

# TWISTED *hearts*

ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE



MAYA ALDEN

# Twisted Hearts

**A Second Chance Enemies to Lovers  
Romance**



Maya Alden



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ISBN: 9798859834426

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All discarded lovers should be given a second chance, but with somebody else.

Mae West

A man deserves a second chance but keep an eye on him.

John Wayne

Love is a misunderstanding between two fools.

Anonymous

# Playlist

- *Wicked Game*, Chris Isaak
- *Bleeding Love*, Leona Lewis
- *I Put a Spell on You*, Annie Lennox
- *Dangerous Woman*, Ariana Grande
- *Hunger*, Florence + The Machine
- *Demons*, Imagine Dragons
- *Clarity*, Zedd ft. Foxes
- *Lost on You*, LP
- *No Air*, Jordin Sparks ft. Chris Brown
- *Torn*, Natalie Imbruglia
- *Shallow*, Lady Gaga

You can now listen to this playlist on Spotify!



# Chapter 1

## RIVER

I woke up drenched in sweat, and my cock was standing up like a pike. *Fuck!* I dreamed of *her* again. I couldn't understand why I continued to dream about a woman I knew over a decade ago. Sunny French was *many, many* women ago. Dreams are nothing but neurons firing off at night, I told myself. It means fuck all. Because by the time Sunny and I were done, we had had nothing but hate and a good dose of disgust.

I got out of bed and looked around my fairly decent hotel room in Damaturu. I'd stayed in worse. I picked up my phone and quickly reviewed my email to see if anything was urgent. There was a message from my mother. I deleted it without reading it. Since my brother, Judge Forest Knight, had cut her out of his life, she was trying to reinstate herself into mine, even though I'd kicked her out of it a long time ago.

There was a message from my sister-in-law Daisy with a photo of my six-month-old nephew Kai and a question: *When are you back?*

My brother still carried a Nokia flip phone, so Daisy and I kept the communication by text. Forest believed in phone calls. I replied: *Still in Nigeria. Two more days here and then catching a flight home.*

I had given my notice to *The Times* a few months ago. I wanted to complete this last assignment with my partner, journalist Quincy Galvis, who was working on a story about how villages in the Yobe State of Nigeria were caught between insurgents and the Nigerian military. We'd worked together for several years and had found ourselves in a variety of dangerous situations in Afghanistan, Iran, and recently in Ukraine. He'd joked that this last gig in Nigeria was tame compared to where I'd been for the past decade, working as a photojournalist.

I looked forward to returning to the States and staying in Forest's beach house. I'd seen too much death and horror and, as the cliché went, I was burnt out. I needed some beach, peaceful ocean, a life where I didn't always listen for bullets or bombs going off.

I took a shower and got ready to go to a village two hours away from Damaturu, the capital city of Yobe. What was the point in showering, I thought grimly, as I put on shorts, a t-shirt, and hiking boots. It was fucking August, which meant the minute I stepped out of the air-conditioned hotel, I'd be drenched in sweat.

I ate breakfast at the buffet the chain hotel provided. And while I did, I scrolled through Twitter. Some discussions on

the platform were excellent sources for more information, while a lot of it was complete rubbish. I went to Threads next and did the same.

And then, as I always did, even though I knew it was unhealthy, I went on Facebook to Sunny's page, one she hadn't updated in about eight years. She had two or three posts on the page, a forgotten account. I should have downloaded the photos from there, but that felt too desperate, so I cyberstalked her instead. She was beautiful. Blonde. Blue-gray eyes. Delicate.

Quincy looked as tired as I felt when we got into the jeep that would take us to Kajara. "Good morning, Jelani." I handed a cup of coffee to our driver and translator.

"Thanks, man."

"I'm going to sit in the back and get some shuteye," Quincy announced. He was in his early fifties and had recently been dealing with high cholesterol and an ulcer.

Yeah, I didn't want to end up like him. I was leaving now while I still had my looks and health.

"Man, you looking forward to going back home? You got a girl back there?" Jelani drove on the reasonably new roads of Damaturu, but soon enough, we'd be pounding the rough village streets, and good luck to Quincy getting any asleep.

"No girl at home," I told him as I went through my backpack to check my equipment.

“You look like the kind who’d have a girl.” Jelani’s white teeth flashed against his dark skin. He was a good-looking man in his thirties and had been journalists’ go-to guide and translator.

“There was a girl,” I mused because she was still fresh in my mind.

“What happened?”

“The usual.”

“Cheated on you? But you’re such a pretty boy. You a bad lover, River, that your girl needed someone else?” he joked.

I laughed. I could laugh now. *Then*, I’d been in pretty poor shape. “She did not cheat on me. It was...something else, and it was a long time ago, Jelani.”

“You still think of her?”

“Sometimes.” I grabbed the side of the jeep as Jelani hit a few bumps. *I dream of her.*

“Maybe you should look her up when you get home?” he suggested.

She snagged some rich guy, for sure. That, after all, was what she was after. “She’s probably married with two kids, living in suburbia.”





# Chapter 2

## SUNNY

The staccato rhythm of gunfire pierced the silence, snapping our immediate surroundings into high alert. Instincts honed by years of military drills surged into action, muscle memory dictating each calculated maneuver. Rounds passed uncomfortably close; their passage accompanied by the acrid scent of burnt propellant. My rifle's retort provided an odd sense of comfort, its kickback a stark reminder of reality.

“Advance! Advance!” My voice was a steely command through the comms, cutting decisively through the cacophony. “Glitch, I need intel ASAP!”

“Roger that, Lima Charlie,” came Glitch's swift acknowledgment.

“Rebound, sitrep on tangos?”

Rebound, poised with his Barrett M82, its menacing form just visible beyond the foliage, responded crisply, “Three tangos in the open, two holed up. Phoenix, our HVT is in that structure. Ten more hostiles inbound, fast.”

“What’s your play, Chaos?” I barked, as a volley of fire announced another enemy position. Chaos, the maestro of high explosives, was setting up to leave our signature destruction in our wake.

“Setting charges,” Chaos’s voice crackled back, ever efficient.

“Confirm, HVT inside?” Glitch’s clarity cut through again. Our target, Matthew Oldenburg, a bigwig from a global oil magnate, was a high-value prize in these parts.

“Greenlight,” I confirmed, M4 raised, Phantom and I breaking cover to approach the holding point. As the perimeter neared, three tangos dropped - victims of Rebound’s impeccable aim.

In the heat of combat, Sun Tzu’s teachings echoed: warfare thrived on deception, knowing when to strike and seize opportunity. Amidst the fallen, the ambient noise faded, replaced by distant gunshots. Phantom’s gaze met mine, our silent communication unwavering.

