind.”

“Again, because you’ll talk him into it. But that’s not a good look for the fiancé, is it?”

“I don’t—”

“The truth of the matter is, when you’re in a relationship, you have to put aside what you want and do what’s best for the other person.”

“Agreed.”

“I go to things with Zach even when I hate the people I have to see.”

“As you do.”

“But you see, Bodhi has no problem not going because you’re the one he’s staying for.”

“Would you pretty please make your point already?”

“I think Bodhi can say no easily to Hayden because he’s not the most important person in his life.”

I scowled at her.

“It’s clear as day, and the two of you aren’t fooling anyone.”

We were all down one flight of stairs now, and I could see the restaurant overlooking the water. I looked at Bodhi holding hands with Stella and Thomas, walking with them, answering questions, probably about being a marshal, and just seeing him smiling and talking made my chest hurt.

“You’re wrong,” I assured her.

“I’m not,” she replied flatly.

“You have to understand that he’s my partner and—”

“My husband has a partner,” she told me. “I know all about the importance of the person who has your back.”

“Then you get what I’m—”

“This ain’t that,” she said playfully.

“You’re—”

“I thought my brother hit the lottery, but now I’m not so sure.”

I stopped walking and looked at her. “He did. I promise you, there’s no better man than Bodhi Callahan.”

“Well, I will argue that point with you since my husband is marvelous most of the time. But seriously, I think what’s great for you might not be great for my brother.”

I shook my head. “You’re wrong.”

“We’ll see. The good news is, either way, I have your number.”

This was a surprise. “You’d still wanna be friends with me if—”

“*Us* has nothing to do with Bodhi and Hayden. Am I right?”

I nodded.

“Good. Let’s eat. You’re going to love this place.”

SHE WAS RIGHT, I loved it, since fried fish and clam chowder were two of my favorite things. I had Bodhi on one side, Angie on the other, and watching Stella in absolute heaven sitting between her parents, who were talking and laughing with her, made my day.

“You know,” said Josette, who was sitting across from me, “I love that ring of yours, Jed. It’s really beautiful.”

I looked at the octopus ring on the middle finger of my left hand. “Thanks, it’s actually Bodhi’s, but I stole it a long time ago.”

“It’s yours?” Angie asked, leaning forward so she could see around me to Bodhi.

“Yeah,” he said, smiling. “When he ran away from Vegas to Chicago—”

“I beg your pardon,” I grumbled. “Ran away?”

He scoffed. “Yeah. When you left me in Vegas to move to Chicago, I was really pissed, but then I realized that’s how you do things. You leap without looking.”

“I have never—”

“Did you have a place to live in Chicago?”

“I—no.”

He chuckled, patting my thigh. “Come on. Admit it, you ran. But it was a good thing for both of us, so I didn’t mind. Plus, when I got there and saw you were still wearing my ring, I thought, yeah, we’re gonna be okay.”

The kids were all eating, and Bodhi went back to dragging pieces of cod through cocktail sauce, but all the adults were staring at me.

“What?”

“You left Vegas and he followed you?” Josette asked.

“Yeah, but—”

“And you wear his ring?” Angie clarified.

“It’s not his. It’s mine now.”

“Of course it is,” Shae agreed, grinning at me. “Who wants another beer?”

I did. God. I needed, like, five.

EIGHT

We walked around downstairs afterward, looking at so much stuff, and I started collecting the crap you bring home for your annoying friends. I got Ian a lovely heavy beer stein for the freezer that had an etched design of an orca. Miro got a hoodie that said Papa Bear because he so was one. I got Wes a sweatshirt that said Official Search and Rescue, and Dorsey a huge bottle opener that he'd like because it was ridiculous. I'd have to be on the lookout for gifts for the others and was pleased that Bodhi was collecting items as well. Whenever anyone went on vacation, we all got various knickknacks and tchotchkes when they returned. It was just one of those things you did.

We stopped for oversize cookies to bring back to the house, got coffee and pastries, and while we were walking, I saw both men and women turn to look at my partner.

"That must always happen to him," Angie said with a sigh.

"Yep. Always."

"It's because he looks like a movie star or a rock star," Shae chimed in. "With all those pretty muscles too."

"Giles has muscles," Josette teased her.

She gasped dramatically. "Where? Where are they?"

They all laughed, and I felt kind of bad for poor Giles, who just turned around to look from where he was and smiled.

LATER, we were in Target, getting some things the kids needed, small items forgotten at home. Shae was the first one out with Margo, joining me.

“You know, I always got a weird feeling from Luke, but I ignored it, thinking I was just being ridiculous.”

I looked at her. “Don’t ever do that. I can’t tell you how many people don’t listen to their gut.”

She nodded.

“Never second-guess yourself.”

“It’s funny, right? How many times I’ve thought, I shouldn’t get into this elevator alone with a stranger, but you think, that’s dumb.”

“But if your little voice says no, then listen.”

“I feel so dumb.”

“Who cares? Better to be safe—”

“Than sorry. Yes.”

I smiled at her. “Half of being in law enforcement is listening to the voice in your head. I can’t tell you how many detectives I know get a feeling about someone or something and follow it home.”

“Thanks, Jed. I’ll say no next time in any situation.”

“Good.”

“Can you take Margo? I forgot a brush.”

Margo was out like a light and much heavier for some illogical reason, but with my good arm, she was fine, and her head on my shoulder was sweet. I was having a peaceful moment, when a guy suddenly came up and asked me for money.

It was a usual occurrence in Chicago, so that wasn’t the issue. I always gave out cash when I had some on me, generally to teenagers or unhoused folks with pets. The issue wasn’t the request for funds, it was simply that he was way too close to me.

If it were just me, fine, but I had Margo. And maybe he typically had good luck coming up on people with kids, but I somehow doubted it.

“No, man, sorry,” I said, taking a step back. “I don’t have anything on me.”

“I’m sure you do,” he snarled, crowding close.

Normally, unhurt, without Margo, I would have walked away, but I was stuck there, with one arm, and this guy was nearly touching the little girl.

“Step back,” I ordered, moving myself.

“Fuck you,” he said under his breath, and then I saw the knife.

I had been around thousands of unhoused people, and the majority were not violent, and even more were not mentally unwell. This guy was both, and from the state of his skin, and his teeth when he bared them at me, I could tell he was a meth addict. It was just wrong place, wrong time.

“Back away,” I said, wondering about his thought process. He was trying to intimidate me, on the street, in broad daylight, threatening me with a knife. It was surreal.

When he lunged at me, I had no recourse but to defend myself. I kicked him squarely in the groin. I was wearing my Converse, but still, I kicked him hard, and he dropped, and when he did, I put my foot on his wrist and told him I’d break it if he tried to lift up off the ground.

“Oh my God,” a woman said, running up beside me. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, putting pressure on the guy’s wrist when he tried to move.

“My son and I saw the whole thing. There’s a policeman right around the corner, and I sent my boy to—here he comes.”

Two female police officers were running after the woman’s son, who pointed.

“You protected your little angel,” she cooed, rubbing Margo’s back.

There were lots of people with their phones out, and I groaned because that was going to be a mess.

Both officers asked if I was all right, and they put on their gloves before they moved the knife out of harm’s way and cuffed the guy.

“I’ll go to the car for the evidence bag,” the older officer told the younger one. “Be right back.”

The guy, facedown on the sidewalk, wasn’t moving.

“How hard did you kick him?”

“The man was threatening his child,” the woman told the officer. “However hard it was wasn’t hard enough.”

“Oh, I’m not arguing,” the officer told her. “I’d just like to learn the angle.”

They shared a smile then.

“The hell happened out here?” Bodhi grumbled when he reached us.

“Who are you?” the officer asked, standing up.

“Deputy US Marshal Bodhi Callahan,” he said, lifting his T-shirt, flashing her some gorgeous golden skin as well as his badge. “This is my partner, Deputy US Marshal Josiah Redeker.”

“And this is your daughter,” the woman said, like she was going to cry. “How sweet is this?”

No one corrected her, just talked to both officers, and then the older one, Hartman, brought over an evidence bag and her tablet.

“You’re law enforcement?” she asked me.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, thank God. I thought this was going to take all day.”

I was a great report giver. It was a strength of mine. I was concise and thorough. I commended Mrs. Oberman and her

son for helping me, and explained how I never would have kicked the guy if he had taken no for an answer.

“Well, we’ve had a few muggings around here, and the assailant used a knife in all three cases, so...we’ll see how this shakes out.”

Bodhi, who always carried cards in his wallet, passed one to Hartman and explained that she could get us both at that number, as we were only visiting from Chicago.

Once the guy was taken into custody, there was scattered applause. I waved, thanked Mrs. Oberman and her son, Faraz, and then Bodhi took hold of my bicep and led me halfway down the street.

“I can’t take you anywhere,” he teased, smiling.

“Listen, you should go to the fancy dinner with Hayden and your soon-to-be in-laws.”

“What?”

I gave him a deadpan look.

“I’d rather work a week in Asset Forfeiture.”

That was surprising. “Why?”

He shook his head, looking everywhere but at me.

“Tell me.”

His gaze refocused on me. “You’ve never seen so many people so very horrified to learn that Hayden is marrying a guy with a blue-collar job.”

“But you don’t care,” I reminded him.

“No, it’s true, but I don’t want to have to go to their parties either.”

He had a point.

“Besides, I found a place we can go and get Mexican, and the reviews are all really good. I figured we’d try it out, take everyone with us not going to the fancy party.”

Authentic Mexican like what we’d had off the strip in Vegas was what he’d been pining for. “And you’ve been

missing it in Chicago.”

He whimpered.

I chuckled, and he took Margo so he could lean into me and I could put an arm around him. “Don’t worry, we’ll get ya fed.”

He stayed right there beside me.

ONCE WE GOT BACK, I was wrung out and needed a nap just like all the kids. I felt old, and seeing Hayden there, waiting for Bodhi, looking all hale and hearty—and who even said that *besides* old people—I felt absolutely decrepit. I needed a reality check about why Bodhi was spending time with me and not Hayden, and really, there was only one answer. I was hurt. If I wasn’t, he would be with his fiancé. I was being stupid, and so was everyone else, especially Angie. She didn’t really know Bodhi, knew me even less, and to think any different was insane.

Two, almost three hours later, my door was knocked on, and without me giving whoever was on the other side permission to come in, it opened.

There, standing in my doorway, was Bodhi, in a suit I’d never seen in my life. Honestly, I owned three suits total, two black, one navy, and definitely not one in the color he was wearing at the moment.

“So many questions,” I mumbled, squinting at him.

Closing the door, he turned on the light, nearly blinding me, and I sat up and looked at him again.

“What, um, do you call that color?”

He flipped me off.

It was sort of tan with a bit of mustard thrown in. Or orange. Like a blended-vomit color. “Are you being punished?”

“It’s clearly a summer suit.”

“Sure. Yeah.”

“It’s linen.”

“Okay.”

“This is what you wear to a summer social.”

With the suit he was wearing, he had on a crisp white cotton shirt, no tie, a floral pocket square, and brown suede loafers with tassels. I’d never seen him in anything with tassels. Eli, yes; him, no.

“You look nice,” I assured him, because really, Bodhi could wear anything, with his shoulders and the whole V shape of him. It was just that he looked uncomfortable.

“I look ridiculous.”

“No, no. It’s just not your normal, but that’s not bad. Eli always says that it wouldn’t kill us all to look better when we’re out on the job.”

Eli Kohn, our director of Public Relations, always looked like he should have been walking a runway in Milan. The man was never anything but metrosexual perfection, and often, he looked at me and Bodhi like seeing us, in old jeans, lots of flannel in winter, and sweaters with the necks stretched out, was physically painful for him. But I didn’t sit at a desk, and neither did my partner.

“I think he meant for you not to wear your cargo pants and for me to put on something other than a hoodie under my leather jacket.”

“Cargo pants just make sense,” I told him. “And the hoodie keeps you warm, but not too warm, and the leather jacket by itself in a Chicago winter would be no help at all.”

“That’s all reasonable,” he agreed. “But that’s not the point.”

“Please tell me what is.”

“That this is what I’m wearing.”

It hit me then. “Oh, you’re going to the party. Good. I’m glad. Have fun, and I’ll—”

“No,” he said, stopping me. “The party is here.”

“Whaddya mean the party is here?”

“The DuPonts, who were throwing the party, had an emergency, so it was moved here.”

“What kind of emergency?”

“Their oldest grandson, Flipper, he—”

“Flipper?” There was no way to let that one go. “Like the dolphin?”

“Yes. Just like the dolphin,” he said without a glimmer of mirth.

“Okay. Go on.”

“Flipper,” he repeated, glaring at me, “drove their speedboat into their pool.”

It took me a second. I’d just woken up, after all. “Sorry?”

“I guess he drove it onto the grass slope toward the lakefront and then into the infinity pool.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah.”

“Drunk?”

“Oh yes.”

“How old?”

“Seventeen.”

“Jesus.”

He shrugged. “I see rehab in his future, but anyway, because of that, the DuPonts asked if the party could be moved here, and Hayden’s parents agreed.”

“Okay.”

“The kids are all downstairs where they were last night and ___”

“Oh, so I need to go and watch—”

“No, there are parents down there who had no desire to be at this party, like Angie and Josette, Shae, Keith, Meredith—

you get the idea.”

“Got it. Is there food out there?”

“Yes, there’s—again, not the point. I’m here telling you this so you don’t come stumbling out in your jeans.”

“Got it. I’m not to come out. I hear you, and I promise not to leave this room. That is, as long as you bring me some food, because I’m starving.”

“Alternatively,” he began, “you could shower, shave, put on the white dress shirt I packed for you, and—”

“You lost me at shave. Have fun at the party, and I’ll just sit here and die from lack of food.”

“I—”

“Or I could have a pizza delivered.”

He growled at me. “I’ll bring you some food.”

“Thank you.”

He went to the door but didn’t leave, just stood there with his hand on the knob.

“Go already,” I teased him, because if I didn’t, I’d beg him to stay. Every time he left me to do something with Hayden hurt like gargling glass.

He didn’t move.

“Bodhi?”

Quick breath. “Hayden told me today that having us be partners again has been weird for him, and he’s not sure he can get used to it.”

“What does that mean?”

“He said we needed to have a discussion.”

A discussion? “About what? It is what it is,” I said defensively.

“Is it?”

I squinted at him. “The fuck does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” he muttered. He started pacing, walking to the door of the bathroom, then quickly swiveling around. “I’ve never seen him—I mean, I think he was mad, but I can’t tell.”

“You can’t tell if he’s mad?”

He shook his head as he walked by the bed, the pacing continuing.

“Why can’t you tell when he’s mad?”

“Because he’s never been mad.”

That didn’t make any sense. “No way. You do a hundred things a day that make me want to murder you. How can he not get mad?”

“I know,” he admitted, arms thrown up in the air, “and it’s the same for me. I’m homicidally angry at you at least ten times in a normal day.”

“And you’re a yeller,” I reminded him.

“So are you,” he shot back.

I gave him a head tip in agreement. “But you’re saying, he’s never raised his voice to you? Ever?”

Another shake of his head.

“Then how the fuck do you know if he really loves you?”

He stopped to stare at me. “Most people in love don’t yell.”

“That’s a lie.”

“No, it’s true. You’re just broken.”

“I’ve been telling you that for years.”

His growl was loud. “You’re not broken, you idiot.”

“You just said I was.”

“Fuck all this,” he yelled, fisting his hands as he kept pacing. “I’m so fuckin’ pissed at you.”

“Me? Why’re you mad at me?”

“Because this is all your fault!”

“What’s all my fault?”

“Everything. All of it.”

“What’re you talk—”

“I’ve been so twisted up that I talked myself into thinking I could be in this. I could be fine and good and happy with letting my life play out with no ups, no downs, just safe and steady and simple. Everything could just be easy for once.”

I stared at him, watching him continue to pace.

“I mean, why not? Why would anyone want to live in a fuckin’ tornado if they didn’t have to? It’s insane.”

“So not following.”

He ignored me. “But see, somewhere along the line, when no one was looking, I slipped into the eye where it’s stable, and now watching things whirl by makes sense.”

“You lost me.”

“No, I only thought I did.”

“What?”

He glared at me like I was an idiot.

I huffed out a breath. “Fine. May I take a stab at what you’re saying?”

“Go ahead.”

“Here’s what happened, without your whole twister-whatever metaphor,” I told him, shooting him a look. “When you and Hayden met, we weren’t partners at the moment, we weren’t roommates anymore, and we weren’t hanging out all the time. He got you, but he had no me.”

“Yes,” he concurred. “That’s exactly right.”

“And everybody knows, if you don’t get *me*, with *you*, then it’s not the real you.”

He stopped walking and looked at me. “That’s true, isn’t it?”

“And Jesus Christ, if you’re not yelling at him, how does he know you care?”

“Right?”

“You just hafta tell him you didn’t mean to fool him or anything, but this is how it really is. This is the Callahan and Redeker show in its full glory,” I said playfully, trying to lighten the mood. “But it’s only because we’re in the same place at the moment. It won’t stay like this. We’ll still be partners, which will keep me from going nuts, but he’ll have you at night and on the weekends and—”

Crossing the room to me, he stood near the end of the bed. “What do you mean, that will keep you from going nuts?”