We breached the shabby structure. Using a tactical fiber-optic camera, I scoped the room: Oldenburg chained, two distracted tangos engrossed in some mobile diversion. In sync, Phantom and I neutralized the threats.

“Can you move?” I questioned our HVT, as Phantom secured him.

Oldenburg nodded, face weary but unharmed.

“Extract now!” Rebound’s urgency crackled in my ear. “Insurgents half a klick out, ETA ninety.”

Amidst Rebound’s deadly marksmanship and Chaos’ orchestration of pyrotechnics, we navigated the treacherous terrain. Phantom guarded our principal while Glitch provided overwatch, ensuring our egress.

Once ensconced in Glitch’s armored mobile HQ, I signaled the all-clear. As we exfiltrated, the echoing roars of Chaos’ handiwork underscored our exit. Yet, our escape wasn’t easy.

“New tangos inbound!” Glitch warned.

“Pedal to the metal,” I snapped.

Rebound, ever the opportunist, quipped, “Just another day in paradise.”

Safely distanced, we paused to regroup. Oldenburg looked us over, bemusement in his eyes. “You’re US Special Forces?”

“No. We’re Steel Rain. Call me Phoenix,” I introduced the crew following suit.

He chuckled. “Feels like a scene from Top Gun.”

I smirked, “If channeling Cruise helps, be my guest.”

Phantom retorted, “I’m the real Cruise here.”

Chaos snorted, “Who wants to be old man Cruise?”

Gazing at Oldenburg, I grinned. “See what you started?” He’d held well, I thought.

He grinned and nodded. “Yeah, I see what you mean.”

My senses blurred for a moment, fatigue battling with the need for momentary reprieve. The anticipation of reaching and decompressing at the Abuja Continental was tantalizing. Visions of a refreshing shower, a therapeutic massage, and some decent chow beckoned. A full week, hot on the heels of the mercs responsible for the snatch job, navigating through Nigeria's unforgiving green hell.

"Phoenix," Glitch's voice sliced through my thoughts. "Priority comm from Command," he relayed, offering me an encrypted earpiece. I synced it up.

"Phoenix, status?" The voice belonged to none other than Steel Rain.

"Inbound to Abuja, sir."

Steel Rain's chuckle did little to ease my tension. "You've got a T-minus four-hour window to R&R in Abuja. New extraction op on the horizon."

"Sir, we're still wheels down from the last mission. We've been running dark for days," I countered, catching Phantom's questioning glance.

"Listen up, Sunny," Steel Rain began, invoking my real name, a rare gravity. "Top-level brass just pinged. We've got an American journalist KIA in Kajara, alongside a local guide. Another journalist's been snatched, with a ransom demand on the wire."

"Civilians," I hissed. "Who's pulling strings at the top?"

“A contender for California’s governorship. The KIA’s sibling is Judge Forest Knight. This has gone personal, and they want our best on it. It’s the Hausa Brigade and...”

The blood in my veins froze. “River Knight?”

“That’s a roger. Pulitzer Prize-winner River Knight. We’re on the clock here, Phoenix. Intel suggests Aminu ‘Bloodhawk’ Dahiru’s involvement. Ransom is a non-issue; we’ll wire it through intermediaries. Your objective: secure and extract, no casualties.”

Static filled my ears as my mind raced. Dahiru. That name spelled bad news. “Send Glitch all you’ve got on this. We’ll rendezvous.”

Damn River Knight. The very man whose teachings forged my armor of skepticism was the same I was tasked to recover. Irony was a cruel mistress.



# Chapter 3

## RIVER

The road to Kajara was a gauntlet. The armored jeep's tire succumbed to the unforgiving terrain, and an unexpected cattle blockade tested our patience. With the sun's descent painting the Kajara skyline in hues of impending danger, my day, defined by interviews and a relentless shutter frenzy, had drained me.

Fatigue weighed on me as I clutched my camera, its battle-worn edges a testament to the tales of adversity it had chronicled. Every snap of my lens painted the story of Kajara, resilience intertwined with torment.

The village's ambient symphony consisted of the murmurs in native tongues and the subtle intertwining of earthy aromas and lingering smoke. Every gaze from the villagers was a cautionary tale, every murmur an encrypted message, and the air was thick, not just with heat, but with an unspoken tension.

"This heat's unrelenting," groaned Jelani.

Quincy snorted, “You’re acting like it’s a surprise.” Fumbling with his phone, he added, “Comms are dark. River?”

“Managed a few uploads when I had a bar,” I responded. Thanks to my camera’s auto sync, every snap found its way to the cloud whenever a stray signal graced us—a failsafe against the unpredictable.

We were almost in our vehicle when an unnerving chill crept up my spine. Danger lurked.

“I’ve got a bad feeling,” I muttered to Quincy, scanning our surroundings.

He nodded, equally wary. “Same.”

In a split second, the serene veil of Kajara was lifted. Gunfire echoed like a demonic symphony, bullets tearing the dusk apart. Quincy and Jelani, always quick to adapt, dove for cover. But before my brain could process a move, an explosion stole the moment. Quincy’s gaze met mine, a brief, harrowing connection, before he was flung to the ground. Jelani vanished into the maelstrom.

Adrenaline surged, sharpening my senses, painting everything in hyperreal detail. The approaching rhythm of heavy boots was unmistakable. Without the jeep keys, which were with Jelani, escape became a game of stealth and wit.

Heart pounding, I took off, the night enveloping me. Every echo of a gunshot, a ghostly reminder of the thin line between



life and death. The once-distant observer, River Knight, was now ensnared in the very chaos he sought to capture.

The descent into darkness was complete. As Kajara's shadows consumed me, I was thrust into a new narrative: one of peril, captivity, and a desperate will to survive.



# Chapter 4

## SUNNY

“He was taken at eighteen hundred hours,” Glitch told the team as we sat around the meeting table in my suite.

We looked at our watches and set the timer. River Knight had now been a hostage for eight hours.

“The ransom demand came in at twenty-three hundred hours,” Glitch continued.

“That was fast. Looks like he was the target.” Rebound chewed on a toothpick as was habit since he quit smoking.

“Yeah. Looks like. And here’s what they sent to the US Embassy in Abuja.” Glitch typed on his keyboard to bring up the video on the screen.

I prepared myself. I’d seen what Aminu “Bloodhawk” Dahiru did to hostages. As much as I thought River Knight was a rich, self-important prick, no one deserved to be kidnapped by one of the deadliest insurgents on the African continent.

I locked my gaze on the flickering screen. The video played. The quality was gritty, but the message was crystal clear.

There he was: River Knight, tough-as-nails journalist turned captive by the damned Hausa Brigade. His eyes, once sharp as a blade, were now hollow and beaten.

I leaned in, jaw clenched, muscles coiled like a spring ready to snap. One of the Hausa brigade kidnappers wore a mask and was holding River up. He looked like a bruised-up rag doll. Unshaven, bloodshot eyes, a map of pain etched into his skin. It hit me like a sledgehammer to the gut—a man of steel, reduced to this.

In the video, River's voice emerged, raspy and strained, like a whisper from the edge of despair. A harsh light illuminated his bruised face, casting sharp shadows across his features. They'd beaten him up. His nose was probably busted. One of his eyes was shut. *Fuck!*

He held up a *New York Times* newspaper so we could see the date. Nice touch, assholes, since River worked for them.

“My name is River Knight,” he croaked out, his words faltering as if each syllable was a struggle. His voice trembled, starkly contrasting to the fearless reporter who'd faced danger head-on countless times.

His eyes flickered with an almost imperceptible urgency. As the seconds ticked by, a subtle pattern emerged in his gaze.

“Fuck me, dude is sending a message. He's using an old CIA code,” Phantom exclaimed, a hand running over his bald head.

Phantom was six feet five and built like a wall. His call sign should've been Tank, but that he could, despite his size, disappear into thin air had led to him being called Phantom.

River was not an idiot. I had to give him that. He used his eyes to make contact. Short blinks and long stares wove a message amidst the chaos of his captivity.

“Chaos, how bad does he look?” Besides being our demolition expert, Chaos was also our medic since he had a medical degree. But once he had the education, he decided he didn't want to be a physician and ended up in special forces.

“Looks like they gave him a bad beating. He seems to have trouble breathing, but that could just be that he's shit scared. Still, I think he has broken ribs. And since his color is not bad, I'd say nothing broke and poked the wrong organs...yet. If they go at him again, depending on how hard...” He trailed away. Yeah, we all knew what would happen then. River Knight, a Pulitzer-prize-winning photojournalist, would die.

*Not on my fucking watch!*

The camera stayed on him as the distorted voice of a kidnapper came through the video. Glitch was already getting the code down while the rest of us focused on the computerized voice, its monotone devoid of emotion or empathy.

“Judge Forest Knight and the American infidel government, you have exactly seventy-two hours. We require five million dollars to be transferred to the designated offshore account.

Failure to meet this demand within the stipulated time will severely affect this man.”

An account number showed up on the video screen. We’d watch the video several times to parse every detail to identify where they could’ve taken River.

“Our reach is far, and our patience is thin. Should you choose to disobey, we will kill River Knight.”

The kidnapper pulled River’s blonde hair to raise his head. River continued to break up the code with regular eye movements to avoid detection by the cameraman.

“He’s clever,” Chaos noted. He ate a sandwich, washing it down with a beer. Chaos, a member of the Navajo tribe, was nearly my height, around five nine five ten, but weighed about a hundred pounds more in muscle than I did. He had dark eyes and kept his hair long, tied in a bun.

The computer-generated voice continued.

“Transfer the funds as instructed. We expect your prompt compliance.”

We watched the video again with a focus on River and his eyes. “Seven kidnappers. Three hours from Kajara,” he transmitted with his eyes, a silent beacon of information amidst the ominous uncertainty. His pupils danced with purpose, a language born from desperation and resourcefulness.

The sequence of rapid blinks and lingering gazes formed a lifeline, a way to convey crucial details without uttering a

single word. It was a testament to his resilience and determination to outwit his captors even in the darkest circumstances. Each deliberate movement of his eyes was a lifeline cast into the digital void. It was evidence of the strength of River's spirit, a message that transcended the brutality of his captivity.

Finally, we all sat back. River's face froze on the screen. The seconds dripped away like blood from an open wound. My eyes stayed locked on the screen, where River's face was etched in a loop of torment.

“Glitch, we need satellite photos of the area around Kajara,” I demanded before I walked into my bedroom and closed the door. My hands were shaking.

I put my hands on the door and hung my head, waiting for the memories and emotions to pass. This was personal. And I had to let the team know.





# Chapter 5

## SUNNY

**W**hen I came back, my teammates eyed me cautiously. We all knew each other very well. They could sense the tension emanating from me.

I sat back down and looked at the monitor on the wall. Glitch had pulled up a map of the area around Kajara.

“I’m working on the satellite data for this area,” Glitch informed us. “ETA to target is approximately 45 mikes via air assets.”

I looked at everyone, waiting for me to say whatever they knew I had to say. “Okay. I need you all to know that I have a history with the hostage. We went to university together. I was in Columbia for two years and, as you know, dropped out and joined the military. He was two years my senior, and...we had a one-night stand.”

*Technically it was just one night...but emotionally, it was a lifetime.*

“This was what, twelve years ago?” Rebound threw the toothpick in his mouth into the trash and pulled out another from his vest pocket.

“Yeah.”

“You seem shaken up, boss,” Chaos said, concern lacing his voice. He didn’t doubt my ability to do my job and run the team. He was worried about me.

“Hey, if a girl I had my dick in were on a video like that, I’d be shaken up too,” Rebound retorted.

I grinned. “Glitch, you got that sat data?”

Glitch, who’d not looked up from his screen, nodded. “I’m putting it together. Okay, here we go.”

We huddled around the table, the dim glow of the monitors casting an eerie light on our focused faces. Glitch’s fingers danced across the keyboard, manipulating the satellite imagery with deft precision. Rebound’s gaze was steely, scanning the images with the intensity of a predator on the prowl, chewing on his toothpick. Chaos sat, an air of controlled anticipation about him, his fingers idly tracing patterns on a small device that held untold destructive power. I thought he needed to stop playing with demo equipment in meeting rooms. But I also knew that when it was Chaos, the bombs only went off when he decided they would. This was how he kept his cool.

Phantom leaned against the wall, his presence silent yet imposing, as he watched the satellite data. My eyes swept over the team. These were people I trusted with my life, each

person a vital piece in this high-stakes puzzle. Once upon a time, I'd trusted River...the stakes were much lower now, but then my heart had been in the mix.

The images on the screen flickered, revealing the village of Kajara, a pinprick on the vast canvas of Nigeria. Glitch's voice broke the silence, guiding us through our gathered intelligence. His fingers zoomed in, highlighting key landmarks, potential escape routes, and the rumored location of River's captivity.

"I looked at intel from some other teams." Glitch's voice was calm, starkly contrasting with the tension in the air.

"What you're saying is that you hacked into the DOJ," I murmured.

"One of these days, you're going to get caught," Chaos admonished, but his voice had no heat. Glitch would only get caught if we wanted to get caught.

We were all experts. Steel Rain hired the best of the best. Everyone around the table had walked many paths in their lives, each one shaping the people we were today.