Shit. “I just meant that, you know, I’ll miss you being with me all the time and—”

“Miro thinks you have regrets. Do you have regrets?”

Fucking Miro. “When did you talk to Miro?”

“Today. He wanted to know how you were feeling.”

“Because he wants to make sure I’ll be ready to be his minion next—”

“Answer me, Jed,” he said flatly, brows furrowed, eyes darkening. “Do you have regrets?”

The right thing to say was no. The right thing, for his long-term happiness, was to tell him that I had no regrets and that I couldn’t wait to dance at his wedding.

“Be honest,” he ordered me.

And I would be. “I want you to be happy.”

“Oh yes, I know. You’ve sung this same song for the entirety of our partnership,” he said snidely, glaring at me.

Normally, when he was a sarcastic ass like that, it got my hackles up and I said something shitty back, and that fast we’d be fighting. It was how it went every single time.

“It’s true,” I said instead, and I watched the instant surprise cross his gorgeous chiseled features. His eyebrows lifted, and

he looked halfway between stunned and hopeful. Already this was the weirdest conversation we'd had in ages. "I want the very best for you because you're the most—because you, you know..."

He moved closer and sat down on the bed, his hand on my knee. "I don't know."

I cleared my throat because the lump there needed to be dislodged so I could speak. "I love you, right? I mean, you know that."

"I do know that," he agreed. "I also know that you'd rather take a bullet for me than explain about your regrets."

"I dunno, chief," I teased him, lifting my bad shoulder just a bit. "Being shot kinda sucks, so maybe—"

"Don't be funny," he warned me. "Tell the truth."

Years ago, when I had first met Miro Jones, he said I would regret not doing anything with my feelings for Bodhi. The fact that he'd only spent half a day with us and seen the love and desire on me so easily should have clued me in.

I said, "You want things."

"I don't want to talk about me, Jed. I want to talk about you."

"Yeah, but you can't consider one without the other."

"Like?"

"Like you want kids."

"So what? So do you, and you're great with them, but we're not talking about anything but the present, right here, right now, and it's time for you to sack up and tell the truth."

But how could I? To what end? How could ruining his life be in any way good for him?

"Don't think about me, Jed. Think about you."

"How?" I asked miserably.

"I'm not stupid, you know."

"When did I ever say you were stupid?"

“No,” he stopped me, moving his hand higher up on my thigh. “Don’t pick a fight. That’s not gonna work.”

I huffed out a breath.

“I know how you really feel, Jed. I’d have to be blind not to.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I have to break up with Hayden,” he said miserably. “I’m no good for him. I’m never gonna be what he needs.”

“The hell are you talking about? You’re what everybody needs,” I assured him and then added, “And wants.”

“No,” he whispered roughly. “I’m not.”

I grabbed his hand and held tight. “No, no, believe me. You are.”

His sigh and the accompanying grin made me smile. “Only for you, idiot. I’m only good for you.” My breath caught, and he heard it, felt the tremor run through me, and he shook his head. “Jesus, Jed, try and pull your head all the way out of your ass this time.”

I was sure I was scowling at him, but his smile said he wasn’t the least bit intimidated.

“Hayden is the nicest, kindest, most decent guy I’ve ever met, but the fact of the matter is, I have been in love with you since the moment you took me to get Mexican food at your favorite place off the Strip a week after we met.”

I shook my head.

“Yes. The way you smiled at me and said how you wanted us to be permanent partners, and you didn’t want to change anymore if that was okay with me.”

I could still remember him nodding and saying that yeah, he wanted that too.

“And you’ve been in love with me since I brought you my homemade chicken noodle soup when you got walking pneumonia, which was exactly one week later.”

He had come to my house, found the spare, and walked in like he owned the place. He'd warmed the soup and made me go get in bed. The best part was, he climbed in on the other side and watched movies with me for the rest of the day.

There was no question that he was right. I started loving him then and there.

“Do you remember that?”

Stupid question. And I would have told him that, but my heart was in my throat, making words impossible.

“There's no one else, Jed. I'm sure you could find a ton of guys who'd want the job of taking care of you, being your best friend and then graduating to lover, but the truth is, you don't trust anyone but me.”

It was true. Bodhi had filled the empty space in my heart, and between him and my sister and her family and my annoying-ass friends—and some brand-new ones now—I was good. No one else was needed. It turned out that I couldn't move on from Bodhi because he was the only one I wanted. It was set in stone, and I had trouble even sleeping with anyone else. I had for a while, been able to take my heart out of the equation, but it had been years at this point. There was no way to separate what my body needed from what my heart craved.

“Hell,” I muttered.

“So after all that,” he said, taking my hand in both of his. “Tell me the truth now. What do you regret?”

He was waiting, staring at me with his beautiful eyes, and I felt like everything could begin or end at this exact moment.

I could barely breathe.

“It's been two days, Jed,” he rasped, his gaze locked with mine. “I've been with you now two days, and the idea of going home and not seeing you except when we're at work is not—I just—”

“I regret not telling you I love you,” I blurted out, confessing because it was just plain stupid not to. “And not

like my partner, but like you're the person I want to wake up beside for the rest of my life."

It was quiet, and after a moment I realized he looked utterly gobsmacked.

"I just, I never wanted you to not get everything you wanted in life because you were stuck with me."

His sigh was long.

"I love you more than anything, and so...it always had to be you before me."

After the longest moment ever, he said, "I know."

"You do?"

"Of course I do."

I looked away and then back. "I love you, and it's selfish because seriously, Hayden is the perfect guy for you, but I can't help it, and everything's been upside down since you told me you were gettin' married, and only since I woke up in the hospital has everything felt normal again."

"I feel the exact same way."

"You do?"

"How could I not? We fit. We've always fit."

And we had. It was like I met him and that was it. He was home. He'd always felt like home.

"When I told you I was going to get married, I thought it would feel right, that I'd feel this weight lift and you'd have no more hold on me, but all I've felt since then is a steadily increasing sense of dread."

I grinned. I couldn't help it. "That's really fucked up."

"I know!" he yelled. "Don't you think I know?"

"Dread?"

"I—it's like I couldn't get my bearings for so long because I couldn't wrap my brain around us not being...us."

"Yeah," I whispered.

“This is a mess.”

“It is, and I don’t want you to break up with Hayden to be with me because what if I blow up your life? But I do want you to break up with him because I know I love you more than he does because there’s no one who could ever love you more than me.”

Trace of a smile then, I could see it in the barely there curl of his lip.

“Nobody knows you better than me.”

“That’s true,” he whispered.

“And when you’re with me, that’s who you really are.”

“Yes.”

“And you wouldn’t have to be a marshal if you were with me—”

His face crumpled. “Why do you always—”

I leaned forward and grabbed hold of his hand tight. “I see you clearly. You love to help. You live for it. But the toll on your heart is greater than mine because you give more of yourself, and so a part of you breaks every single time we lose someone.”

He squeezed my hand back.

“But see,” I said, smiling at him, “if it was us, together, and you could come home every night and have me there with you, then you could stop being a marshal and instead teach art to high school students or criminal justice to ones in college because then you’d be educating and making a difference but it wouldn’t suck out your soul.”

“Jed, there’s no—who could I ever trust to protect you better than me?”

“If I stayed with Miro in Custodial WITSEC, would there be that worry?”

He jolted before covering my hand with his other. “You’ve thought about—you...you...”

“Have I thought about what I could do if I had a chance to live a life with you? Of course I have. You’re all I think about.”

“And I fooled myself into thinking I could be happy screwing all those guys when the only person I wanted to be in bed with was you.”

I wasn’t stupid. I’d known that.

“And then I went along with everything with Hayden because I felt like it was time,” he confessed. “Time to get married and settle down, time to think about a family. It all seemed so right, like I was a grown-up, but then the second you got hurt, I’m blowing my life off to make sure I’m there for you because... Jed...” He looked away, tried to pull his hand free, to move, but I wouldn’t let him.

“You only wanna be with me,” I stated with a smile. “It’s me, Bode.”

His head turned too fast, like it was on a swivel, his eyes riveted on my face because *Bode*, the nickname only I ever used, had been gone for years and was now, suddenly, in an instant, back.

“I want it to be me,” I said, staring into all that deep-sea blue. “Make it me. Break the really nice guy’s heart and make it me.”

He leaned forward but stopped, and I felt his warm breath on my face. “I want to. I want you and—*Jed*.”

I smiled at him. “I know. I want you back. It’s been a long time for me.”

“No, you— It’s not that I want to fuck you—”

“You don’t?” I teased him.

“Oh God,” he groaned, and I let his hand go so he could do what he wanted and cover his face with both. “You’re really looking at me, *finally*, and your mouth is right there and—”

“Do you like to top? I’ve never asked.”

“Fuck yes, Jed, I like to top,” he ground out like he was in pain. “I have dreamed of having you under—oh my God.”

I reached out and curled a long strand of hair around his ear. “Me too.”

He actually whined as he dropped his hands and looked at me.

“But I know what you mean. It’s not just the sex. It’s that final piece. It’s the last part that connects us. Can’t ever go back after that.”

“No,” he was adamant. “You can’t ever take it back. From the first kiss, Jed,” he said, swallowing hard, “you can’t ever send me away or change your mind because you think something stupid. I won’t ever leave you. Do you understand?”

He looked so scared, so tense, so ready to either jump me or hit me, and I understood because it was nearly six years of longing, of us circling one another, simmering the whole time, and his control had been stretched to the limit and was now gone, utterly and completely fractured. But since at the moment he still belonged to Hayden, there was only one thing to do. Only one way to return us to normalcy.

“What if a billionaire wants to marry you?”

It took him a second. “Have you lost your—”

“Or what if you meet that football player you like?”

“I don’t think he’s gay,” he replied, grinning, scooting closer, at my hip now, reaching out and slipping his hand around the side of my neck, his thumb tracing along my jawline.

“What about that guy who plays for the Blackhawks, the one you said always smiles at you whenever you go to the games?”

He shook his head. “You’re so stupid.”

“This is not news.”

“We’re going to have to fly coach home.”

“That’s okay,” I told him. “You can hold my hand.”

“Have I ever told you that hazel is my favorite color?”

My eyes just so happened to be that color. “No, you haven’t.”

“I will build my whole world around you, Josiah Redeker. I’ve been waiting for so long.”

I nodded. “And I’m sorry for making you wait, but I wanted what’s best for you, and you know how I feel about that being me.”

“I do, yes. But now?”

“But now I’m selfish, so you’re screwed.”

His smile was blinding. “No, baby, you’re the one who’s gonna be screwed.”

“Why you gotta make everything all nasty?”

He laughed long and hard, and that was a very good thing.

NINE

Once Bodhi left, I sat there and worried and second-guessed myself because that's what I did. Always. When my phone rang, I saw a Chicago area code and picked up.

"Hello?"

Nothing. No sound. No greeting.

"Hello?" I repeated, like everyone did in every horror movie I'd ever seen.

"Harold of visions," Ian whispered and then was gone, the call ending.

"The fuck was that?" I asked the air angrily, thinking he was fucking with me. I tried him back a moment later.

The line was busy, making a beeping sound like it was a landline, which made no sense. Why wouldn't Ian just use his cell? And who did he know who even had a house phone? His father maybe? But again, he always had his cell on him; he had to. He was the deputy director, and the office always had to be able to get a hold of him.

I called again, then a third time, the line never ceasing to beep, and I finally called Miro to figure out what was going on. It was right after nine p.m. in Chicago, so still relatively early, but I was still surprised to get him on the second ring.

"Jed," he said, his voice breathy, "are you on your way?"

On my way? “No, I’m—no. And I’ll ask what you mean in a second, but I just got a weird call from Ian, and I need to know if you have eyes on him.”

“Eyes on—no, we’re dealing with a crisis here and—”

“Miro, listen. Where’s Ian?”

“He’s coordinating with the FBI and Homeland about—”

“No. He’s not. Get me in a room with Kage and Becker now.”

“Jed?”

“Now, Miro. Do it now,” I commanded. “Hurry.”

There were muffled sounds, and I could hear yelling, and then he told me he’d call me right back.

I was pacing when my phone rang, and I picked up instantly. “Hello?”

“Redeker,” Sam Kage addressed me in that tone he had where I had better not be wasting his time. Not that I ever had.

“Sir, I just received a call from Ian, and I believe he’s in danger.”

“Yeah, we think so too,” Wes agreed, and I was glad he was there. “We pinged his phone, we got nothing, so tell us about the call.”

“First, lemme give you the number to trace. I think it’s a landline.”

“Go ahead.”

After I read it to him, I said, “My phone rang, I answered, Ian said, ‘Harold of visions,’ and then the line went dead,” I recounted without any embellishment.

“The fuck does that mean?” Chris Becker, our supervisory deputy, snapped.

“Harold who?” Miro asked out loud. “What’s going on? First Eli and now—”

“Repeat what you said,” Kage ordered.

And I did, word for word.

“Okay, so not Harold like a name,” Kage intoned, “but herald, like an angel. Like the Christmas carol.”

Miro said, “I don’t under—”

“And the herald of visions is the archangel Gabriel.”

Everyone was silent.

“Wait. Gabriel?” Miro sounded unsure. “Are we thinking Gabe Brodie? He’s the only Gabriel I know.”

“Me too,” Becker agreed.

“That number is for a Catholic church on the south side,” I heard Wes say in the background. “We’re going now,” he informed our boss.

“Check the rectory first,” Kage threw out. “Ian’s probably there.”

“We’re out,” Wes announced, and then there was noise and I heard Kage shouting orders at Becker to put Miro in a vest and to not let him breach with the SOG team.

“Redeker?” Kage said.

“Yessir?”

“I need you and Callahan back here now. I have no idea what’s going on, but Eli was giving a press conference today, and someone tried to kill him.”

And suddenly I couldn’t breathe. “Would you repeat that, sir?”

“Someone tried to shoot Eli while he was giving his final press conference about what occurred with you and Crouse and that whole shitshow last Monday night.”

I wasn’t going to defend myself, because yes, everything had technically turned out okay, but it was still an absolute clusterfuck of the first order. “Why was he giving another one?”

“The Wexlers were taken into custody by the DST, the Directorate of Territorial Security, when they arrived in Paris

this morning.”

I didn’t remind my boss that I knew what the DST was, as I’d worked with them many times when fugitives fled to France. The man was in full operational mode at the moment, so he was giving me the facts like he would to anyone.

“They flew there because they’re stupid, and as I said, DST picked them up. They’re being extradited as we speak.”

“So Eli was giving an update to the press about that.”

“That’s correct.”

“Is he all right?”

“Shaken but unharmed.”

“Thank God that whoever did it was a lousy shot.”

“They weren’t a lousy shot,” Kage corrected me. “Eli was fidgeting with a lapel pin Celso had given him. Apparently, he took it off before the briefing, thinking it was too over-the-top or whatever for the five o’clock news.”

Eli was a big believer in subtle and chic. He never wanted to draw attention to himself outright, never wanted to be ostentatious. But if you did look at him, or if he was giving a press briefing, he had to look flawless.

“So he’s got the stupid thousand-dollar pin in his hand, but he dropped it,” Kage explained. “And instead of letting it sit there on the ground next to his shoe and grabbing it after he finishes his remarks, because it’s from Celso, without a second thought, he immediately bent to retrieve the pin.”

“And missed being shot,” I said, seeing it in my mind.

“That’s right.”

“Holy shit, does Eli have a guardian angel or what?”

“If one believed in such things, then yes.”

But clearly my boss did, no matter what he said. He knew the archangel Gabriel at least. “Bodhi and I will be on the next plane home, sir.”

“I have no idea what’s going on, and until I do, I want everyone here.”

“Of course,” I agreed, because I could hear the tension in his voice. He wasn’t scared, it wasn’t that, but he wanted all of us where he could see us. And it was weird because Bodhi and I were safer on the other side of the country, but not in Kage’s mind. To him, we were safest if we were close to him. What was even stranger was that I agreed. With Sam Kage watching over you, a guardian angel wasn’t necessary. You had all the vigilance you needed right there in him.

“I want you at the airport now, do you understand?”

“Yessir.”

“I will keep you apprised of the situation with Ian the moment I know.”

“Thank you, sir,” I replied, and the line went dead. The second it did, I got an automated emergency text from the office of the chief deputy that I was sure Bodhi was receiving at the same exact moment. It told us to report in person immediately.

Leaving my room, I walked quickly down the hall to the kitchen, which was empty, and then out into the great room, which was filled with men in summer suits and loafers, and women in flowy dresses and lots of jewelry. People noticed me and turned up their noses, but I couldn’t be made to care. In my T-shirt and jeans, I stood out, but I needed to find Bodhi. When I saw him and Hayden out past the pool, standing apart, but both leaning on the thick stone railing overlooking the lake, I headed toward them.

I was around the pool when Davis stepped in front of me.

“Haven’t you done enough damage?”