For almost all of us, it started with the military, where we found a home in the heart of special forces—those years taught me the true meaning of discipline, resilience, and camaraderie. I faced challenges that pushed me to my limits, forged bonds with comrades that were unbreakable, and learned to thrive in the most demanding and hostile environments. Phantom and I had been working together since those early days.

After my time in special forces, I transitioned to the CIA. I worked in the shadows, gathered intelligence, and executing covert missions. Those were the years of secrets and whispered truths, of deciphering puzzles that led to high-stakes solutions. I embraced the cloak of anonymity, mastering the art of blending into the background while remaining an indomitable force.

But as with every phase, there came a time for change. A few years ago, I left the CIA behind and embarked on a new journey with Steel Rain—a security company that sought to make a difference in a constantly evolving world. I found a different purpose within its ranks, which allowed me to apply my skills to classified missions and to protect and secure in a broader sense.

Nearly a decade and a half of service had woven my tapestry of experiences, each thread contributing to the mosaic of who I was today. From the battlefield to the shadows, from classified documents to satellite imagery, I embraced every challenge, every danger, and every moment of uncertainty. The scars I bore, inside and out, were badges of honor that reminded me of the battles I'd fought—some physical, some psychological.

In the world I'd chosen, danger was a constant companion, and trust was a currency more valuable than gold. My decisions could balance life and death, success, and failure. But amidst the adrenaline rushes and the moments of calculated risk, there was a fire within me, an unwavering determination to protect, serve, and bring justice to those who needed it most.

My call sign, Phoenix, came from when I almost died during a mission in my early military days. I had months of physical therapy and finally came out of it a reborn Phoenix.

This had not been the plan, not when I was a young student. I was going to get a degree in forensic psychiatry from Columbia...but thanks to River, I had to drop out, and I'd gone into the family business. I joined the military and finished my education there. I had no regrets. Sometimes, the things that disappointed us the most were what brought us to where we were the most fulfilled. I should thank River because without him betraying me, I'd probably never have found my way to special forces or Steel Rain. I'd not be in the position to save his life.

“River’s about a three-hour drive from Kajara. I’ve cross-referenced his last known movements with local reports. There’s a compound here.” He marked a spot on the map with a digital pen. “And it matches the description of Hausa Brigade’s known operations.”

Rebound’s sharpshooter eyes honed in on the compound, his mind calculating trajectories and angles. “We’ll need eyes on the ground,” he stated, a note of certainty in his voice. “Visual confirmation before we make a move.”

Chaos interjected, his fingers still tracing patterns on the device he had in his hand. I looked at it keenly and sighed. It was a Nexoblade Detonator X-9, an innovative handheld explosive device designed for precision and controlled destruction. Created by Valkyron Industries, the compact

device combines advanced technology with expert craftsmanship to deliver devastating impact while minimizing collateral damage.

“Please tell me that the detonator is neutral,” Rebound mocked.

“Sure, it is,” Chaos said lazily, winking at me.

Phantom pushed off the wall, his expression impassive. “Stealth is our advantage. The element of surprise will be key.”

I nodded, my mind racing as the pieces fell into place. We went through the plan several times. We had a narrow window of opportunity. The longer River was in their clutches, the higher the risks.

“We go in during the witching hour,” I ordered. “0220 hours. We use the night as our cloak.”

“Copy that,” Rebound responded. “We need diversion points. Chaos, your toys will come in handy.”

Chaos smirked. “Got a few tricks up my sleeve, sharpshooter.”

Glitch’s fingers moved rapidly across his keyboard. “Satellite images show three possible entry points. I’ll loop their surveillance feed and overlay our approach vector. We’ll have a twenty-minute window of digital blindness.”

“You’re the best, Glitch,” Phantom commented.

“I know,” Glitch said with mock arrogance.

I focused my gaze on the screen, locking onto the target compound. “We need intel on their guard rotations, patrol timings, and blind spots. Glitch, can you get a fix on their communication frequencies?”

“On it,” he replied, his fingers dancing with purpose.

The room grew silent except for the soft hum of electronic devices. I could feel the gravity of the situation pressing down, the weight of the mission ahead. The crispness in the air was charged with a palpable tension.

“Let’s gear up and move out,” I finally broke the silence, meeting each of their eyes. “We have the plan. Glitch, keep monitoring communications. Rebound, prepare for recon, and you’re out of sight. Chaos, bring X-9 along for something better than scaring Rebound. Phantom, you’ll be with me.”

The room buzzed with a charged energy, a shared determination that ran deeper than words. The mission was clear: infiltrate the compound, extract River. If we were lucky, Bloodhawk would be on site.

But amid the strategizing and the satellite imagery, there was a palpable truth: every second that ticked by was one closer to River’s fate being sealed.





# Chapter 6

## RIVER

I dozed. It wasn't easy to do with how they had kicked me in my abdomen when I lay down. And the loud noises. I was a war photographer; I understand how torture worked. These guys weren't doing that. They didn't need any information from me. This was just sport.

They'd thrown me in a room with no windows or light. My eyes adjusted so I could see that it was an empty room. I had two or maybe three rodents for company. My hands were tied in front of me, which I was grateful for.

They hadn't given me anything to eat or drink.

When they first caught me, they'd used the butt of a rifle to beat me, after which I'd pretended to black out. This meant that they'd not covered my face. I kept track of the time it took for them to reach our destination. Once we were in what I assumed was a Hausa Brigade compound, I tried to keep track of the number of men.

As war journalists, we'd been trained to use not Morse code because anyone could read that, but a different US-based code that could help us communicate messages. I'd let Forest and anyone else who'd seen the video that there were seven kidnapers, and we'd driven for three hours, give or take.

I'd been the target, because I was a Knight, which was why they'd killed Quincy and Jelani on sight.

If I had a dime for each time my last name had worked against me, I'd have doubled my substantial trust fund.

I kept count of the minutes the best I could, so I knew how many hours had passed since they brought me here. The purpose of kidnapping was to confuse the hostage. And I was pretty fucking lost. Also, I had trouble breathing. They had broken two of my ribs. I didn't want to put too much pressure on my chest, not just because it hurt like a motherfucker, but also because I didn't want to dislodge a bone that might pierce a lung or my heart. Because then I was a dead man. These guys didn't seem like they would provide me with medical help.

I pulled my body to rest against a wall. They beat the crap out of me. *Assholes*. But this was the Hausa Brigade. They didn't consistently return their ransom hostages in a functional piece, or even alive, even when the ransom was paid.

I knew the US military would not interfere because that would open a whole can of diplomatic shit. Knowing Forest, he'd contact one of his friends in the DOJ to find a private outfit to get me out. He wouldn't trust that giving the money

would keep me alive—which was a sound notion. The money they'd asked for was trivial.

They knew that Quincy and I were going into Kajara on the day...yesterday. They'd probably been tracking me. I'd gotten my friend killed. When I closed my eyes, I could still see Quincy's eyes right before he fell.

Death was here. I had to face that fact.

I dozed off again and dreamed of Sunny. Christ, she was so beautiful it hurt.

I remembered the first time I'd seen her in the common room next to the dining hall in Columbia. She was with friends, garrulously talking and laughing.

She stood out. She was tall, around five nine-five ten. She was blonde, and her hair hung loose around her shoulders. She had bright blue-gray eyes that seemed like they were filled with amusement. And then there was her full mouth.

I'd wanted to meet her as soon as I'd seen her. I'd made it a point to find out who she was and bumped into her during a poetry reading at the Lenfest Center. The poems were terrible, and she laughed at my jokes.

When I introduced myself, she shook my hand and said, "I know who you are. Isn't one of the buildings here named after your granddaddy?"

Legacy was a dirty word, and even though I'd gotten into all the Ivy schools I'd applied to, a big part of that acceptance was

my last name. Even if I hadn't had a 4.5 GPA and a perfect SAT score, I'd still have made it here.

"Yeah," I admitted honestly.

"I'm Sunny French, and I'm here on a scholarship," she told me, her eyes challenging me.

"I know how competitive that is. You must be very smart."

She laughed. "Now you're making me sound like a snob."

"Not at all," I confessed. "I'm *trying* to let you know that I'm aware of my privilege and that my circumstances differ vastly from many others."

She considered me for a long moment and then smiled. "You're alright, River Knight."

"May I buy you a cup of coffee?" I asked her.

"Yes, you may."

That was the start of a friendship. We didn't fall headlong into bed; we got to know one another. I liked her. But we were different. She was in her second year of studying forensic psychiatry while I was finishing my bachelor's in journalism. She had two jobs to pay her bills; I had a trust fund. She was an introvert. I was an extrovert.

The one thing we did have in common was a love for dancing and we did quite a bit of that. The salsa, jive, waltz!

She changed me. I enjoyed spending time with her so much that I gave up my debauched ways to be with her. I tried to give her money, and she'd shut me down immediately. "River,

money ruins friendships. And I'm up for a scholarship based on a paper I am submitting to the School of Psychiatry, which will pay for my next two years here. Fingers crossed."

"I'm sure you'll get it," I'd said with pride.

She didn't want me as a friend for my money. It was such a relief and an irresistible draw. Sometimes, people wanted to know me because I was a venerable Knight with all that old money. I wasn't cynical. I had friends who didn't give a shit about my family, but then so many of my friends in university were like me, trust fund babies.

I woke up when I heard shouting. The past slid away, and I flung my arm when I felt something furry against it. Fucking rodents. I was thirsty. Dehydration was the first thing that got you, long before hunger did.

My throat was hoarse. "Hey," I called out. It was a scratched whisper. I tried again. "Anyone there?"

There was more shouting.

My door opened. Something slid inside the room, and then the door closed again. The little light told me that my room service had arrived, and if I didn't get to it quickly, the rodents would eat my food.

When kidnapped, there was always a danger that the food could be tainted, the water laced with drugs—but I knew I needed to eat and drink to keep my strength.

I opened the door and could smell the food. I could see the outline of a metal plate and a plastic bottle. The bottle had

been cut to be fashioned as a large glass. I sipped the water, not wanting to throw up.

The food was Jollof rice. They hadn't given me silverware. Man, was I going to give this place a bad Yelp review. I spared a little water to wash the fingers of my right hand and ate quickly, not knowing how much time I'd have. I even licked the plate. It had been nearly twenty hours or so since I'd been taken, the same time since I'd had anything to drink or eat.

I leaned against the wall by the door, keeping the plastic glass close to me. I'd had nearly three-quarters of the water. I wanted to save the rest for later because I didn't know how long I'd be here before they'd feed me again.

There was an excellent chance I would not leave here alive. And I wished there was some way for me to let my brother know I loved him. Let Daisy know I loved her. And hold my nephew one more time. I wouldn't get to know that cute kid.  
*Fuck!*

*And* I wanted to meet Sunny again, tell her she broke my heart, and I hated her for it. I hated that she'd been like the others, trying to take advantage of me.

*Yeah, River, you want to see the girl after a decade and a half to tell her she's a bitch? Be honest; you want to see her once before you die.*

If you can't be honest with yourself right before it's lights out, when the hell else could you be?

The door opened again; a man came in with a knife. Fear clutched me.

He cut the bindings around my ankles. “Get up.”

I drank all the remaining water first. Maybe they’d not bring me back here, so I better hydrate. I stood up on wobbly legs. I had tried to stretch, but how I was tied made it impossible to exercise my leg muscles, which now hurt like a mother fucker.

The kidnapper grabbed my arm and dragged me out of my room. My eyes had to adjust to the light. It was late afternoon, from what I could make out.

He returned me to the room where we’d made the first video. I guessed it was time for my closeup again. They hadn’t beaten me first this time.

*Thank god for small mercies.*





# Chapter 7

## SUNNY

**R**apid preparations began as we were equipped with gear tailored for the mission. Silent but efficient, the hotel suite transformed into a war room, with maps, satellite images, and communication devices spread out. Plans were refined, contingencies discussed, and every minute detail fine-tuned.

The hour approached, and the engines of our transport roared to life. With precision and purpose, we embarked on a mission to penetrate the heart of enemy territory and bring back one of our own from the jaws of hell. Every heartbeat was synchronized, every move calculated, and every breath held promise.

We were Steel Rain, and the storm was about to begin.

Before an op everyone seemed to be in their world; so we got on the plane with our gear to be flown to Damaturu, the capital city of Yobe. From there, we'd have to drive. A chopper would make too much noise, and we didn't want to alert the Hausa Brigade that we were coming.

“Phoenix, call for you.” Glitch held out an earpiece for me.

I put it on. “Phoenix.”

“Hi, Sunny, this is Forest Knight.” He sounded like his brother, I thought. I knew they looked like brothers; I’d seen photos, and Judge Knight had kicked up quite a storm when he pulled his nomination for a judgeship because it was hurting his wife.

“Judge Knight.”

“I wanted to wish you and your team good luck.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Ah...I looked you up. You went to Columbia.”

*He knows! Fuck!*

“I knew your brother, Sir. But that won’t affect how we conduct ourselves. We’re going to do everything we can to get River out there.” I kept my voice emotionless. All my years in the military, special forces, CIA, and now with Steel Rain, had taught me a great deal about controlling what I felt. The fact was, I didn’t feel all that much most of the time. After all the horrors that I had seen, it took a lot to shake me. Watching River on that video had eviscerated me.