He was furious; I could see it all over his face. And I understood, I did. If someone hurt Bodhi, I’d kill them. “Listen, I’m sorry for how everything—”

“Fuck you, Jed. You should have just let them be happy.”

It was exactly what I'd wrestled with for so long, but I'd made my choice, and now I realized it was the best one for Bodhi as well. Because really, for better or worse, no one loved him as much as I did.

Taking a step back because I didn't want him to try and hurt me and then I would have to defend myself, I tried to go around him, but he put out a hand that came dangerously close to grazing my bad shoulder. "The hell are you—"

"You've got Bodhi so turned around that I wouldn't be surprised if he's delaying the wedding until later in the fall. What the hell were you thinking?"

I was going to say there wasn't going to be a wedding, but it wasn't my place. "Listen, Bodhi and I have been called back to Chicago, so I don't have time to—"

"Oh, I'm sure. That's very convenient, isn't it?"

"No, it's not, it's an emergency and—"

"Jed," Hank began, coming up beside me, taking firm hold of my bicep like I was one of his kids. "While I appreciate everything you've done for my family, this is actually a very important party to introduce my son to donors who—"

"Hayden is going to run for a Senate seat here in Washington in two years," Emily railed at me, her voice a harsh whisper. I hadn't seen her a moment ago, but she was there, suddenly at Hank's elbow. "I know Bodhi must have told you, so I can only conclude that you're trying to sabotage his—"

"I'm taking care of this," Hank informed his wife coldly. "Please let—"

"Wait," Davis ordered them through clenched teeth. "Hayden hasn't had time to tell Bodhi about his plans to—"

"It's Redeker, right?"

All conversation stopped, and Davis, Hank, Emily, and other people I didn't know all turned to look at the man who had asked me a question. I did too, and though he seemed familiar, I couldn't place him.

“Yes, it is,” I answered, and when I did, he smiled and offered me his hand.

“I’m Duncan Stiel, Commander of the Eighteenth District in Chicago.”

“Oh, yessir, you’re friends with my boss.”

“And you and Ian Doyle got sent out on some shady missions to help find Sam Kage’s son a place to live.”

I exhaled, calming, and it was strange because Stiel and I weren’t friends, but he was like a safe port in the storm, and I was very thankful. I didn’t want to get loud or mean, and I was saved from having to be that guy who made a scene. “Not shady, but yeah. Some of the places we looked at—in our off time, I might add—were a bit sketchy.”

He chuckled, and I had the real urge to hug him.

“This is my husband,” he announced as the real estate mogul and philanthropist Aaron Sutter joined us. “Aaron, this is Josiah Redeker. He works for Sam.”

Sutter’s expression, which had been flat, devoid of emotion, cold even, was suddenly bright, and I was treated to the smile that was all over the internet and graced magazine covers like Barron’s and Forbes. His whole face came to life, and the man was stunning. “Pleasure to meet you, Deputy US Marshal,” he said, extending his hand.

I took it and found his grip firm and warm. “The pleasure’s mine, sir.”

“Whatever are you doing so far from home?”

“My partner and I were—oh, here he is,” I said as Bodhi reached me, his hand going immediately to my back. “Mr. Sutter, this is my partner, Bodhi Callahan.”

“Marshal Callahan,” he greeted Bodhi, taking his hand next. “I was just asking your partner what brings you to Seattle.”

“We were visiting, sir. But we’ve been recalled, and our boss wants us at the airport right this second, so we have to—”

“Oh, well, please, let us be of assistance,” Mr. Sutter rushed out. “If you’re going back to Chicago, you can hitch a ride with us, as we’re leaving shortly.”

Bodhi cleared his throat. “Sir, we don’t want to impose on ___”

“No, no, no, it’s not an imposition in the least,” Mr. Sutter insisted.

“It’s not. Really,” Stiel stressed, and I got the feeling that us needing to leave was the best news he’d heard all night. I had to wonder what a career cop from Chicago—and I was aware, as was everyone, that he’d come up through the ranks; not to mention, people everywhere were enraptured with the story of the cop and the billionaire—was doing at whatever high-class function was happening at the Burdine home? “We don’t want to make Sam Kage wait.”

“Who is Sam Kage?” Emily asked sharply.

“He’s our boss,” I told her. “The Chief Deputy.”

“We accept your gracious offer,” Bodhi told Mr. Sutter. “Could you wait while we grab our things, sir?”

“Absolutely. We’ll leave as soon as we see you by the front door.”

Bodhi took hold of my bicep, led me through the crowd toward the arch, and then down the hall.

“I want to ask you all about your conversation with Hayden, but—”

“No, I know. Tell me.”

I was going to, but my phone rang then, and since I could see it was our office, I put it on speaker just as Bodhi and I reached my room. “Hello?”

“Jed,” Miro said, and I heard how shaky his voice was. “We have Ian.”

“Oh thank God,” I husked, my phone falling from my hand to the bed. I dropped down beside it, my knees going out on me. Funny how you had no idea what someone meant to you

until you were faced with losing them. Somewhere in the time I'd been in Chicago, Ian Doyle went from being my boss to my friend. I wanted him to stick around a long time.

“What’s going on?” Bodhi demanded, picking up my phone and holding it between us as he took a seat beside me.

Miro said, “I...wait a sec while I...while—”

“No, go get into the ambulance with him,” Chris Becker instructed him.

“They won’t let—”

“They will,” Becker assured him. “Go now. I’m right behind you with your phone.” There was a silence, only ambient noise, and then, “Still there?”

“Yessir,” I answered.

“Okay, so the SOG team entered the rectory, found nothing, searched the offices, found nothing again, and finally searched downstairs in a basement meeting room and found Ian duct-taped to a chair.”

“And he’s okay?”

“He’s hurt, but he was yelling, so that’s a good sign.”

It was. Anyone who knew Ian Doyle knew it was.

“From what Wes could see, there was enough C-4 to blow the entire church, plus the cemetery in back, sky high.”

“Jesus,” Bodhi husked.

“Wes, of course, went to get Ian out, and as is protocol, turned on a signal jammer in case the bomb was going to be detonated via Wi-Fi.”

“That’s standard operating procedure now?”

“It is,” Becker told us. “The bomb squad was right behind SOG, just in case, because Kage thought that was the most likely scenario. As usual, he was right.”

Kage had to be the most careful man on the planet. He was also exceedingly prepared and didn’t take chances with any of our lives, which was why I really wanted him to forget all

about what had happened with me and Crouse and that whole witness removal going sideways.

“So Ian and Wes are both all right?” Bodhi blurted out.

“Yes.”

“And the bomb was deactivated?”

“That’s correct.”

“And Ian? What happened to Ian?”

“He lost quite a bit of blood from several deep lacerations, but he was slashed, not stabbed. Brodie wanted him to bleed, not die.”

Becker didn’t need to add that Brodie hadn’t wanted Ian to die from that; he’d wanted him to die in the blast. We all understood what he meant.

“So Ian’s gonna be fine?”

“Yes. Lots of stitches, and he needs to not move for a few days, which I’m sure will be the worst part of this for him.”

I had no doubt. Ian Doyle was a retired Army Ranger and Green Beret, so the word *rest* was not in his vocabulary. He was going to be an ass about it too, I was sure. Miro was going to have a bear on his hands. But he got him back, and that was the important part. Knowing he was safe; I could breathe again.

“So what do we think is going on as things stand now, sir?” Bodhi asked Becker.

“We’re not—wait,” he ordered. “Hold the line.”

He was gone then, and we sat there, quiet, waiting, and then there were several *beeps*.

“Okay, is everyone on?” Kage asked, having taken over from Becker.

We sounded off then, saying our names, Ryan and Dorsey, Ching and Becker, Jer, Sharpe and White, Yamane and Pazzi, Lopez and Cho, and then I said my name and Bodhi his.

“Good,” Kage said on an exhale. “So here’s what we know. For whatever reason, Gabriel Brodie is taking out his anger at being fired from the marshals service on the people who were, he believes, the final straw.”

Bodhi and I were working our first joint task force with the DEA in Chicago the day Brodie was fired. We’d recently worked a second one, but it had been during the first that we heard that Ian and Eli had found a witness that belonged to Brodie and his partner, Leo Rodriguez. Basically, the guy, Shawn Pelham, was walking around unprotected in the world. He was gone now, transferred from Chicago that same day, which looked bad for our district. Normally, you liked to place witnesses once. They were only moved in a crisis situation, and the office that allowed that to happen was considered to have failed that witness. Since Sam Kage ran a well-oiled machine of an office with the most competent people I’d ever worked with, it was a rare blemish on his record.

Brodie had been, by all accounts, a dick from the beginning. He was lazy, surly, had a huge chip on his shoulder, and most importantly, didn’t care. His former boss, Kent Standish, had been fired as well for playing pass the trash with many transfers, not just Brodie. At the moment, though, it was far worse than anyone had anticipated.

“So you’re saying he’s the one who tried to shoot Eli this morning?” Ethan Sharpe asked Kage.

“That we don’t know. Wes found the gun that was used on the attempt on Eli’s life when he secured Doyle, and the ballistics match, but Brodie’s prints aren’t on the rifle.”

“That’s fast on the ballistics,” I said, because it was. The FBI moved faster than CPD, of course they did, they were the Feds after all, but even for them, that was speedy.

“The FBI takes marshals being shot at quite seriously,” Kage replied flatly.

Or more likely, Zane Calhoun, the special agent in charge in Chicago, a personal friend of Sam Kage, had jumped on that, especially after last Monday’s debacle with me and Crouse.

“Regardless if Brodie took the shot at Eli or not, it’s his anger that’s fueling this, so if we find him, we’ll find whoever else is involved.”

“Brodie tried to kill both Ian and Eli. Will he try again?” Chandler White asked.

“The FBI profiler says no,” Kage explained, “and I agree. Now it’s only me he’s after.”

I took a breath. “For you, sir?”

“I’m the one who fired him.”

He said all the words so calmly.

“What about your family, sir?” Bodhi asked the question the rest of us hesitated on.

“Let me be clear,” Kage said, taking a breath. “This is not some long, drawn-out revenge plot to make me suffer. Ian and Eli found the witness I fired Brodie over. In response, after stewing for nearly a year now, he’s taking his shot at us. He failed twice, he’s most likely enraged at this point, so he will come for me and me alone.”

“Yes, sir,” Bodhi said quickly.

“That’s not to say I don’t have my family watched. My husband has Dorsey and Ryan on him, yes?”

“Yessir, we’re here outside your house.”

“Good, thank you,” he rushed out and then went on, sounding calmer, “And my son and daughter are out shopping, and my daughter’s bodyguard is there keeping an eye on them.”

“Your daughter has her own bodyguard?” Kendall Cho asked.

“It’s a long story, but yes. He’s overly qualified to be a bodyguard, so I have every faith that a black-ops sniper, now in the reserves, will be a match for Gabriel Brodie.”

“More than a match, sir,” Cho assured him.

“The only thing we can’t account for is who might be collateral damage when he does come for me.”

“Then we have to find him first,” Jer Kowalski, director of Judicial Support, spoke up.

“Precisely. Which is why I need all my people here finding him. Rodriguez, who works in Vermont now, was questioned earlier this morning to find out all the places Brodie frequented back when they were partners here. Currently, the FBI is taking a deep dive into his life, but I need you all on the streets, hunting him down.”

It was what the marshals did.

“Well, sir, Bodhi and I are catching a ride back with your friend Commander Duncan Stiel, so we’ll be there around four a.m. or so.”

Silence.

I’d purposely used the commander’s name and not the billionaire’s to at least help a little. Everyone didn’t need to know his business.

“With Commander Stiel?”

“Yessir, he’s here in Seattle as well.”

Heavy sigh. “Good. Fine. Call me as soon as you touch down,” Kage advised me. “Everyone else off. I need to speak to Callahan and Redeker.”

You could hear the *clicks* of lines going dead.

“Something more, sir?” I asked Kage.

“I’m certain you want to know why Doyle called you, and I want to answer that.” The man was thorough in all his explanations.

“Yessir. Thank you, sir.”

“Well, Ian called you because there was only a push-button landline there in the basement meeting room, and for whatever reason, yours is the only number he has memorized.”

“What about Miro’s?”

“Apparently not. But I don’t have my husband’s number memorized either. Who does anymore? That’s what my phone is for.”

“Yessir,” I agreed because it was true. I had my sister’s number memorized because it had started out as the landline for the ranch which I’d used growing up, and became the one for the sanctuary. But it was the only one I knew by heart. I would have to learn Bodhi’s in case my phone and I were ever parted.

“Why does Ian know your number?” he asked me. “Why is yours so special?”

“It’s because it spells a word,” I informed him.

“What word?”

“Teddy-boo,” Bodhi chimed in with a chuckle. “But not boo like at Halloween, but the letters. B-U.”

“I see.”

“We were talking about stupid crap one day in the car, and it came up.”

“Well, I’m glad it did, because calling you saved his life.”

“May I ask how he dialed?”

Bodhi put his arm around me, which helped with the sudden shivering.

“Doyle dialed your number with his nose because that was all he had to use.”

“Jesus.”

“But the phone—like I said, an old push-button kind—was there, and he knocked the receiver off the cradle and punched out your number with his face.”

“And Brodie didn’t hear that?”

“We think he was monitoring the entrance and exit of the building, nothing more. He was confident that Doyle couldn’t make it to the phone with being restrained and because of his

injuries. Brodie was far more invested in blowing him up, as well as the SOG team, when they went in to save him.”

“But when you pinged Ian’s phone, it didn’t work,” I prompted him.

“Correct. But we don’t think Brodie knew that. He turned Doyle’s phone off when he kidnapped him and simply forgot to turn it back on. He thought we were tracking Doyle’s phone and would be there shortly. Without Doyle calling you and giving you the cipher about a herald of visions, which hinted at both the identity of the perp as well as the location where he was being held, we would have never found him.”

“Why the cipher?” I asked. “Why didn’t Ian just say it was Brodie?”

“Because, as Ian told Wes, he had no idea if Brodie was monitoring his audio. He knew he didn’t have eyes on him, but wasn’t certain if he could hear him or not.”

“Did Ian know about the C4?”

“Of course not,” Kage rasped. “Think about it. This is Ian Doyle. If he knew, he wouldn’t have called. Ian would have never put the rest of us in danger.”

“That’s true,” Bodhi agreed. “Sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

Kage grunted like the apology wasn’t needed.

“Why just the one sentence though?” I asked Kage. “What happened?”

“From the reports I’ve received, he was duct-taped to a heavy antique chair and had leaned as far forward on the front two legs as possible while he dialed and spoke to you, but they slipped out from under him which put him face-first on the floor.”

“Which had to have scared Ian thinking he made too much noise.”

“I’m sure.”

“What a mess,” Bodhi stated. “If Ian hadn’t gotten that message out to Jed, he would have been there all night,

bleeding.”

“And eventually Brodie would have gotten tired of waiting for the cavalry to arrive, and ignited the bomb,” Kage concluded. “We’re fortunate that all the events transpired as they did.”

“Yessir,” we both said.

“Well done for immediately calling Miro,” Kage praised me.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Call me when you land,” he directed, and then the line went dead.

Both Bodhi and I sat there on the bed for a moment.

I said, “I would be a fuckin’ basket case if someone was actively trying to murder me.”

“Same,” Bodhi agreed.

After a moment, I turned to him. “So? You’re mine?”

He smiled. “All yours.”

“Good. Go pack your shit. I’ll meet you at the front door. I’m gonna go downstairs and say goodbye really quick. Grab my duffel on your way out. It’ll be sitting on the bed.”

“And already he starts ordering me around,” he teased, leaning in to kiss my cheek before he got up and went out the door.

I was so happy to start my life, but first, we needed to get home to make sure we helped save our boss’s.

STELLA WAS DISTRAUGHT that I was leaving, but my number was in her phone, and Meredith promised to bring her to Chicago in the fall to see me.

“If that’s all right with you, Jed?” she asked softly.

In response, I hugged her just as hard as I had her daughter, and when I let her go, her smile was luminous.

Angie was next, reminding me that I had her number as well, so the calling had better not be just one way.

“Your brother hates me.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “He doesn’t have to see you. I live in Boston, you live in Chicago. I can’t imagine it will be a problem.”

“He lives in Chicago too,” I pointed out.

“For another minute or two, yes.”

I heard that loud and clear and remembered that I had a lot to tell Bodhi. I hugged Josette, shook hands with Giles, hugged Shae and then the rest of the kids. Stella chased me down for one last hug, and then ran back to her mom, who had wisely followed her, ready to provide much-needed comfort. Upstairs on the main floor, I passed by my room, rechecked it quickly, found nothing I’d left behind, and saw that my duffel was gone. Bodhi was waiting at the front door, a duffel in each hand, and now in jeans and a T-shirt and my zippered cardigan that he’d retaken possession of. His running shoes looked far better than the tassel loafers.

“You changed?”

“And left the suit on the bed. I’m sure Hayden will find a use for it. He just needs to have it taken in and it’ll be good to go.”

They were the same height, but Bodhi had muscle on the lawyer, and he was right—through the chest, shoulders, and arms, it would need to be sized down.

In moments, we were joined by Stiel, who was fidgeting with his collar and a scarf where a tie normally was.

“You look uncomfortable,” Bodhi offered, grinning.

“Yeah, whatever this is, cravat, ascot—fuck. I hate it. I’m being slowly choked to death.”

I smiled at him because he just swore over a piece of material. I liked him already.

Bodhi wanted to leave the house for more than one reason, and so he asked, “Should I go get Mr. Sutter or—”

“No,” Stiel said, tugging off the offending garment. “As soon as he notices I’m not there—yeah, see? Here he comes.”

The billionaire was jogging to where we were, which surprised me.

“That lasted longer than usual,” Sutter teased his husband, taking the material from him, putting it quickly to his face, inhaling, and then folding it around his hand as Stiel held the door open.

Walking behind them toward a large SUV, I saw how tightly Stiel clutched his husband to him and how much the billionaire leaned. They were relationship goals right there.

On the plane, Sutter directed us to the back so we could have our privacy and they could have theirs.

“Thank you so much for the ride, sir,” I reiterated. “Our boss wants us back, and we need to be there.”

“Is something going on?” Sutter asked me.

“Not something you can know at the moment,” Stiel told him, tugging his husband close before glancing up at us. “Take a seat, gentlemen.” He was a police commander; he was used to giving orders, just like my boss.

In the back, on a plane that made Hayden’s father’s look shoddy by comparison, Bodhi and I sat together, pressed close, and I loved having his hand curled around the inside of my thigh.

After several moments, I asked him if he was okay.

“I am,” he answered with a sigh. “Which makes me a horrible person, but Hayden did agree that I was saving him more heartbreak down the line.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means he knew, Jed,” he said with a rueful smile. “He could tell from looking at me look at you, hearing my voice when I speak to you, and how, like always, I can’t keep my

hands off you...that I'm stupid in love with you and that will never change."

"He said he thought you were stupid in love with me?"

"No, idiot. I added the stupid."

I smiled at him, and his breath stuttered.

"What else?"

"When we first started talking, he asked if I planned to ever fuck him again."

"That's charming," I said, hating that Hayden spoke to him like that.

"Well, I fucked him a lot, and he liked it."

"Thanks for that."

"No, I'm just telling you the truth. I did, and then, as soon as you were in the hospital, I didn't leave your side, and everything, including that, stopped."

"Just like that?"

He nodded.

"Why?"

"You know why," he husked out. "I had you back with me, all your focus on me, just like it's always been, and you know you're irresistible."

"To you."

"I dunno about that. If you weren't gay, I think both Meredith and Angie would have taken you home, and Davis —"

"No, listen, Davis fuckin' hates me and—"

"Davis wanted to take the ride bad." He waggled his eyebrows at me.

"You're an ass."

"True," he agreed, his eyes glinting with mirth before he slowly grew serious. "Hayden hates me now."

“He doesn’t, though, and I’m sure that’s the problem.”

He nodded. “He said I should have told him everything about you, and he’s right, and I apologized.”

“Well, that part’s good, that you said you were sorry.”

“I mean, I didn’t ruin his life,” he said with a shrug. “And I told him I would pay my half of whatever couldn’t be canceled for the wedding.”

“Weren’t you getting married there, at the house?”

“Well, yeah, but I mean like the catering and stuff like that.”

“I really don’t think they’re going to ask the poor deputy US marshal to pony up any cash. How bad would that look in the press?”

“Press?”

“Did he not tell you he was gonna run for a Senate seat in two years?”

The way he was staring at me, I was guessing not.

“Emily told me that was what the party tonight was for, and Davis confirmed it. So if you think about all of it logically, that means you and Hayden weren’t gonna be in Chicago long.”

“I guess not. He and his family have big plans.”

I studied his face. “Are you mad? I can usually tell.”

“Not mad, just...it feels like if I wasn’t smart enough to know what real love is supposed to feel like and be, that I would have been blindsided when he hit me with all this down the road.”

“You would have been. Yeah.”

“And because I’ve just gone along with everything, he probably thought I was submissive and pliable and would just do what he wanted.”

“*Agreeable* was the word Angie used.”

“Yeah. Agreeable.”

“What’s funny is you’re so not that guy.”

He met my gaze.

“I mean, we’ve had knock-down drag-out fights about Fig Newtons.”

“Because it’s not a cookie, Jed,” he was adamant, immediately picking up the discussion from the last time we’d dropped it. “A cookie is by definition small, flat, and made from flour and sugar.”

I chuckled because he was so serious. “Fig Newtons have all that in there.”

“And fruit! There’s no fruit in cookies.”

“What about the kind with a cherry in the middle?”

“That’s a tart.”

“No, like shortbread cookies.”

“Do you even know what you’re talking about right now?”

I did but it hardly mattered. I was so happy just to have him with me.

“Remember the time we fought for three days about ninjas versus samurai?”

“Which was stupid too. Ninjas are assassins, samurai are warriors.”

He shook his head.

“Whatever, that’s not the point,” I grumbled. “The point is that you are not now, and have never been, agreeable.”

“Well, I don’t see that as a bad thing.”

“Me neither,” I told him, grinning.

He was quiet for a moment. “Do you think they wanted me to be some kind of beard?”

I scoffed. “That’s not how a beard works, love.”

“No, I know, but...you get it. Like a blue-collar guy was what he was looking for. Here’s my husband the law-enforcement guy? Was that what he was trolling for?”

“No,” I assured him, certain as always that anyone who met Bodhi would want him because, very simply, there was no one better.

“You can’t be trusted,” he said dismissively. “You’re crazy about me, so you have no objectivity whatsoever.”

“Yeah, but c’mon, why would Hayden want—”

His gasp was sharp as he pointed at Sutter and Stiel. “That’s what it was. That’s what all this was. Me and Hayden were a younger them. Can you imagine how good it would have looked with Sutter endorsing him? Jesus Christ, Jed, I—did you just call me love?”

“What?”

“Focus.”

“I can’t with how you’re lookin’ at me,” I snapped at him.

“Oh?” He smiled lazily. “How am I lookin’ at ya?” He copied my drawl perfectly.

“Like I’ve been hopin’ you would for a long time.”

He shook his head. “I really like your place. It’s got a very warm vibe over there.”

“You do?” I asked hopefully. “It does?”

“It does. Mine is sterile and upscale, and it’ll sell fast. Just you watch.”

“Which means that—”

“Which means that after we find Gabe Brodie, whom I never liked but didn’t actually think was a psychopath, we’re gonna get the guys to help move me into your place.”

I nodded. “Yes. Let’s do that.”

“And I want a cat. It’s mean to have a dog with our shitty hours, but a cat is good because they like their alone time.”

“A cat sounds good.”

“Okay,” he said, exhaling deeply. “We’re good.”

And we really were.

TEN

As soon as we landed, after thanking our hosts profusely, Bodhi and I went to long-term parking and got into Bodhi's Army-green 1989 Toyota Land Cruiser FJ62. He'd owned it as long as I'd known him and now, since I didn't have my own car, I would have something to park in the garage that my house sat over. I called Kage, even though it was nearly five in the morning. He, of course, was at the office but directed us to go to the hospital where Ian was, Northwestern Memorial, and so we drove there.

Normally, visiting hours did not start so early, but Ian Doyle was a deputy US marshal, so there were extenuating circumstances. Plus, Ian had a big private room, so they could herd all of us in there and close the door. And really, when all was said and done, the hospital simply could not tell the chief deputy no. I couldn't imagine anyone ever saying that word to Kage.

When we walked in, I was met by Ian's wide grin. "Who knew fuckin' Teddy-Bu was gonna be something I'd need to save my life?"

I walked over to the bed, bent and put my good arm around him.

He hugged me back with more strength than I thought he'd have. "You look like hammered shit, Jed."

"I was in a different time zone, you'll remember."

"Oh yeah, that's right," he said, hugging Bodhi when he leaned in after me.

Ian looked pretty good. Tired but good. There were bandages, but his coloring was healthy and his smile was all him, mischievous and wild. “You hopped up on the good drugs?”

Instant scowl. “Absolutely not. You have to feel some pain so you know when you’re healing, am I right?”

“What is that, some scary-ass Green Beret shit?” Bodhi teased him.

He shook his head. “In the field, you get sewn up and you go on. Hospitals, man, who has the time?”

I didn’t say anything, and neither did Bodhi. We’d both seen his bare back a few times when we played basketball, football, or racquetball, and the scars there, from what appeared to have been a flogging, along with various other marks all over him, spoke to hard living. I suspected his brothers-in-arms looked much the same.

“Listen, just take it easy, all right?” I ordered him.

He grunted, but clearly, he wasn’t about to get up and walk out of there. I was thinking our boss had something to do with that.

“Has Kage been here to see you?” I asked Ian.

“Yeah. He had to go back to the office to meet with Calhoun and the guys from Homeland.”

“Who’s watching his house now?” I asked, since Dorsey and Ryan were there, sitting in the room.

“My buddy George Hunt. He’s his daughter’s bodyguard.”

“Is he really a black-ops sniper?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah? I mean, I saw him that one time in their house back in, like, 2021. He was there with you, remember?”

Ian nodded. “Yeah.”

“So that was him?”

Ian made a noise of agreement.

“He looked beat to shit that night.”

“Yeah. He’d just gotten back from a mission in Dakar where the team lost a couple of guys,” he said solemnly. “He’s good now.”

“So tell me what happened with Brodie.”

He shook his head. “It was stupid. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Just tell me,” I prodded him.

“I went to grab some lunch and saw him across the street, and I thought, the fuck is he doing here today of all days, you know?”

“Because of what happened to Eli.”

“Yeah,” he said softly. “The timing was odd.”

“And so you did what?”

“I crossed the street to talk to him, and I called his name, but he didn’t turn around.”

“And you thought he couldn’t hear you.”

“I did, so I followed him, and when I was close enough, he turned so fast. Like one second everything was normal and the next he’s shooting fuckin’ mace at me.”

“Ours, or the cheap shit people buy at gun shops?”

“Ours. Standard fuckin’ issue, and of course I can’t see, and then he hit me with a baton.”

“He could have killed you.”

“Yeah, he could’ve, but I still broke his goddamn nose on the way down.”

I grinned at him. “You’re so mad.”

“Hell yes, I’m mad! Years of training, and fuckin’ douchebag Brodie gets the drop on me? I won’t be able to face any of the guys on my old team. I won’t be able to face Hunt the next time I see him.”

“You realize you never expected him to attack you.”

“But I should have known better. We did not part well.”

“Sure, but really, none of us saw this coming.”

“I know, I get it, but still, that would have never happened in the field.”

“You’ve been lulled into a false sense of security.”

“I have. I’ve lost my edge, and I need to reacquire it.”

I shook my head.

“No?” He was indignant. “Why would you say that?”

“Because you don’t need to be on a hair trigger all the time. You’re the deputy director. You’re the boss now. You have to find the diplomatic solution to the guy with a hammer.”

He growled, I laughed, and everyone got quiet as Ian crossed his arms.

“Right?”

“Yeah,” he said like it was painful.

And then everyone was a bit loud again, but not nearly at the decibel level I knew they could be.

When Chris Becker walked into the room, everyone shut up to hear him.

“Kage wants the following people to go home and go to bed,” he said, and listed the names, Bodhi and I being on the list. “The rest of you need to report to the office now, to be relieved by two in the afternoon.”

Everyone moved quickly.

“You have two guys from Judicial Support on the door,” Becker told Ian, “and CPD officers are walking this floor. Go to sleep, because I’m going to need your brain later.”

Ian nodded.

“He”—Becker pointed at Miro—“stays here with you, because while I respect the hell out of Kage, we are going to protect all our families until this is over. The press release goes wide in ten minutes, listing Brodie as armed and dangerous

and for the public to not approach him. It's a manhunt now, so we need to be ready."

It was a nightmare, was what it was.

"Go home," Becker ordered me, and I reached for Ian's hand. He took mine and squeezed. He did the same with Bodhi, and then we were waiting by the elevators with everyone else.

"Kage didn't even tell his family," Cho said as we all entered the elevator. "They're gonna see it on the news and worry about him when he's worried about them."

Bodhi scoffed.

"No?" Lopez asked him. "You think different?"

"They're not going to be worried about him because all they're going to see on the news is that a former marshal is wanted for questioning in conjunction with the attack on Kohn yesterday," Bodhi explained. "There won't be any mention of Doyle or the explosives—nothing. That'll come out much later, much quieter, downplayed to something barely notable. Right now, what we know is a manhunt, the public at large will be led to think is merely routine."

"I agree," Yamane chimed in. "Kage and the Feds and Homeland, they don't want to cause a panic, so it will be one of those press bulletins where this individual is a person of interest and that's it."

"I love how it's true but not at the same time," Pazzi said, then grinned at Bodhi. "And by the way, when Redeker was *my* partner, he never got shot."

It took a second for what came out of his mouth to sink in, and then a few more for me to realize he was trying to be funny.

"Holy shit," I murmured. "Have you got a death wish or what?"

I had to give Yamane credit, he moved really fast to intercept Bodhi. With my bum shoulder, there was no way I could have kept him from killing Pazzi.

“What did you just say?” Bodhi roared as Yamane, with the quick help of Cho, shoved him up against the wall of the elevator.

“Wait, I was kidding!” Pazzi shouted.

“What *the fuck* did you just say?”

Oh, he was mad, like seeing-red-in-a-rage mad, and he was moving around, trying to get free but not wanting to hurt Cho or Yamane. His regard for them was the only reason he didn’t punch Pazzi through the steel wall of the elevator.

“Oh my God, Eric!” Lopez yelled at him. “Are you insane?”

“That was an evacuation protocol, you stupid sonofabitch!” Cho barked at him as she held on to the man I loved. “Do you even think before words come out of your mouth?”

“I was kidding!” Pazzi protested loudly.

“When I tell Doyle, he’s going to murder you,” Lopez stated with absolute certainty.

“No, don’t do that,” he begged her.

When the elevator stopped, Lopez shoved him off, even though we had ten floors to go.

“Come on, man,” he made his plea to Bodhi, “I’m sorry. It was funny and—”

“It wasn’t funny,” Yamane assured his partner, hitting the button to close the door before turning to Bodhi. “I’m sorry. He’s an idiot, but I also know he didn’t mean it in a bad way. Not at all. He was just trying to make us laugh.”

“Between his comment and the broken earpiece,” Bodhi told him, “I will beat the shit out of him, and no one’s going to stop me.”

“No, they won’t,” Cho agreed. “Kage has given him a chance to redeem himself, but idiotic comments like that will not make our boss happy, and we all know it.”

“I know,” Yamane said with a sigh. “He’s awkward sometimes.”

“He’s a waste of a badge,” Bodhi said, his voice a rasp of icy disgust.

The car was silent as we descended.

“Nobody’s mad at you, you know that,” I made clear to Yamane. “And sticking up for your partner is admirable.”

He nodded.

We all faced forward when people joined us on the sixth floor, and even when they got off two floors down, the subject remained closed. When Pazzi tried to get on when we hit the third, Bodhi just shook his head. It would take him a minute to get over that. He was not in a forgiving mood.

BODHI and I drove to my place, and since my keys had the fob for the garage door, we parked in there.

“There’s an opener upstairs that we’ll put in your car,” I told him.

“Yeah, it’s nice in here. My car likes it.”

I chuckled as we got out. “Is that right?”

“Yep,” he assured me. “Feels like it was meant to be.”

It did to me as well.

Trudging up the stairs, I realized how bone tired I was. We’d been gone such a short time, but it felt like forever.

“There’s nothing in your fridge,” he told me, walking toward the front door. “I checked before we left. Since we gotta eat, I’m going to run down to the deli and get us—”

“No,” I said, stepping in front of him. “Just have something delivered. Kage wouldn’t want either of us to be alone. It’s not safe.”

“Kage wouldn’t want?” he baited me with a smirk.

“Fine. I don’t want you out of my sight.”

“All right, then.”

We stood there staring at each other, and it seemed so normal and easy. And yes, we were in a crisis, but at the same time, I felt so good.

Bodhi said, “I’ll order soup and sandwiches, and we’ll take a shower and eat and go to bed.”

“Go to bed?”

He shook his head at me. “You’re such a perv.”

“No, I just, you know, have been thinking about it since we met, is all.”

“Me too, but you are hurt and tired, and that is not what I call a recipe for a memorable night or day or whatever it is now.”

“Morning,” I told him.

“Okay,” he said, then chuckled.

“What?”

“I’m imagining falling asleep while giving you a blowjob.”

“Stop.”

“Forehead on the dick,” he said, cracking himself up.

I scowled at him, which only made him laugh more, and he was basically useless because of more images like that one running through his head.

And then, as I could have bet on, the tears came. It wasn’t a surprise. He’d been through a lot in the last two days. He went from having a fiancé to not, to being with me, but the romantic part was untested. Then there was this threat to all of us, we hadn’t slept, I was hurt, so he had to be constantly on guard to keep me safe, and the only person he had to lean on, to look to, was me, and what if *us* was a giant mistake and he lost everything?

“You’re all up in your head, huh?” he asked, wiping at his eyes.