“I have no doubt. Thank you for what you’re doing. I will always be grateful. If you ever need anything, please reach out to me.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I was about to remove the earpiece when Glitch held up his hand. “Keep it on. Okay, here we go. I have helmets that will give me your visuals and earpieces for you so we can keep in touch.”

I looked at my watch. We’d land as close to the target site as possible. Even so, it would take us an hour to drive through the jungle and another hour to get to the Hausa Brigade compound. River Knight had now been a hostage for twenty-two hours.

I remember first meeting him at a poetry reading at the Lenfest Center. He later confessed that he’d seen me before at the common and had made it a point to find me. I was flattered. Here I was, a kid from the wrong side of the tracks who’d become friends with *the* River Knight. My father had retired as a Sergeant from the US Army, and his father had done the same. When my parents divorced, my brother and I didn’t see our father much—though the child support checks kept coming regularly. We’d see him when he was on leave, but when you saw your father just once or twice a year, you didn’t have a relationship with him. My mother worked in a diner, finding creative ways to stretch the dollar. My older brother had joined the military and had recently retired as a Warrant Officer. He had two kids, a healthy and happy marriage, and a new job doing logistics for an IT company in Providence. His wife couldn’t stand me, but I was hardly ever home in my flat in Providence, so it didn’t matter to either Sam or me.

We were not the type of people that River Knight hung out with.

It had been impossible for me to resist River. In my sophomore year of college, his senior year, we spent a lot of our time together. He and my friends assumed River and I were dating. We hadn't been. Ours was an honest friendship. We took care of each other. When he had the flu, I all but lived in his apartment. When I had to rush to Providence because my mother was sick, River drove me and held my hand through her funeral. We went dancing—it was a hobby for both of us.

Even my brother liked him the few times he'd met him, though I'd been worried because River was just the kind of rich, pretty boy that Sam would despise. But River had an air about him that was grounding—you could not dislike him.

I never met his brother, because *whatever* we were, ended before our planned trip to Los Angeles.

River had been the reason why I couldn't finish my degree in Columbia. Dropping out of university, because I couldn't afford it, and joining the army meant I had built a life I was proud of. I lived a life of service.

Still, I couldn't believe he had done what he had done. And that, too, right after we'd made love. The best fucking sex of my life. I'd had sex since then, but I still remembered how it had been with River. *Magical!* I had not expected that because I'd known it would be my first time, but River had made it perfect.

We'd known each other for nearly a year before we ended up in bed. We had felt the pull more than once but resisted it, afraid it would ruin our friendship. But one night, while we were working on papers due at midnight, we threw caution to the winds.

We were in his apartment. He had a *very* nice one in the Upper West Side while I was in the dorms, paying through my nose.

"Sent," I cried out. "I'm done! It's damn good, River. Isn't it?" He'd helped me with my paper, which I submitted for a scholarship. I'd compared and reviewed data from the United States on self-induced intoxication causing automatism. It had taken me months to put it together, but it had been worth it. My forensics professor had told me it was one of the best papers he'd ever read from an undergraduate student.

River gave me a high five. "It is, and you're going to get that scholarship. I can't see how you won't."

We hugged as friends, and somewhere during that hug, our hold on each other changed fluidly and turned sexual.

He looked at my face. "You're so beautiful, Sunny."

My heart was in my throat. This was the best man I knew, except for my brother. And River was the best friend I'd ever had.

Our lips touched, first a whisper, a dream realized, and then, with a groan, we both devoured each other. He knew he'd be

my first lover. I was only eighteen and had been so busy studying that I'd never gone beyond first base with anyone.

He nuzzled my cheek. "You smell of sunshine."

He smelled of expensive, addictive, sexy cologne. I licked my lips and saw his eyes change. Go hot for me. "I want you," he whispered. "Tell me I can have you."

I couldn't believe my luck. I was going to have sex with my best friend, whom I trusted implicitly, a man I suspected I was probably in love with.

"Yes."

"I'll take care of you," he whispered, brushing his lips against mine.

"Whoa," I cried out when he picked me up. I looped my hand around his neck. "I'm heavy."

"Light as a feather," he claimed and kissed me again. "And I've wanted to do this for a long time."

"*This*, as in carrying me, or having sex with me?"

"Yes, and yes," he breathed as he put me down gently on his bed. His house had floor-to-ceiling windows, and New York blinked before me. I could see my reflection, lying on the bed, leaning up and resting on my elbows.

He stood looking at me as he unbuttoned his shirt and flung it aside. He smiled when he heard my breath miscue. I knew he worked out. I didn't know how much because those muscles didn't come for free.

I looked at the bulge in his crotch, and my breathing went haywire. He didn't take his jeans off. Instead, he leaned and removed my Converse shoes and then my no-show socks. I fell on my back and looked at the ceiling. He pulled my skinny jeans, and I tried to remember if I was wearing the right panties. But I didn't have to wonder for too long because he took them off next.

I closed my eyes. I was embarrassed. Thank god I'd taken care of things down under two days ago; otherwise, he'd have a forest to contend with. But I didn't go the full Brazilian way...that was not on the cards. Just a regular bikini wax was excruciating...what the...? Why wasn't he doing anything or saying anything?

I opened my eyes and found him staring at my pussy.

“Ah...River?”

He dragged his eyes up, and they were almost black with arousal. “You're so beautiful.”

*Five stars for Angel's Wax Palace!*

“Take off your shirt, Sunshine.”

I sat up, feeling very conscious about being naked from the waist down. I removed my shirt, unhooked my bra, and took it off.

“Your turn,” I stammered. Suddenly, I felt cold and afraid of what was to come. I knew the basics of sex. I used a vibrator, so it wasn't as the Victorian novels liked to mention, a hymen to breach.

His hands stilled on the buttons of his jeans. “Hey. What’s wrong?”

“Will it hurt?”

He stroked a finger over the slope of one breast, and goosebumps broke out on my skin. “I’ll be careful, Sunshine. Do you trust me?”

That question was easy to answer. “Always.”

He kissed me then. I’d always wondered who would be my first. I was so happy I’d chosen so well.

His mouth kissed between my breasts and then he moved his mouth slowly, *oh so slowly*, until he came to a nipple. He kissed the puckered flesh and then took it in his mouth. This was the first time anyone had suckled me, and I almost came off the bed; the feeling was so intense.

“You taste so good.” He went from one nipple to another, and I was wetter than ever.

“River,” I moaned.

“Yeah, Sunshine. You’re perfect, you know that.” His mouth went down to my stomach, and then he parted my thighs. I stiffened. I tried to pull my thighs close, but he wouldn’t let me.

“Keep them open,” he growled.

“But...I can’t.” This was too intimate. He was...putting a finger inside me.