I reached for him, and he walked right into me, letting me enfold him against me as I talked into his ear and breathed into his hair. “Listen, I know your whole world is upside down right now. And even though Hayden wasn’t the one for you, he was solid and stable, but I’m that too. I can be that for you. Have faith in me, all right?”

“Idiot,” he murmured, arms around me, his face pressed against my throat. “I love you, and I have all the faith. I know you’re my rock, you always have been. I just want everything to start because I have the change, just not the new yet.”

I smiled and exhaled deeply. “All I want is you. I will not fuck this up.”

“I know, Jed,” he whispered, his hand around the back of my neck, sliding up into my hair as he lifted and bent me to him.

Our lips met, and he devoured my mouth, not at all gentle, and I opened for him. His moan was all decadence and heat. I could feel what he wanted—my submission and trust. Kissing him back, I sucked on his tongue so he could taste my desire and need. The give and take was endless, and when he knocked me back gently against the wall, parting my thighs, hands on my hips, I bit his bottom lip gently.

He broke the kiss and looked at me, and I saw the blown pupils and his swollen lips and how flushed his skin was.

“You’re so beautiful,” I barely got out.

“It’s you, Jed,” he assured me, leaning into me. “And it’s going to take me a minute to wrap my brain around this being real, so you’re going to have to deal with a lot of mauling while I convince myself you’re mine.”

“That sounds terrible,” I teased before kissing him again.

The smiling he did as I kissed him made me feel like I was glowing.

STANDING in the shower ten minutes later, I had my head under the water, really trying to find my balance and not worry and

not have that niggling feeling that somehow, everything could be taken away. I was never scared, but I'd never had everything I wanted before either. I wondered if everyone had those feelings now and then, that the happiness could end. Or did other people just take for granted that nothing could change? That wasn't me. I needed to stay vigilant.

"This is a nice shower," Bodhi said, and I lifted my head and looked at him.

He was right outside the glass door. The shower was the only change I had made to the house when I moved in. The rest of the renovations had been great, move-in ready, but the shower stall was tiny, and I didn't need a bathtub. I had that taken out, and now I had a shower with all the jets, a marble seat, and lots of ledges to put things on and places to hang things like eucalyptus and dried chaparral bundles that made my shower smell like the desert when it rained.

"Thank you," I rasped because he was naked and all the sculpted muscles and sleek skin were there on display.

"I missed that smell. I tried to get my own, but they were never the same," he said, and I knew what he meant. The chaparral had to be picked fresh and dried right away or it lost most of its scent. I was lucky, I received them monthly from a wonderful woman in Arizona named Sherri whom I met on a trip. She lived in Sedona with a lot of rescue Dobermans, and we'd met while I was hiking and she was foraging. The scent of the desert soothed me, and she found a way to give that to me. I offered to pay her, but she said no. Taking care of a small part of me was good for her, she'd said. All I knew was that every shower was healing, and now Bodhi was saying he'd missed it.

"Are you coming in?"

"Is that okay?"

"Yes. Please."

The shy grin nearly undid me, and I wasn't sure what I was expecting, but him stepping up behind me and pressing his chest to my back wasn't it. If he'd grabbed me and pushed me

up against the shower wall, that I could prepare for, but the slow, gentle way he wrapped me in his arms was too much.

“Why’re you shaking?” he whispered in my ear.

“Because I never thought, ever, that I would get you.”

“Yes, you did,” he said, kissing the side of my neck. “Deep down, you knew.”

“No. I thought you were going to have a lake house and pottery studio.”

He was quiet a moment and then said, “What?”

“I had a whole thing worked out in my head.”

Turning me around, he took my face in his hands. “Well, I’m the idiot because I could never get an image in my head of what I would look like married. Every time I thought about it, I kept imagining you with me as well, cleaning your gun and asking me what the fuck we were doing there.”

I chuckled and was rewarded with a wide smile.

“You know, if I’d used my brain, even for a moment, I would have grasped what my subconscious was trying to tell me.”

“And what was that?”

“That it was always you, Jed. Always,” he said with a sigh before kissing me.

I couldn’t wait to kiss him for the rest of my life.

IT WAS WEIRD, we should have been all over each other, but I was hurt and exhausted, and he was simply worn out. Both of us being awake and vertical was a tremendous feat all on its own.

The food was there when we got out, soup and sandwiches, and I said we should eat before he wrapped me up like a mummy.

“You apparently have no idea how a mummy was wrapped up,” he said, squinting at me. “And I will not have you

accidentally tripping over something and reinjuring your shoulder.”

“Tripping over something?” I was indignant. “What am I, eighty?”

He was snickering as he left the room.

“I’m not old!”

“Glad to finally hear you say it,” he yelled back.

“I really missed you,” I called out.

“I know you did,” he said as he walked back in with all the supplies, reached me, and lifted for a kiss. “Give me love.”

And I did.

AFTER WE ATE, that was it. He helped me put the brace on, and we went into my bedroom and lay down. I rolled over on my good side, and I had him plastered to my back in moments, arm around my waist, face pressed into my nape, spooned tight. I couldn’t remember sleeping so well in years, and that was so peaceful.

And then it wasn’t because the noises weren’t right.

I knew all the sounds my house made. The settling creaks, the scrapes when the branches of the sixty-foot oak trees around my house touched my windows, the *thunks* when the damn squirrels dropped acorns on my roof. But unless you stepped on the wooden stairs out front, they did not make any noise. Since they now creaked, and then my front door rattled, I sat up, only then realizing I was alone in bed. Bodhi was gone, and the house was dark. What was really confusing was that at the end of my bed there was a wolf.

I was clearly dreaming.

Maneuvering out of bed took some work, not because I was old, but because I’d been asleep a second ago and only had one arm. But once I was vertical, I felt extremely vulnerable with only pajama bottoms on and no shirt.

Even in the darkness, I realized that the wolf was not looking at me. Instead, he was lying on the bed, paws crossed, absolutely entranced with the sounds that had woken me up.

“Wait,” I whispered to myself, coming completely awake. “Chickie,” I said to Ian and Miro’s dog, who turned his head to look at me, his tail thumping my bed a few times before he turned back to the door.

Where was Bodhi? Why was the dog here and he wasn’t? I was so confused.

Moving to my nightstand, I pulled my gun from the top drawer, did a press check, making sure it was loaded, and then was about to go to the front door, when my phone started vibrating.

The latest message was from Bodhi, asking me to call him as soon as I woke up. Quickly scrolling through the others, there was one from Kage saying to stay home. He wanted me to rest until the following day. And he knew he’d said that no one should be alone, but home, with my gun, and Chickie—he considered me safe. That made sense to me.

The one from Miro said that his friends who normally watched Chickie were out of town, so when he picked up Bodhi, he dropped off Chickie, and that there was food in the freezer and some thawing in the refrigerator.

Again, that was logical.

A new message from Bodhi came in, saying he was with Miro, looking for Brodie like everyone else, running down leads. It was all hands on deck with the manhunt. I didn’t like being left out but I understood my boss’s concern. I wasn’t even a full week out of the hospital.

Another message from Bodhi said that he would bring dinner when he got off at ten. And yes, he knew that was late, but we could stay up and watch movies.

I called him.

“Hey,” he said, his voice all sultry like it hadn’t been in years. “I—”

“There’s someone outside.”

“What?” That fast, panic replaced the desire.

“If it’s Brodie, he might have a jammer, so—”

The line went dead.

Darting around my bed, I saw that my alarm was armed but flashing because the Wi-Fi connection was gone. Of course Bodhi had armed it when he left; he would never leave me unprotected. Plus, I was sure he’d been even more confident leaving a wolf in my house. And yes, Chickie did have some wolf in him, no matter what other breeds Ian rattled off to account for his size and the thickness of his coat.

Punching buttons on the alarm, I first put it on silent mode so it wouldn’t make any announcements if the Wi-Fi came back on, then disarmed it. Whoever was out there, I wanted them to come inside.

The house was built like a Craftsman, just over a garage. So when you came in the front door, you walked into the living room, and you could see into the kitchen and straight back into my bedroom. A second bedroom came off the kitchen down a short hall, and before it was a half bathroom. That meant that whoever came into my place, I was a sitting duck in my bedroom.

Walking out, with Chickie right behind me, I didn’t move straight through the house but instead crouched down beside the couch so I could see the front windows. Chickie—again, because he was a wolf and wolves didn’t do stupid things like bark or growl at intruders because that would alert them—stayed silent, shadowing me, and stood beside me in the dark.

I saw Gabe Brodie look inside, and a hundred things went through my head starting with, if I touched my phone, it would light up. I couldn’t overpower him; he was stronger than I was at the moment, and I certainly didn’t want to send Chickie out the door because I didn’t know what Gabe was carrying and I wanted to keep the dog safe. I settled on what could be believable and what I knew he didn’t know because only Bodhi and I could have.

I rushed to the door, silently opened the dead bolt, then the lock on the knob, counted, took a breath, then threw it open and lifted my gun at the same time. Gabe Brodie, looking more like a lumberjack and less like the marshal he'd been, held a Sig Sauer on me.

Instantly, I lowered my gun, holding it by my side. "What the fuck, man, are you trying to give me a goddamn heart attack?" I griped at him, turning around and stepping back into my house, turning on the light by the door.

Chickie was dancing around, thinking it was a game. Brodie had been to Miro and Ian's house for various parties before he was fired, so even if Chickie didn't know him like he knew me, I was fine, so Brodie must be as well.

In my kitchen, I put my gun down on the counter and then went to my refrigerator and got a bottle of water out for me and one for him. Then I waited.

Brodie walked in slowly and closed the door behind him, which didn't lock because I'd made sure it wouldn't.

"The hell are you doing here?" I grumbled at him.

He replaced his gun in the holster under his jacket and only stared.

"Hello?"

"I didn't expect you to be here."

"Why wouldn't I be home?"

He cleared his throat. "I thought you and Bodhi went on a trip."

I nodded. "You saw the news?"

"Yeah, Jed, everyone saw the news," he said, moving closer.

I held out the bottle of water for him, and he came forward, on guard, and took it quickly from me. "As you can see, I'm busted up, but Bodhi's getting married, and being with his future family... Let's just say I had two days too much of that shit."

He smiled suddenly. “Rich, I heard.”

How had he heard? What kind of tabs had he been keeping? “Beyond rich, man. Like, you should’ve seen that house. It was like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

“So you came home and he’s still there?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you talked to anyone?” he asked softly.

“I talked to Miro, what, not yesterday, day before? I told him I was coming back, and I knew he was looking for someone to watch the dog. He must have had someone else drop him off because Chickie was just sitting out there on my porch when I got home this morning.”

“When you talked to Miro, you just talked about the dog?”

I squinted at him. “Yeah. Why?”

“Nothing else?”

Pointing at my shoulder, I shot him a look like he was stupid. “I’m on leave, man. What am I going to tell him about, how crappy my trip was? And then what, when Bodhi gets back, he tells him? Like I need that shit.”

“Yeah. I hear you.”

I squinted at him. “The hell happened to your nose?”

“I walked into a door,” he lied easily.

Knowing that Ian had broken it, testing to see what he would say, I wondered who had set it for him. There was tape there, and both his eyes were bruised from the break. “It looks bad.”

“I’ve looked worse,” he said, grinning at me, “as you know.”

He and Rodriguez had been with me and Bodhi when we’d apprehended a fugitive biker. Getting out of the bar, once some of the guy’s “brothers” from his club wanted to help him get away, had been far more than we’d counted on.

Knowing that asking any more questions about his nose would be stupid, I went another way. “Man, I wish you hadn’t been let go,” I muttered. “Guess who I got stuck babysittin’ for the past few months?”

His furtive, watchful expression changed then, calmed, and he walked over to the couch and flopped down. What was strange was that Chickie remained glued to my side in the kitchen instead of joining him. “Tell me.”

“Fuckin’ Pazzi,” I groaned. “He gets out of rehab, and you just knew Kage was going to stick me with him. Like I’m a goddamn babysitter.”

He chuckled. “Kage doesn’t care about careers. He just wants to destroy people. It’s the same thing he did to Mills.”

I leaned back on the counter. “Who?”

“Darren Mills. He was the supervisory deputy before Becker. He got demoted down to the Warrants Division when we both transferred in.”

I’d heard the name but didn’t have a face to go with it. That was before my time. The thing was, though, it should have been before Brodie’s as well.

It was so weird to see him with a beard and mustache, his hair still short, but not like it had been. He used to wear it in a fade, neat and perfect. Now it looked hacked and uneven, like he’d cut it himself. And we were trying to talk like we had, but it was clear he was out of practice from how stilted and awkward his responses were.

“You don’t remember Mills at all?” Brodie pressed.

“I don’t, and how the hell do you?”

“After I was let go, I looked him up. He’s a good guy, he’s the one who set my nose.”

I didn’t ask why he’d looked him up, that would give me away, and he knew it would from the way he glanced at me, as if daring me to delve. “That was nice of him.”

“What?”

I pointed at his face. “That he fixed up your nose.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

He seemed out of it. “I gotta put on a shirt,” I told him, and turned to go to my bedroom.

“I’ll get it for you,” he rushed out.

“Oh, thanks, man,” I said, smiling. “They’re all hanging in the closet.”

He got up, walked around my coffee table, then stopped. “Your T-shirts are on hangers? What’s that about?”

Just that little bit was the flicker of the old Brodie.

“They’re not wrinkled that way,” I informed him.

“Okay,” he said, smiling.

“Hey, get my sling too, will ya? My arm’s gettin’ tired.”

“Yessir,” he agreed and left me.

Instantly, I pulled my phone from my back pocket, checked it, and saw I had no bars. Thinking that Brodie might turn off the jammer since he seemed to be trusting me, I sent a *No Lights* text to Bodhi, then flipped off the vibration function and put the phone in the refrigerator in the butter compartment. I was in the pantry when Brodie came back with a T-shirt and my sling.

I reached for the shirt. “Thank you.”

“I’ll help you,” he said like I was stupid and of course he would.

Gently, he put it over my head and helped me thread the brace through the hole and then get my arm through the other. He was careful when he did all the Velcro straps on the sling.

“Tell me what happened,” he prodded me.

“It was in the paper,” I said with a yawn. “Are you hungry at all? Do you want me to make something, or we could have something delivered. You want pizza?”

He nodded. “Pizza would be good.”

“You’ll have to order it with your phone. I cannot find mine anywhere, and now I’m worried I left it in the cab from the airport.”

“You don’t have your phone?” He sounded excited over that possibility.

I shook my head. “Try and call it.”

He got up and turned away, reaching into his pocket for the jammer I knew he had, and then once it was off, only then turning back to face me as he called.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he said after a moment, looking and sounding, relieved. “It’s just going straight to voicemail.”

“Well, that’s fuckin’ great,” I said with a heavy sigh. “And my watch is dead, so yeah...order us some food, will ya?”

He smiled. “I appreciated you always being nice to me, Jed.”

“Your brain isn’t working,” I teased him, taking a seat on my couch. “I gave you a lot of shit, man, especially about your paperwork. Don’t you remember that?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t like Kage or Doyle. You were never out to get me. You never tried to hurt me or embarrass me.”

“Of course not,” I agreed.

“See? Yeah. Of course not.”

I turned on the TV to check baseball scores, ignoring him, and Chickie sat beside me, looking like a statue, not relaxed in the least.

After a few minutes of silence, Brodie said, “Did you ever read the reports about how Craig Hartley shot that dog?”

“Craig Hartley didn’t shoot the dog,” I corrected him, my focus still on the TV. “He saved the dog.”

“Is that right?” He pulled his Sig Sauer from his shoulder holster. “The serial killer saved Ian’s dog?”

Ian’s dog. The words were spoken so flat and cold.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I asked him, scowling. “Put the gun away in my house.”

“Make him go with me to the backyard.”

“For what?”

He didn’t answer.

“Have you lost your fuckin’ mind?”

His gaze met mine, and I waited, holding it, not looking away. My gun was on the counter, still fully loaded, ready to fire, with a round in the chamber, but it was much too far to be of any help. The only thing keeping Chickie alive was the game I was playing.

I had sent Bodhi the *No Lights* text. It was a thing only the men who worked for Sam Kage knew. Simple words that meant that danger wasn’t imminent, but hurry the fuck up because whoever sent it needed backup. But even if I hadn’t, or if Bodhi didn’t get the text, he still knew, from our brief talk before the line went dead, that I had an intruder. With everyone knowing that Brodie was out there, I knew Wes was probably on his way with no lights and no sirens, though it was possible SOG was further away than I thought which left Bodhi mobilizing something himself. All I could do was wait and keep Brodie talking.

“So you’re saying you won’t let me kill Ian’s dog?”

“What’s wrong with you?” I snapped at him. “I mean, really, what the hell?”

He got up then and started pacing, still holding the gun. I got up, and when I did, he pointed the gun at me.

“For fuck’s sake, Gabe,” I yelled at him, “if you’re gonna shoot me, then fuckin’ shoot me, but at least don’t be a psychopath about it. Just tell me why first.”

He stood there, and I could see his mind working, thinking, running through his memories of me. I had called him after he was fired, left messages telling him I hoped he was okay. I didn’t know if he got them because he’d never called me back, but I’d made the effort.

It occurred to me that he'd tried to have Eli killed, and would have blown up Ian, but I had never been in a place of power or authority over him. I was a senior investigator, yes, but that came with years on the job, not status.

"Sorry," he said under his breath, holstering the gun.

"Okay." I took a breath. "I'm gonna put Chickie in my bedroom so you don't get the urge to shoot him again, all right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, okay."

"Come, Chick."

He followed me to my bedroom, where I had him walk in ahead of me. He turned around before I could close the door, fast for such a large dog, and I hated leaving him in there because he looked anxious, trying to get past me and out. "No," I ordered, and he sat and whined. I would have rather had him out there with me, and his presence had been comforting, but Brodie would hurt him, and I couldn't have that.

Back in the living room, I saw that the pizza had come and was now sitting on my coffee table. He hadn't opened it, waiting for me.

"Where the hell did you order pizza from that you get it in—what was that, like ten fuckin' minutes?"

He coughed softly. "I actually ordered it on my way over here," he said with a sheepish smile. "Like I said, I didn't think you were home."

"So you were gonna do what, break in and squat here? Order food and make yourself at home? What the fuck, Gabe?"

"I just needed a place to stay for a couple of nights is all. I would have left you money to fix the window I would have had to break to get in, and this place would've been sparkling."

He had no idea I had an alarm which was good for me.

"Are you mad?"

He sounded lost, like a child. It was sort of heartbreaking.

“No, I’m not mad, but get plates and paper towels, you animal,” I directed, and he moved quickly. “I do wanna talk about what’s going on with you though.”

“Do we have to?”

“Hell yes,” I groused at him. “Why the hell would you wanna hurt Chickie?”

He collected things as I took a seat in one of my club chairs across from the couch.

“Why’re you mad at Ian?”

He hurled the two plates in his hands at the ground, smashing them into a thousand pieces. “He and Eli got me fired!” he screamed.

I got up, and his gun was out again that fast.

“I wasn’t there that day. Tell me what happened.”

His eyes narrowed. “I don’t think so, Jed. I think you’re stalling.” He lifted his gun, leveling it at me. “I apologize for all of this, and I’m truly sorry you’re home.”

I was dead. I saw it in his eyes, like his compassion just sort of clicked off, leaving him cold and empty. But in that same second my front door flew open and Bodhi was there. He was the first one through, and when Brodie turned to fire, he was hit in the chest with a beanbag round—what was known officially by its trademarked name as a flexible baton round. Basically, we had shotguns outfitted to fire beanbag rounds, and yes, it hurt like hell to get hit with one, but they were not lethal. Brodie went down, his bullet hit my ceiling, and Dorsey, Ryan, Yamane, and Pazzi swarmed into my place.

Brodie was flipped to his stomach, which he screamed over because he was just hit in the chest with a beanbag, and they probably bumped his tender nose in the process. Bodhi reached me a moment later.

He was shaking violently, and I put my arm around him and hauled him close.

“Shut up,” Dorsey yelled at Brodie, who was screaming at them, dragging him to his feet, and then glanced over at me. “You good over there?”

I nodded. “Someone let Chickie out of the bedroom, will ya?”

Yamane bolted to the door, and Chickie came through, rushing over to me.

“You gotta pet him,” I told Bodhi, leaning in to kiss his cheek. “I’ve only got the one arm, and I think I need to hold you.”

“Yeah,” he rasped. “Hold me.”

So I did, and he petted Chickie, who stayed right there, planted beside me, surveying all the excitement as Gabriel Brodie was taken out my front door.

Ryan walked over as Bodhi took deep breaths to calm himself.

“We would have been here a lot fuckin’ quicker, but we were spread out all over the city, and there was no way Bodhi could be allowed to breach alone.”

“Of course not,” I agreed, but wondered how they had kept him from coming anyway.

“We had to get eyes and ears here so we could see what was up, and we had to wait for SWAT since Wes and his team were out in Skokie.”

It all made sense. They were outside, and CPD was getting a mic set up and infrared cameras so they could see where I was in my house in relation to Brodie.

“As Miro told your partner, if he’d come in here alone, he could have gotten himself killed as well as you.”

I nodded.

Kage strode in then, directly to where we were standing. “We normally dress for visitors,” he told me, and I smiled because yes, the rest of them were in Kevlar and I was in a T-

shirt and my pajama bottoms. Thankfully, I'd put on the blue pair with white stripes and not the Captain America ones.

"Yessir," I agreed, and he did something he'd never done before and put his hand on my cheek, gave it a quick pat, then stepped back.

"Okay," he said, exhaling sharply. "We need the bullet from the ceiling, so the crime scene people have to get in here, but afterward, send us the bill, and we'll get it taken care of."

"I will," I replied, watching him pet Ian's dog. "Sir, is Wes in Skokie because he's picking up Darren Mills?"

"That's right. How did you know?"

"Brodie was talking about him—said that after he was let go, he contacted Mills. I think that's how he's kept tabs."

"He did. When the FBI did a deep dive on his life, there was a lot of contact between them. I was on both Mills's and Brodie's hit lists, but Mills had nothing against Doyle or Kohn. Regardless, he's the one who took the shot at Kohn."

"Which makes sense. I never knew Brodie to be any kind of marksman, and I never saw him on the range with a rifle."

"He never practiced doing anything," Kage said, disgusted. "I don't know that we can do much about Standish, since he's already been fired, but I'm going to speak to a lawyer with the DOJ and see if we can bring charges. Through his incompetence and continual practice of transferring problematic people, he put me, you, Kohn, and Doyle in mortal danger."

It would be interesting to see if the charges stuck.

"Okay. It's Sunday night, and I don't want to see you in the office until Thursday morning when you and your partner report to Jones."

I nodded.

"Yes?"

"Yessir."

“Okay,” he said, and I could tell from the catch in his voice that he was very relieved that everything was over. “Let’s move,” he barked at the others.

As he walked out, Becker walked in with Cho and Lopez.

“Where’s your computer?” Becker asked.

“In my bedroom.”

“Good. Some guys leave them at work when they go on vacation, and that annoys the shit out of me. We all know you’re gonna need it.”

“Truer words,” I agreed. “We had to write reports on the situation we encountered in Washington with Luke Stoker.”

“I heard about that,” Becker said softly. “Little girl all right?”

“She is. Yes.”

He took a breath. “Good.”

“The two of us will get our reports written later tonight.”

“That’ll work. Did you fire the gun?”

“I did not.”

“Then please secure it.”

“Yessir.”

“I’ll be here with the team.”

“Thank you.”

“Miro was going to come in the morning to get the dog. Does that work for you?”

I nodded, easing Bodhi back, and he just stood there, not moving, no longer shaking but looking like a zombie.

Going to my kitchen, I first got my phone out of the refrigerator—it was cold but working—turned on the volume, then got my gun off the counter. I walked back to Bodhi, took hold of his bicep, and led him to the bedroom, with Chickie right behind.

I could hear Becker barking orders to the tech team, telling them they had better collect only what they needed and not make a mess. He also said he had a cleaning crew showing up five minutes after them, so they better be thorough.

In the bedroom, I sat Bodhi down on my bed and then slid my left thumb over the slide-mounted safety, engaging it before putting the Glock in my nightstand. Taking a seat next to Bodhi, I put my arm around his shoulders as Chickie put his head in my lap.

“I’m okay,” I told him, petting the dog because he was such a good boy.

He just sat there like he was in a trance.

“Please talk to me.”

Silence.

“Okay,” I said with a sigh. “I’m gonna go get you some water, all right?”

The moment I started to move my arm, he grabbed my hand with both of his.

“Bode?”

He coughed softly, tried to speak, made a noise that was not a word, and then tried again with no better results.

But I knew him, so I could help. “You were scared.”

Shuddering breath. “We were outside, in the SWAT vehicle—not the transport one, the other one with all the monitors inside.”

I nodded.

“We could see you and Brodie on infrared, and then suddenly there’s audio and I can hear that he’s out of it and you’re being so good with him, so calm, like you always are in those situations with hostages, but he’s got a gun, and I can’t get past the thought that you’re all alone with him, and I know what he did to Ian, and if he comes at you, because you’re not at full strength, he could really hurt you... I tried to tell them you’re hurt, but nobody was listening to me.”

“You got here first.”

“Of course I did.”

I would have been there first as well. It was Bodhi. When he called, whenever he called, I would be the one to show up before anyone else. Not that we should have ever been apart. “I wish I wasn’t hurt. I hated you going without me.”

“I know but that couldn’t be helped. What kills me is that I was sure you’d be safe, just like Kage did. You were armed and I set the alarm when I left and Chickie was here.”

“It’s okay,” I soothed him.

“It’s not,” he choked out. There was so much pain and regret, it was suffocating him.

Moving abruptly so he had to let me go, I stood up and went around the side of the bed. “Come get this off me,” I instructed. “Brodie put it on too tight.” He hadn’t, it was fine, but Bodhi needed to do something for me right then. It was necessary.

He was beside me in seconds, gently removing it, careful not to jostle me. “He helped you with the T-shirt too, didn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

“The thought of him touching you, touching your skin... I want to kill him and throw up at the same time.”

So many different emotions running through him at the moment, and it was up to me to fix it, to make him better. “He didn’t hurt me. You can see he didn’t.”

He just watched me with hollow eyes, and with the sling off, I lay down on the bed, on my side, and patted the bed so he’d know where I wanted him.

Following my lead, he stretched out so we were facing each other. He had nowhere to look but into my eyes. “I don’t remember ever being that scared,” he confessed.

“Tell me the rest.”

“I announced I was going in, and the SWAT commander ordered me to wait because it sounded good, like you were in control and Brodie was calm, but I know him. I remember how he would just snap, how volatile he was back when he was on the job.”

I had too, which was why I’d kept yelling at him. We had all been on him all the time, and that part was normal for him. Treating him like he was still a member of the team had been key right then.

“I said I was going, and the SWAT commander says no again, and they’re barring the door, but then—then Kage arrived with Dorsey and Ryan, and Jesus, Jed, I’ve never been so happy to have backup in my life.”

I knew the feeling. The knowledge that you had people with you, it was overwhelming.

“And Kage brought the modified beanbag gun with him, and Dorsey gives it to me and tells those guys we’re getting you out of there right fuckin’ now.”

I smiled, and amazingly, I got one back.

“Yeah. It was pretty great. You know how Dorsey is when he’s pissed.”

“He’s loud is what he is. I’m surprised I didn’t hear him.”

“Right?”

He was sounding better, more like him. More alive.

“Kage put me in the front and told me to get in there. They were worried we would need to break down the door, but I said no, I knew you’d left it unlocked and that Brodie wouldn’t have noticed that it was.”

“He didn’t, you were right.”

“It’s because he was focused on you, not what you were doing.”

“We always got along pretty well.”

“Which is probably why he came here,” Bodhi told me.

“It’s weird, though, that he knew where I lived. We were still living together in your buddy Joe’s apartment when he was fired. He visited us there before, but never here.”

“When I was on my way here to you, I was on the phone with Becker, and he told me about Mills. The intel on all of us was from him. He was feeding Brodie information the whole time, not just in the last twenty-four hours.”

“That’s horrible.” I put my hand on his cheek, then pushed his hair out of his face, just wanting to touch him.

“Mills told Brodie that Eli was giving a press conference before it was announced, and he called Brodie to say that Ian was leaving the building. Mills saw all of us every day when we passed him in his office downstairs.”

“I can’t imagine holding a grudge like that,” I said, scooching closer, loving that Bodhi slid a hand around the side of my neck. “I mean, I guess I get Brodie. The career he thought he was going to have was over. But Mills was only demoted. He still works for the marshals service. It’s crazy that he threw in with Brodie.”

“But they shared a common enemy in Sam Kage.”

“Which, again, is insane,” I told him, then smiled as he leaned forward and kissed me.

It wasn’t the mauling he’d given me earlier; this was gentle but possessive, and he took his time and kissed me thoroughly.

“We’re still out here,” Becker called to us.

Bodhi broke the kiss to laugh, and I was chuckling along with him.

“This pizza is going in the garbage,” Becker yelled. “Who eats this stupid pineapple shit?”

“Good,” Bodhi said, turning his head to answer. “It’s the worst.”

“Hey,” I whispered, and his gaze was back, locked on mine.

“I know you were scared.”

He took a breath. “We just... It’s brand-new, Jed. I can’t lose you. I can’t be this close to everything I wanted and lose.”

I nodded.

“I had tunnel vision when I came in.”

“As you do,” I reminded him. “If you look at everything and everyone, you can miss something or get hurt.”

“Yeah,” he whispered, “but once he was down and I saw you, I sort of checked out.”

“Well,” I said, grinning, “we both do actually need a vacation.”

“We do,” he concurred, surging toward me, rolling me to my back so I was under him and he was hovering over me, hands down on the bed on either side of me.

“Oh, man, please tell me I’m about to get ravaged.”

But he took that moment to turn his head, and Chickie licked his nose.

“Really?” he said to the dog.

I nearly choked laughing.

THE TECH TEAM got what they needed, which wasn’t a lot. I was a witness, there was a recording of Brodie being in my house, and the SWAT guys who’d followed Bodhi, Dorsey, and Ryan into my house all had on body cameras that captured the breach. So the reports we wrote were pretty self-explanatory. Mine was longer than Bodhi’s, as I had to add what occurred before they got here.

“Why didn’t you just shoot him in the face when he was outside on the porch?” Bodhi asked, leaning sideways to read my report as we sat together in bed.

“Well, for starters, we don’t shoot people in cold blood,” I reminded him.

He grunted.

God, he was cute.

“Not cute,” he grumbled.

“Did I say that out loud?”

After the cleaning crew left around one in the morning, Bodhi cooked for me, which he'd never done in the past. I got scrambled eggs with cheese—the cheese sprinkled on top, not inside. That whole flippy thing was not in his repertoire. But there was bacon, which Chickie wanted in on even though he'd already eaten, and toast that he made in the oven since he sliced up sourdough for me. There was apple juice because he was a fan of that, not orange, claiming that apple was easier on the stomach.

“Why're you smiling?” he asked as we ate at my kitchen island.

“Because you cooked for me. You never cook for me.”

“Well, don't get used to it,” he said with a scowl. “You're the cook, not me.”

I was quiet a moment.

“What?”

“Would you rather we move into your place—since mine had Brodie in it and crime-scene people?” I asked hesitantly, not wanting to move, hoping I wouldn't have to.

“No,” he replied, smiling at me. “There weren't even any bullets flying around in here—well, except for the one in the ceiling and the beanbag round.”

“That's true,” I agreed.

“And the tech team got the bullet out of the ceiling, and the cleaners did a nice job going over everything. I mean, other than annoying your neighbors with a vacuum running after midnight, I feel like this was a non-incident.”

I nodded, feeling hopeful.

“And I'm thinking with just a bit of spackle and paint, the ceiling will be perfect again, with no hint that Brodie was ever here.”

“That’s what I want,” I told him. “But if you’re going to think about Brodie every time you come into the house, I don’t want that.”

“No, I won’t,” he promised, leaning close to kiss me. “And besides, compared to this, Miro and Ian’s place was in much worse condition, and every time I go over there I don’t instantly jump to thinking: *there was a serial killer in here.*”

I shook my head at him.

“What? They had Craig Hartley in there. Who else can say that?”

After the food, between a full stomach and his adrenaline draining like a plug being pulled, Bodhi stumbled to the bedroom and passed out. I covered him with a lightweight throw and then took Chickie out for a late-night, now very early in the morning, walk. The full moon was out, the streets were empty, just me and him, and I couldn’t remember ever feeling so content.

At home, I set the alarm, turned off all the lights, and after taking off the sling, got into bed beside Bodhi. I wished I could put my arm around him, but I settled for spooning him and nuzzling my face into his hair. Chickie stretching out on the end of the bed was nice too. I realized we were probably going to need a dog instead of a cat. I would tell Bodhi in the morning. Or in the later morning.

ELEVEN

Around ten the following morning, Miro and Ian showed up to collect their dog. I was amazed that Ian was released from the hospital, but as he told me, a few stitches were nothing to whine about. Miro still looked wrung out.

“Thank you for all you did, Jed,” Miro told me. We were having coffee at my kitchen table while Bodhi and Ian sat on the couch and talked.

“It’s the job, you know that.”

“Yeah, but if Brodie had gotten away, and I would still be thinking that he could show up at any time and hurt Ian, I’m not sure I could have taken that fear day in, day out.”

My face made him chuckle.

“What’s with the look?”

“That makes no sense. You had Craig Hartley gunning for you. I would think that would be infinitely worse than Gabriel Brodie.”

“Yeah, but Hartley was after me, never Ian. He would have never harmed him to hurt me. He wouldn’t have seen the point. And after the time he saved Chickie’s life when he was shot, I wasn’t even afraid he wanted to kill me anymore.”

“You’re serious?”

“Absolutely. As weird as this is to say, Brodie was far more unhinged than Hartley.”

“How?”