“Fuck, you’re tight, baby.”



The friction of his thick finger rasped the tissue inside me, making me jolt. “Do you like this?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I moaned. He added another finger, and something inside me unraveled. I wasn’t sure what was happening to me. I’d had orgasms before, but they were a pop. This was—.

He pulled his fingers out of me and put them inside his mouth. I watched, my heart beating like a hammer.

“I want a proper taste.”

My thighs almost automatically wanted to prevent access, and he held me still. “What?”

“It’s embarrassing.”

“Get over it,” he said lazily, and his mouth was on me.

*Oh my god!* So much of the world made sense. This was why women loved to have a man go down on them. He licked and pushed his tongue inside me, and I got impatient. My hips wanted to move, but his hands on them wouldn’t let me.

“River,” I pleaded, unsure what I was asking for.

He licked my clitoris gently. And then he used his teeth to graze the swollen flesh. Something amazing happened inside me—like a supernova burst through. This was not a pop I got with my vibrator; this was an earthquake.

*“Phoenix. Phoenix.”*

I opened my eyes and saw Chaos looking at me. “Yeah.” I’d fallen asleep and had the best dream/memory.

“ETA to area of operations is 60 mikes.”

We landed close to Kajara on a runway the French military often used. I picked up my backpack and followed the guys out of the plane. I looked at my watch. It was now twenty-four hours since River had been taken. My heart clenched. I hoped he was still alive.



# Chapter 8

## RIVER

One of the kidnappers pushed me into a chair. “Sit.”

As a reporter, I always felt that we should conserve our words. Pushing me down and saying *sit* was redundant. But I was happy to sit on a chair like a normal person. The last time I sat on a chair was because I could not stand or sit unless someone held me up. It wasn't my first beating. This wasn't even my first detention, but it was my first kidnapping. Hopefully, my last, and not because I'd die after this one.

I looked around the room. It was dark, and I couldn't make out the faces of the people, which was a good thing. I didn't want to see any of them. When insurgents decided you could see them, they weren't worried about you identifying them—because they were sure you would not make it out alive.

I enjoyed sitting on the chair and wondered if I could ask for some water.

Since I had some light, I took inventory of myself. My shirt was torn but wearable. My shorts were...well able to stand up

and walk themselves, they were so stiff with dried sweat and dirt. I smelled like someone who had...well, spent the past twenty hours in a very filthy, sweltering place. August, in Nigeria was a bad idea—and now in more ways than one.

“You are a reporter,” a man with a thick Nigerian accent said.

Was that a question or a statement? “Yes, I am a reporter.”

“I am Aminu Dahiru,” the man announced.

My heart pounded at a ridiculous speed. No one had seen Aminu “Bloodhawk” Dahiru and lived to tell the tale. *Well fuck!* A man sitting in the shadows rose.

I knew *of* Bloodhawk, the enigmatic and cunning leader of the Hausa Brigade. His background was shrouded in mystery, with rumors suggesting that he was once a skilled operative in a special forces unit before he went rogue and formed his own mercenary group. Aminu possessed a keen strategic mind, and an uncanny ability to anticipate the moves of his adversaries. He was a charismatic leader known for his pragmatism, often prioritizing profit over ideology, which set him apart from the more extremist elements of Boko Haram. But that didn’t exclude him from creating chaos when it benefitted him.

I finally saw the man. A man who was feared by most men who knew of him. I had seen fuzzy pictures of him, but nothing matched the force he exuded in real life. A scar stretched across his left cheek, a testament to his years of combat experience. His eyes were sharp and calculating, reflecting a depth of knowledge gained from his time in

various conflict zones. He wore a combination of tactical gear and traditional clothing.

*Ready for a family party or a war!*

“I want you to interview me. Dayo, *hustle and get that man’s bag.*”

I wanted to ask him if he was nuts. Did he kidnap me to interview him? Then maybe he shouldn’t have killed Quincy; he was the real reporter. I was a photojournalist.

“And I want you to take pictures,” he told me.

I blinked with my one good eye. “Pictures of what?”

“Me. *Be like your Time Magazine.*”

Right. A fucking megalomaniac had kidnapped me. Could this whole thing be more surreal?

The man, who I assumed was called Dayo, dropped my backpack before him. I almost barked for him to be careful. My equipment was in there and I realized how ludicrous my situation was. These guys would have no compunction putting a bullet through me or beating the crap out of me, and I was worried about my fucking lenses.

“You want me to interview you?”

“Yeah.” Bloodhawk sat down on the couch, facing the video camera. “The video is set to focus on me. You ask the questions. Dayo, *abeg bring the paper, my guy.*”

I was given a paper with typed questions. It was a letter-size paper, and the printer needed ink. There were five questions,

and the words were slightly fuzzy because my one open eye was tired.

“You want me to record this interview?” I pointed to the video camera.

“No *wahala*.” I understood some Nigerian pidgin English, so I knew that meant yes or no problem.

I felt stiff as I pulled out my camera. If someone was coming to rescue me, I could prolong this and maybe save my life. Either way, I had little choice.

I touched my lens and felt comfortable, like holding an old lover. I looked through the lens and immediately felt the world dissolve around me as it always did. I tested the lens and then took some pictures.

I saw the blinking bars on the camera’s screen and took a deep breath. “You know, I think we should use my camera,” I suggested. “It’s higher quality.”

Bloodhawk nodded and continued, “Yeah, yeah.”

I took my time changing the cameras. The slower I moved, the longer I lived. I looked through the camera and set it on Bloodhawk’s face. But pretending to make sure it worked, I moved it around the room, caught all the insurgents, and threw a prayer at the universe that someone was paying attention.

I took a deep breath and started with the first question. “You are Aminu Dahari, a freedom fighter. Tell us what your mission is.”

Bloodhawk sat up and smiled. “I am the leader of the Hausa Brigade. You see, in Nigeria, *e no dey easy at all*. Our brigade believes in fix things. People are suffering in Nigeria. We want the world to hear of our pain. Education, jobs, better life for our people—*those na the solutions we hope for*. We just want to make our people get hope again, no matter how we fit do am.”

If I was functioning as an objective reporter, I’d ask a follow here and ask how the fuck they were doing this by kidnapping someone like me. But I was not doing an interview. I was asking questions that this asshole wanted me to ask.

“Thank you. Mr. Dahari.” I looked around and said in a tone that I hoped didn’t sound like I was begging because I was. “Could I have some water?”

“*Abeg*, bring water for the man.” Bloodhawk snapped. “You getting it all on film?”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

I got a bottle of water this time. I had been elevated now that I was interviewing the big man himself. I drank slowly, wanting to elongate time. Now, if no one was coming to rescue me, I was up shit creek without a paddle.