He shrugged. “Brodie is absolutely convinced that our boss is the devil. He thinks that Sam Kage ruined his life, and he takes no responsibility for flushing his own life down the toilet.”

That was true.

“Hartley knew what he was doing at all times. He was never out of control. People always say he was deluded, and some of the things he believed could be out there, but he was completely sane.”

“You think Brodie needs to be in a mental facility?”

“I think his delusion is coming from somewhere, and not just from him being a dick like everyone always thought. I think there’s trauma there, and I hope they unpack it and don’t simply send him to prison and throw away the key.”

“An attempt on the life of not one but three federal marshals... I can’t imagine he’ll be breathing free air for the foreseeable future.”

“Agreed.”

I took a breath. “What about Mills?”

“He helped orchestrate the attack on Ian, and he’s the one who shot at and missed Eli. He’s going to prison as well.”

“For a very long time,” I said, studying his face.

“You’re looking at me weird. What is it?”

“You were really never scared of Hartley?”

“When he first stabbed me, yes,” he said softly, thoughtfully. “When he kidnapped me, oh yes. But again, after someone saves your big dorky dog, it’s hard to muster terror when you think of them.”

I was quiet a moment. “You know, a lot of people think, because there was no autopsy, that he’s still alive.”

“Yeah, well, they weren’t there. I promise you, Craig Hartley is gone.”

I sipped my coffee and agreed that Bodhi was right—I did tend to make it the consistency of crude oil.

“You’re still looking at me like I grew another head,” Miro said, smiling.

“You just sounded almost sad there.”

“It’s an odd thing, the relationship Hartley and I had. I mean, for the rest of my life, my name will be tied to his.”

“You have standing offers to be interviewed by some of the biggest names in the business. Everyone wants to know what you know about Hartley. There’s been so many shows and articles and books, but no one knows more than you.”

He nodded.

“Can I ask?”

“About his vault?”

“Yeah. Are you ever gonna go to Switzerland and look inside?”

“I honestly haven’t decided yet—and thank you for keeping that secret. Not everyone knows.” He then clapped me on my good shoulder. “I understand Pazzi said that you got shot because he wasn’t there.”

I groaned. “Who told you?”

“Cho,” he said with a laugh. “And when I told Ian, he made sure that when you and Bodhi report to me come Thursday, Pazzi and Yamane will go to Asset Forfeiture.”

“Oh, man, that’s just mean.”

“As a marshal, you have to know when to keep your mouth shut, and if you can’t remember, then your partner has to do it for you.”

“So Ian’s giving both guys a lesson.”

“He is. Plus, you know, he enjoys sending people down there to the basement just like Kage does.”

“Power mad,” I commented.

“Without question,” Miro agreed, then cleared his throat.

I knew it was coming. “Yes? Something to say?”

“What? Me?” He cackled. “Just nice to see this finally taking off.”

“This?”

“Yes, Jed. This. You and Bodhi. I mean, Jesus Christ, if it weren’t for the last minute, huh? Or were you thinking you’d wait until his fortieth wedding anniversary?”

“Funny. You’re so funny.”

“Don’t I know it.”

We were quiet a moment.

“But really,” he said, smiling at me, “I’m proud of you. It was time.”

“It was overdue, and anyone who knows me knows it.”

“Yeah, but you sacked up, Jed. I was getting a bit worried.”

I scowled at him.

“I always knew you loved him.”

“Well, aren’t you smart.”

“That’s what people say,” he said, grinning at me.

I just shook my head.

BODHI HAD GONE to his place to get clean clothes and more things he needed, and called his real estate agent on the way over. Selling his place would be easy, since the area was in high demand. I told him he should keep it and rent it out, but he didn’t want to be a landlord.

“You’re making a lot of decisions really fast,” I pointed out when he returned with clothes that needed to be hung in my large closet. I was using only a quarter of it, which was great for him.

“Isn’t that how we always do things?” he asked me, grinning. He walked by the end of the bed, carrying a laundry

basket filled with assorted-sized bottles into the bathroom, and then I heard him opening cabinets and putting things away.

And that was true. It was, in fact, the way we had always done things. Both of us leaped without looking as we followed the other.

“Hey,” he called out. “Tell me if you need any pain meds.”

“No, I’m good,” I said, sitting up. “But can you take this sling off me when you have a second?”

He was there quickly, gently extricating me from the sling I was already coming to hate. The brace was okay; the sling immobilized me more.

“You hate the sling,” he said, smiling.

“How can you tell?” I teased irritably.

“Well, the sling is there to let you rest the limb, right? Otherwise, it would just hang at your side.”

“Did the doctor say I had to use it for the whole month?”

“No, only the brace is mandatory, but let’s keep it for at least a full week.”

But if I said I didn’t need it—

“You’re thinking, why is he not just listening to me?”

I met his gaze.

“It’s the same with you doing my thinking for me where being a marshal is concerned.”

“Okay,” I said with a sigh. “I promise that isn’t what I was trying to do.”

“I know, but still,” he prodded me, leaning down close. “I know what’s best for me.”

“Yes,” I agreed, shutting the door forever on my making assumptions about his career and future. If I was asked, I would give my opinion, but really, no one liked someone else doing their thinking for them. Bodhi had always particularly hated that. It was why he and his family—his parents and his two siblings—were estranged. They all thought he should have

taken another road with both his career and his sexuality. And I understood them being scared about him being a marshal or thinking it wasn't what they wanted for him, but who he wanted to sleep with was wired in his DNA, it was not a choice he'd made. But being like them, in any way, thinking I knew best, was not something I wanted between us. I would never put another roadblock between us when now, finally, there were none. "Forgive me."

"You're forgiven," he said, and I saw how warm his eyes were as he looked at me. "Because you know me better than anyone, and I know, if I just told you, that you'd listen."

"It's true. I promise."

His grin was suddenly mischievous, and my heart flipped over. "And for my part, we can leave this sling off the rest of today, and you can tell me if you want to put it back on in the morning. Yes?"

"Yes."

He crossed his arms then, looking down at me. "There's something else."

It was really something how he could read micro expressions on my face, subtle nuances no one else could pick up.

"Tell me," he demanded, but it was gentle, easy.

"I want to tell you that I'm rested, and while you have to be careful of my arm, I promise you, I won't break."

"I see."

"You won't hurt me," I reiterated.

"You're making that very clear."

"I am."

"Because?"

"I've known you nearly six years," I said.

He nodded.

“And first it was me wanting you, and then later you wanting me, but we were never lined up. Never on the same page.”

“Until now,” he teased me, arching an eyebrow.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I growled at him. “Would you please just attack me already?”

“So aggressive.”

I huffed out a frustrated breath.

“Fine,” he said indulgently. “I guess I can do you a favor.”

I gasped, and he snorted out a laugh, then dropped down onto the bed and crawled over me, taking my mouth in a kiss that made me moan with happiness.

“Is this what you wanted?” he asked between kisses.

“Yes, thanks, you’re very good to me.”

“Just wait.”

I slipped my good arm around his back, holding him to me, keeping us together.

It was endless, his lips on mine, devouring mine, owning mine. I belonged there, with him, to him, and things settled deep inside me because this was us at home in our life. He was in my bed, my room, that was now *our* bed, *our* room. I needed these assurances to feel the change, and now I had them.

Lifting up, he climbed over me slowly, sensuously, moving like he was boneless until he was sitting with his ass pressed to my groin, straddling my hips. “You want me,” he said, staring down into my eyes.

“Yes,” I murmured as he slid forward and back, one hand pressed to my chest. And it was still a bit tender there, but not enough to make me want him to stop. “Could you have me already?”

When he lifted his leg and rolled sideways, I was going to protest, but immediately, he started shucking out of his clothes.

I did the same with the sweats and briefs I'd changed into, getting them off each hip and then shoving them down and off. I got stuck on the T-shirt, and he was chuckling as he untangled me, the sound so carnal, my cock instantly took notice.

"You're so beautiful, Jed," he said hoarsely, his voice thick.

"You have that backward," I assured him, hooking my hand around the back of his neck to pull him down to me for another kiss.

His tongue opened my lips and swept inside as he wrapped a hand around my length, gently but firmly stroking me from balls to head.

"Oh, Jed, please," he husked, his breath warm on my face as he spoke, taking both his cock and mine in hand, stroking us together.

I realized that five years of yearning were about to culminate in absolute combustion, because just looking at him, the desire crystal clear in his eyes, was going to make me come.

"I'm all yours," I told him, "but please don't think I'm bad in bed just because I'm not going to last this very first time when you touch me."

"Same," he agreed, and kissed me again, hungrily, his hand making me writhe in his grip, and combined with the counterpoint of his cock, hot, pressing against mine, was too much. I came hard, bucking forward, my body contorting like a spasm, holding there, everything drawn so tight in that moment when I gushed in his hand.

With anyone else, there would have been a moment of embarrassment that hot kisses and a handjob would take me over the edge so quickly, but this was Bodhi, who laughed softly into my hair and then bent down to taste it, both of us, together. He licked the head of my cock, and a full-body shiver instantly followed.

“It had to be like that. No way either of us would’ve lasted with the buildup,” he said before taking my mouth.

I tasted myself in his mouth, and him, and wanted it all, rolling him over to his back so I could lie over him and kiss him at my leisure. He was trembling under me, absolutely thrumming with need, and I understood in that moment that what we wanted and needed in bed had never been certain until we were actually there.

I broke the fevered kiss and spoke into his ear. “I think you want me inside.”

“I’ve never,” he said, and his breath catching, his legs clutching my thighs, his hands gripping my shoulder and hip tightly, all told me more than his words.

“I know,” I said, feeling his rock-hard cock against my abdomen. “There’s lube in the nightstand. I’m going to lift off you, and you get it and pass it to me.”

His gaze was clouded with passion I’d never expected to see and now I would need for the rest of my life. I was addicted that fast.

Bodhi said, “If I need you to stop—”

“Then we’ll stop,” I promised, lifting off him, rolling sideways, feeling the hot, sticky cum drying between us. “It’s me. You don’t keep things from me.”

“No,” he agreed, and scrambled to open the drawer, get the tube, and then pass it to me, waiting, panting, turned on and hesitant at the same time.

Opening the tube, I bent over him, squeezed some into my hand, then took him down the back of my throat as I gently pressed a finger inside him.

His gasp of my name was a very good sound, his demanding hands in my hair holding me there as I sucked and laved, making the suction strong while massaging his muscles, the second finger allowing me to open him up, make slow, endless circles.

He bent his knees, needing the leverage to lift up, wanting deeper down my throat. “Please, Jed.” He pressed down on my fingers and rose for my mouth, the loop getting faster, his breath choppy. When I added the third finger, his breath caught, freezing for a moment with the shudder that followed.

I leaned back, his cock slipping from between my lips. “Yes?”

“Yes,” he moaned, eyes heavy-lidded now, only slits of brilliant blue, his legs slipping around my hips, trying to pull me closer.

“Grab my pillow,” I ordered gruffly, slipping my fingers slowly, gently from his clenching channel, counting in my head so I didn’t lose control, never having wanted inside anyone more in my life. “Shove it under your hips.”

He complied instantly, and I took hold of my cock and aligned the head with his hole, easing forward, feeling the muscles ripple around me. I watched his mouth open, took hold of his cock and began stroking him to the same rhythm of my slide in and ease back, deeper each time, repeating my motion until the clenching eased and the tugging began, his body not letting go.

When I thrust home, to his core, he cried out, and I froze for a moment, worried, but my name came like a prayer from his throat.

“Good?” I asked, wanting to rut into him, the need primal to take what was mine, show him that only I belonged there, inside him, buried deep.

“I didn’t— I thought it would be— Show me, Jed.”

Sliding back, I pushed inside, harder than before, and we both heard the slap of skin on skin. “Okay?”

“Don’t ask anymore.”

The second time I didn’t pull out, I had never enjoyed that, instead preferring to stay where I was, piston inside and drive as deep as I could.

His hand gripped my shoulder tight, and again he lifted for the plunge as I took him over and over, wanting everything, all of him, because Bodhi Callahan was finally all mine.

When I dropped down on top of him, needing a moment so I wouldn't come, I kissed him breathless, tasting, sucking on his lips as I rolled forward and back, rocking, pumping, slow and steady until I couldn't, feeling the orgasm there, close.

"Oh, baby, you gotta come." I bit out the words, shivering with need.

He came apart under me, his muscles clenched so tight, I could barely move, but there was enough give to push forward again, peg his gland and hear him yell my name.

Watching him come, head back, eyes closed, giving himself over to the sensations coursing through his body, was beautiful. He coated my abdomen, and I came inside him, the gush of warm, wet heat making me growl with pride.

He opened his arms, and I was careful that time, covering him gently, the aftershocks making me jolt as he held me tight.

"You're being so gentle with me, when it should be the other way around," he murmured.

"You always take care of me," I reminded him. "This time it's my turn."

"I love you," he said into my ear, licking some of the sweat off my skin. "So much. Let's rest a second and do it again."

I was ridiculously pleased with myself, and demanded a kiss.

He kissed me hard, letting me know that all I had claimed, he'd done the same. "You're all mine, Josiah Redeker."

There had never been any doubt.

TWELVE

Since it could always go either way with Ian—he could be right about things or really wrong, it truly just depended on the day—I decided to be cautiously optimistic with what he’d said about Custodial WITSEC. I was hopeful I would not be going home every night to cry because a child was lost to the system. But amazingly, he turned out to be a hundred percent right. The last time I worked with Miro, or technically, *for* Miro, it had been a mess. But now, with years under his belt, the department ran seamlessly. Miro Jones did in fact know exactly what was happening with *all* the kids under his supervision. And, even better, there were no new intakes in the two weeks that Bodhi and I had already served.

Since we weren’t actually needed, Ian moved us back to our regular desks, but because I couldn’t be on the street yet, we got to be the permanent guys in the office. Normally, as all of us were investigators, we rotated. But since I was a bird with a clipped wing and Bodhi was the keeper of said bird, he was stuck with me.

“No,” I whined when I was at my desk, which faced Bodhi’s.

“Make the best of it,” he suggested even as he took a phone call from an FBI agent who wanted us to send a member of our team to find a rodeo clown in Montana.

“No,” Bodhi said, and hung up.

I scoffed. “That call will go over your head to Ian.”

He did not seem concerned.

Two hours later, I heard Ian on his cell as he walked by my desk. “No, you have a field office in Bozeman. We hunt fugitives, not suspects. Let me know if you need me to overnight you a goddamn dictionary.”

“That doesn’t seem helpful,” I told him.

“Rodeo clown my ass.”

That was the end of that.

BODHI WAS RIGHT. Once his place was on the market, it sold in three days for eighty grand more than he’d paid for it. He was thrilled with the twelve percent increase, especially since, unlike me, he’d done nothing to the townhouse. But it was a much-sought-after, thriving area, so it wasn’t a huge surprise that it went so fast.

As predicted, our friends helped move him into my place. And they did do it for pizza and beer, but there was the whining we had to live through.

“What even is this?” Eli asked, gesturing at Bodhi’s wrought-iron sculpture.

“It’s a heart,” I told him.

“What?”

“See how the rib cage is open and the heart is there?”

“That’s disgusting,” he passed judgment.

“Art is in the eye of the beholder,” Celso, his fiancé, explained to him.

Eli did a slow pan to him.

“It is.” Celso sounded defensive.

“I refuse to move this,” Eli informed me. “It should stay here for the new tenants.”

It ended up going in my backyard, where it became lawn sculpture.

“Vinyl is dead,” Sharpe assured Bodhi as he packed up his extensive record collection.

“That’s sacrilege what you just said,” Ryan assured him. “The imperfections on records are what makes them unique.”

“It’s a whole lot easier to plug in your iPod.”

Eli was horrified.

“Why don’t you have any plants?” Dorsey wanted to know. “Everyone should have some. They’re our little photosynthesizing buddies.”

Ian didn’t understand why Bodhi’s kitchen was so bare. No pots or pans, only assorted silverware, and perhaps three glasses.

“What the hell?”

“You know, living like you’re still in college is a bad look at your age,” Miro told him.

Bodhi gestured at me. “I’ve always had Jed’s stuff.”

“And now you have it again,” Celso said, grinning at him. “How fortuitous that you fell in love with a guy who has *plates*.”

Bodhi sighed deeply. “Not missing the sarcasm even a little.”

Celso cackled and walked away.

“Your fiancé is a dick,” Bodhi informed Eli.

“At least he doesn’t own questionable sculpture.”

“Yeah,” Ian chimed in. “What the fuck even is that?”

“You know,” White called out from the kitchen, “no one should have this much kids’ cereal. All this sugar will kill you.”

Bodhi flopped down on his couch, which was going home with Dorsey.

“Watch the sofa, man,” Dorsey yelled at him. “It’s not yours anymore.”

“Dude, why do you have so much toilet paper?” Sharpe wanted to know, leaning out of the bathroom.

“More importantly,” Wes chimed in, leaning out farther, since he was in there as well, “how much shit do you need to put in your hair? And how much lube and condoms does one man need?”

I was dying.

Bodhi looked like he wanted to murder someone.

Later, incongruously, ordering pizza turned out to be the most exhausting part of the day: Eli couldn't have ham on his, and there were restrictions about what the cheese could go with, so he finally agreed to eat the veggie one with Miro and Bodhi. Ian wanted all the meat on his and absolutely nothing green. Celso was horrified and asked who wanted to share a Havarti and artichokes pie with him. No one jumped on that. Dorsey and Ryan could have sausage, but not the spicy kind, because of heartburn, and no one wanted any pineapple. Sharpe liked cheeseburger pizza, but only a couple of people thought that sounded good, and White didn't understand why just pepperoni wasn't a thing. We ended up with way more than we needed, which was fine because everyone took home what they ordered.

After everyone left, Bodhi said, “With the extra money from selling my place, we can put in skylights. And we can start on the landscaping in the backyard. I'm thinking hydrangeas. I like the limelight color. How about you?”

“Will the flowers offset the scary sculpture?”

He shot me a look. “You must become one with the art.”

Whatever he wanted. If flowers made the man happy, I was happy. If sculpture you had to explain to everyone did it for him, that was okay too. He also wanted to renovate the kitchen and add a breakfast nook.

“I like nooks,” I assured him.

I got a hug for that, so really, I was on board.

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, Crouse's hearing date was moved up, which I predicted was good for him, and I was right. They needed him back at work. I could tell that from how many questions they *didn't* ask me about that night. All they wanted to talk about was his heroism.

"Does the FBI give out medals?" I teased him.

Normally, he would have flipped me off, but since I'd just spoken on his behalf, I got a hug instead and a promise that he'd always have my back.

But I knew that already.

BODHI and I did a final walk-through at his place before he handed over the keys, and I asked him if he was sure he wanted to live with me instead of me living with him.

"Your place is home," he assured me, then squinted. "But it's *our place* now, yes? My name is going on the deed, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," I promised, smiling at him. "We're doing that tomorrow morning before work. But you know me. Even if there is no trouble, I have to try and make some."

"That's true. You're better at raising questions that have already been put to bed than anyone I know."

It was a gift, but I was lucky, and so was he.

THREE WEEKS LATER, he was sitting at his desk, and he started chuckling.

"What?"

Turning the newspaper around for me, I saw the announcement that Hayden Burdine the Third was marrying Davis Warren. The wedding was scheduled for December fifteenth at the family home on Mercer Island.

"No shit," I said.

Bodhi waggled his eyebrows at me.

I took a breath. “You feel okay about that?”

“Are you kidding? I feel great. I mean, I knew I didn’t screw Hayden over when I called off the wedding, but now I know for sure that he was no more invested than I was.”

I nodded.

“I didn’t realize I was carrying around any guilt, but seems like I was, so now I’m good.”

I was glad. I didn’t want anything hanging over us.

Angie texted me an hour later, saying that when they made the announcement, no one was surprised. It made perfect sense. More importantly, she, Zach, and the kids were visiting his relatives in Wisconsin in February, and she wanted Bodhi and me to meet them there. I assured her that Chicago to Milwaukee was easy and we would make that happen. I couldn’t wait to see her.

Meredith was bringing Stella to see me and Bodhi the week after Halloween, and we didn’t have to worry about seeing Hayden since he had already moved back to Washington.

Bodhi grinned. “That was fast.”

“You happy for him?” I asked him that night in bed.

“I am. Everything worked out exactly as it was supposed to,” he said, reaching for me.

TWO DAYS LATER, we went to an adoption event sponsored by a rescue in Texas to get a cat. The thing was, though, once we got there, I saw a black-and-white pittie, and I could have sworn he was smiling at me. His name was Gordo—it said so on the sticker on the hanging sign—and he was scared of people after being used as a bait dog and then left for dead on the street.

I crouched down beside the enclosure, and he got up from where he was under a table and walked over. The lady standing there to corral the other dogs gasped.

“Is he not up for adoption?” I asked her.

“No. I mean yes. He is,” she corrected herself, her eyes filling instantly. “I just... He’s terrified of men, but he—” Gordo pushed his nose through the wire mesh to try and touch my hand. “Oh my God, please tell me you need a dog.”

“We came for a cat,” I told her as I reached over the top of the enclosure and petted him.

“Okay,” she said, her voice wobbling.

Bodhi joined me then, and Gordo took several steps back.

“Hi, buddy,” Bodhi greeted the dog. “You sure are pretty.”

Gordo tipped his head sideways, Bodhi did the same, and then Gordo charged forward and put his paws up on the enclosure to greet the man I loved.

“You know,” Bodhi said, turning to me, “I think he wants to come home with us.”

The lady in charge agreed wholeheartedly.

“DID those dog treats they were selling look edible to you?” I asked that weekend as we walked around the farmer’s market with Gordo who looked really good in his yellow bandana. So good in fact that people kept wanting to pet him which he was already better about as long as he could see us. “Why were they green?”

“They were filled with veggies,” he told me.

“Should dogs eat that many vegetables? Miro says Chickie spits out broccoli.”

He was chuckling and then said, out of the blue, “Maybe when you retire, and I resign so we’re out at the same time, we can figure out what we’ll do for our second act.”

“Where did that come from?”

He shrugged. “Just thinking about our future.”

I grinned at him because that was always good.

“Maybe we can move to some small town in Oregon and I can be the new sheriff and you can buy a bar and dispense life advice over beer.”

“Really?”

“What? It’s as good as me making pottery in my house on the lake,” he said cheerfully.

“I’m never telling you anything.”

But he laughed, and it was a really good sound, and when he took hold of my chin and turned me for a kiss, I simply couldn’t say no.

Gordo just sat patiently and waited, wagging his tail the whole time. He was a very good boy.

“STOP FIDGETING,” Bodhi ordered me another two weeks later as he sat beside me on the couch in Dr. Nkosi’s office. Two days before, I’d had an MRI on my shoulder, and I was there for the results. I hoped it was good news, because I wanted to celebrate in ways that definitely required two hands.

“Juggling?” he teased me.

“You’re hysterical.”

He laughed at me, and I reached for his face, turning his head so I could look into his eyes. “Hey, I have something to say,” I told him, then kissed him.

“Mmmm,” he hummed, kissing me back.

“I want us to get married,” I said between kisses.

“Okay.” He sounded out of it.

I sat back and glared at him. “That’s it? Okay? No overwhelming feelings of joy and happiness? I get nothing?”

“I’m happy, you’re happy,” he told me, smiling crazily. “I love you, you love me, I know, you know, everybody knows. You’ve been wearing my ring for the last three, almost four years, so yes. Of course I’ll marry you. We should do it at your

sister's house when we go for Christmas. Small wedding, just us and her family. Is that good?"

I couldn't even speak. It was perfect.

"You'll have to wear the dumb octopus ring on your right hand after, because you're getting a big gold one for the left."

"Gold ring?" I whispered, because it was so simple and traditional and exactly what I wanted.

"Yes," he answered, his voice husky with choked laughter.

"What's funny?"

"You, thinking I wouldn't know you want a thick band without any stones. It's why we're putting up a white picket fence around the yard—because you want the whole happily-ever-after with me."

"I do. You know I do."

He nodded.

"And the octopus ring is not stupid," I made clear.

"I know. It's how I knew, through everything, that we would eventually be you and me. You never took it off."

"I couldn't. It was the piece of you I could have."

"I've always been all yours."

And I'd hoped for that then, but more importantly, I knew it now.

Dr. Nkosi's news that I would have two working arms to hold him for the rest of my life was the cherry on the top of the cake.

He was so happy after we got the news, practically glowing, and kissed me in the car in the parking lot at the hospital. It was different somehow, possessive, claiming, and his hand on the back of my neck held me still, his grip hard, taking what he wanted.

"Oh God," I moaned when he let me breathe, feeling the heat of arousal lick over my skin, wanting to unclip my seat belt and climb into his lap.

“What?” he asked with a filthy chuckle.

“That was crazy hot,” I said, smiling at him.

“You look drugged.”

I certainly felt that way.

Halfway home, his hand found my thigh and then slid sideways, higher until he reached my groin.

“What’s with you,” I rasped as he stroked over my already thickened shaft straining against my zipper.

“I just want you and you need to know that.”

It had been me topping since we made things between us permanent. It was what he needed, wanted, and he loved it as much as I did—he couldn’t fake his passion—but even though he rode me hard, it was still me buried inside of him, not the other way around.

“I love bottoming,” he told me as he continued to grope me through my jeans which had me writhing in my seat. “I didn’t think I would but I absolutely do. And I’m smart enough to know it wouldn’t be the same with anyone else.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” I stated firmly.

He laughed at me. “Like you would ever need to worry.”

“I know,” I murmured, because I did. He loved me, anyone could see that.

“You’re gifted in bed,” he assured me. “And submitting has been my pleasure.”

“But,” I whispered.

“But the brace is off, you’re not hurt anymore, and I can manhandle you a bit.”

Oh God, please, I nearly begged but swallowed that down and instead said, “Yeah, okay. Let’s do that.”

“You’re sure?”

“So sure,” I said, sounding hoarse.

He kissed me at the next light, taking a small bite of the side of my neck.

“You belong to me,” he husked, and I knew, after so many years, that words, combined with the action, were necessary. “Don’t you, Jed?”

“Yes,” I agreed, staring at him.

His smile was wicked, curling his lip, loving the control he had over me. “Keep it in mind when I’m holding you down.”

I made a noise I wasn’t proud of that made him chuckle all dirty. Such a good sound.

After parking the car and turning it off, as the garage door closed, he attacked me, pulling me in for a mauling kiss that quickly became him sucking on my tongue and his teeth on my bottom lip as he unbuckled my belt.

My moan was loud in the interior of his SUV but I still heard my zipper go before his hand was down the front of my jeans, milking my length, tugging and pulling even as he kept up the hot, wet assault on my mouth.

“We gotta stop,” I barely got out. “I’m gonna come if we don’t.”

“With just this?” he asked breathlessly before he kissed me again.

I was overheated, I could hear my own heartbeat like a drum in my ears, and when he broke the kiss, I nearly lunged at him before I realized he was only leaning away from me so he could slide the driver’s seat back. Quickly, I pulled off my sneakers, thrilled I’d worn them instead of my boots, and then shucked out of my jeans.

“We do have a bed upstairs,” he baited me as he flipped on the overhead light from a button on the panel beside his left hand.

“Turn the light off,” I said as I scrambled over from my seat to his, down onto his lap, leaving swipes of precum on his T-shirt as I moved.

“Fuck no,” he growled, opening the middle console and pulling out a packet of lube. “I wanna see you come apart.”

“I see you’re prepared.”

“To have sex in this car with you?” He ripped the packet open and squeezed all of it into his hand before he took firm hold of his own cock. “Yes, Jed. I am ready to have sex with you anytime, anywhere you want.”

“Such a thoughtful man,” I said under my breath, watching him stroke himself from balls to head, seeing how thick and long he was, admiring the veins and the wide head.

“I am,” he agreed, wiping his hand down the front of his T-shirt before his molten gaze hit mine. “Now lift up and take me in.”

“Just like that?”

He closed his eyes and I knew he swallowed hard because I saw the muscles in his throat cord, noted the hard clench of his jaw, and then heard his breath catch.

“I thought you wanted the light on so you could see me.”

His eyes fluttered open and he took hold of my right hip and his cock, holding it still for me even as it leaked precum.

Lifting up, one hand on the back of his seat, the other flat on the roof of the car, I felt his head slide between my cheeks and then press to my entrance.

“Go slow,” he ordered so softly that I barely heard him, even as his gaze locked with mine and he took tight hold of my thighs.

The pain was sharp and my gasp would have been loud, but he swallowed the sound as he cupped the back of my neck and pulled me down for another drowning kiss. His other hand wrapped around my cock, his thumb spreading the precum over the head before he began the languorous stroking.

I felt the flush of desire run through me as I sank slowly over him rising and falling, like riding a wave, his hand moving with me until I was fully seated, and he was buried to the balls in my ass.

“Jesus, Jed,” he said, his voice a ragged, gravelly moan. “You should see your eyes.”

Words weren’t possible, only feeling was. My muscles that had fought the breach, fought taking him in, were now clenching around his length. When I moved, pushing forward, wanting him deeper inside, it felt incredible, the stretch and the burn, and the immediate throb of need to do it again.

“I should have dragged you upstairs to our bed,” he croaked out.

Our bed. *Ours*.

I would never take for granted that he was mine especially when I was reminded, as I was now, that it could have been so very different if I had kept the words *I love you* sealed away in my heart instead of confessing them to him.

“I want you under me in our bed.”

“This isn’t good?” I asked, levering up only to drop back down over him, loving the feeling of fullness.

“This is better than good,” he said like he was in pain. “But I’m not gonna last and I’ve dreamed about having you for so long.”

“You can have me every day for the rest of your life,” I promised, smiling at him before I lifted and sank, again and again, the motion endless.

“Fuck,” he moaned, jolting under me. “I want... Jed.”

“What do you want, love? Tell me.”

“I need to—it’s more... I need you off,” he demanded and so I rose up off of him slowly because moving, leaving him, was torture. I finally eased free and slid off his lap.

He moved fast, on the ground beside me, still with his underwear and jeans around his knees, shoving me forward across the seat before taking me from behind, his entry so fast and deep, he took my breath away.

“Did I hurt—”

“No, don’t stop,” I begged him.

Smug male grunt before the hammering began. I took it all, loving every moment, willing him to have the stamina I needed.

“It’s never felt like this, Jed, do you know why?”

I couldn’t have answered if my life depended on it.

“Because it’s you and I love you and you’re the only one.”

And truly, there had never been a doubt.

“Now grab your dick because I want you to come,” he rumbled into my ear, his breath hot on the side of my neck, thrusting inside of me, plunging deep, and then easing back, his motion an endless glide, driving to my core each time.

I clutched the seat instead of following his instructions, the extra stimulation unneeded, unwanted, only the power he was exerting important, the claiming for him, the pounding for me.

“Jed, I need you to come now,” he nearly howled, the hand on my hip and the one on my shoulder anchoring me in place as my muscles clamped down around him, and I came hard.

He was seconds behind me, his chest plastered to my back as he pumped inside of me, words of love and praise tumbling from his lips as the rutting continued through the aftershocks of my orgasm, and his own shuddering release.

We were panting in the darkness, cum running down the inside of my thighs, his face pressed to the back of my neck before he started chuckling.

“What?” I grumbled at him.

“You are all mine, Josiah Redeker,” he nearly crowed. “And God, I love you so much. So very much. You don’t even... You don’t know.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” he answered thickly, his voice going out on him as he wrapped his arms around me and held tight.

I understood because I felt the same, all that time spent together, but apart, and then he nearly got married and Gabriel Brodie had tried to kill me. The road had been long, but we

were together now. I felt incredibly blessed and I knew he did too. And sometimes...it was a bit overwhelming.

After several moments of quiet, where both of us calmed and our breathing evened out, he eased gently free of my body, only to turn away.

“Hey,” I said, taking hold of his shoulder, holding him still as I slipped around to face him. “What’s going on? Why’re you crying?”

Instant scowl. “I’m not crying.”

“This is me, idiot,” I teased him, taking his face in my hands. “Tell me.”

He took a shaky breath. “I just—sometimes it’s a lot, in my chest. I can feel the weight.”

I smiled at him.

“Because my heart feels like there’s too much there,” he said, wiping away a stray tear.

Leaning him forward. I kissed him deeply, soundly, letting him feel that it was the same for me. He was it. Forever. It had been him from the start.

Lifting my lips from his, I saw him smile, then heard the accompanying sigh. A more content, whole, happy-in-his-own-skin Bodhi Callahan I had never seen. And it wasn’t the sex that did it, but the words both spoken and heard.

“You love me back,” he said and it was a statement as he reached for me.

“I always have,” I said, pressing my forehead to his. “Always will.”

“I’ve got your promise on that?”

“You know you do.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “I do.”

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



Thank you so much for reading **Tied Over**, the sixth book in my **Marshals** series. It's been a bumpy road for Jed and Bodhi to finally go from best friends, and partners, to lovers. If you enjoyed the book, please consider leaving a review on Amazon, it's so helpful for the book's visibility.

The Marshals series exists under my Chicagoland umbrella, beginning with **A Matter of Time** and Sam Kage, now the Chief Deputy, and originally a Chicago police detective. All roads lead to that series, though you don't have to read the original to enjoy the rest.

Be sure to **follow me on Amazon** to stay up to date on new releases and don't forget to sign up for my newsletter **here**.

Please pop by my **website** or visit me on social media to stay in touch. I have some really cute pics of my furry ninja on Instagram. And if you like to listen to your books as well, you can find me on **Audible** as well.

I hope to see you soon!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mary Calmes believes in romance, happily ever afters, and the faith it takes for her characters to get there. She bleeds coffee, thinks chocolate should be its own food group, and currently lives in Kentucky with a six-pound furry ninja that protects her from baby birds, spiders and the neighbor's dogs. To stay up to date on her ponderings and pandemonium (as well as the adventures of the ninja) follow her on Twitter Facebook, Instagram and [subscribe to her newsletter](#).