“Maybe we can take some pictures before the next question?” I offered and tucked the bottle inside my cargo shorts pockets. I could keep that with me in case I got nothing to drink for god knew how long.



Bloodhawk was excited. I pulled out another camera from my bag and checked the lens and the bars of connection on the screen. Well, this may be the ass end of nowhere, but 3G was working. *Thank you, gods of satellites.*



# Chapter 9

## SUNNY

Glitch was driving the bulletproof jeep while we sat in the back, checking out equipment. Something beeped from the front and didn't stop. "What is that infernal sound?" I demanded.

Glitch said, "You won't believe this, but the hostage is transmitting pictures of...and you really won't believe this, *fucking* Bloodhawk himself."

I leaned back to look at the screens in front of Glitch. "How are you getting this?"

"I hacked into his cloud," Glitch explained. "And we have a video." He handed me a tablet, and I held it so we could watch what was on it.

River's voice came through with a question about the Hausa Brigade's mission. He sounded weak, almost frail. There was a scratch in his throat, and I knew the pressure he was under, despite which he was calm and collected.

“I like this guy.” Rebound moved his toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other. “First the code, and now this.”

The camera focus turned, and we could see River. He was blinking again. The message was short this time, and we Phantom noted down the long and short blinks.

“The message is simple, just: Bloodhawk.”

“I love this guy,” Rebound admitted. “He’s not just a pretty boy.”

“But still cute,” Phantom noted.

“You think our hostage is cute?” Glitch chuckled.

Phantom grinned. “Hey, if this was a female hostage and she had tits up to here, Chaos would be...actually, remember that banker’s daughter in Poland?”

“She *was* hot,” Chaos agreed.

“And I think this guy is cute,” Phantom concluded.

“Gentlemen, can we stop thinking with our dicks and use these images to get a tactical advantage,” I admonished, though I was smiling. Sometimes, you had to laugh when you worked in a high-pressure environment like we did. “Bloodhawk is in the compound, so there will be extra security. Rebound, find your vantage point ASAP so we can get eyes on the place.”

“Affirmative, Phoenix.”

“Ready to execute,” Chaos piped in before I could ask him. “I’ll clear a path.”

We watched the video repeatedly and looked at the photos River was sending through in real time.

I ran a hand through my short blonde hair. I had it cut when I joined the military...but let's face it, I had missed it because he'd loved my hair and ran his fingers through it. Would he even recognize me? Probably not. River Knight was a rich asshole, and people like him forgot the little people.

We drove through the jungle, Glitch monitoring the coordinates from where the pictures and videos were uploaded to the cloud. He was a dead man if they found out what he was doing.

Glitch stopped the vehicle, and we worked to cut branches and move leaves to create a canopy to hide it. In the green jungle, it would take a minute to spot it.

Rebound had already left to reach the coordinates of the spot he had identified that would give him the best cover and view of the building where they were holding River.

Chaos took his backpack and walked away. He knew what he needed to do. Phantom and I worked our phones to pinpoint the vehicle coordinates that would be our escape path. There were several challenges besides the terrain when you worked in Nigeria. There was, of course, the insurgency, but then there was the Nigerian military that would shoot anything and anyone down as well.

I had wondered why the Hausa Brigade had not announced the kidnapping through the media but had used a direct channel to the US Embassy in Abuja, but now that I had seen

the video, I knew what he was trying to do. Nigeria was getting ready to hold elections, and it looked like fucking Aminu “Bloodhawk” Dahiru was getting ready to go legit. Hopefully, this meant he would not kill River. But there were no guarantees, not with the Hausa Brigade.

I checked my SIG Sauer M17 and put it back in its holster. I also had an SRK on my ankle. Phantom carried a machete, which always came in handy in a jungle to cut a path through, and he preferred a Beretta M9 over the SIG.

We trekked the grueling path through the village to the coordinates of the Hausa Brigade facility. It would take us at least one hour on foot. There was no way to get a vehicle closer without being detected. There was a path that the Hausa Brigade used, but that was under continual surveillance, even if it was easier to drive on. We’d decided against it as it would compromise the hostage’s security.

Beneath the oppressive African sun, the jungle seethed with life and danger. My heart raced as I tightened the straps of my tactical vest in an unconscious gesture.

I had trouble reconciling the man I knew with the man I’d seen in the video. The eyes were the same, and I’d spent much time looking into his eyes when we were together and now to read his messages.

“I fucking hate the African jungle,” Phantom commented, and as soon as he did, it began to rain. “Fucking hell. Like the humidity wasn’t enough.”

I chuckled.

“And what the fuck is that?” Phantom demanded when he looked at a creature on a tree, staring at us.

“It’s a pangolin.”

“It looks like a croc.”

“It has scales made of keratin. They normally only come out at night so you should feel privileged to see a pangolin. Added to that, they are disappearing. They are poached for their scales and meat.”

“With this rain and how dark it is in this fucking jungle, it’s always like night here.”

“We’re lucky we’re not in the Amazon jungle.”

Phantom sighed. “No shit. I thought I was done with this when I left the army.”

“And what did you think we did at Steel Rain?” I asked, bending to miss the branch of a tree.

The rain slowed us down as it waterlogged the uneven terrain of the jungle. I was waiting to hear from Rebound and Chaos, who were taking another route to do what they needed to. Chaos would set explosive devices to protect us from being followed.

“Four tangos on the perimeter,” Rebound whispered through the comms.

Phantom and I checked our Night Optical Devices, PVS 14s mounted on our helmets. Rebound was set for a double-tap, and Phantom and I would clear the others.

I threw a hand signal, marking the tango to my three o'clock. We executed with clockwork precision, blades ensuring stealth kills. Rebound's targets went down without a sound.

"Chaos, prepping for exfil, need cover fire on egress," I relayed through the comms.

"Rounds chambered, standing by."

Opting for a silent entry, we scaled the perimeter wall, bypassing the gate. Inside, two tangos met the dirt, courtesy of Phantom.

Reaching the entrance, I gestured for Phantom to pie the corner. Using a tac mirror, he peeked beneath. Our man River had gone dark; Glitch confirmed his tracker was offline. Four enemy combatants lounged, puffing on smokes.

Eagle-eye satellite recon had given us a layout, six rooms in total.

"Intel suggests River's been moved rearward," Glitch updated. "One hostile in the last room, posture upright. Could be our HVT. Thermal suggests another in the 3 o'clock room. Matches Bloodhawk's profile."

"Are we about to bag Bloodhawk catching Zs?" I murmured, disbelief in my tone.

Our rifles clung to our backs, suppressed sidearms at the ready. Their overconfidence was to our advantage; the door was unsecured.

I double-tapped two tangos while Phantom cleaned up the rest. The room went silent, the acrid scent of spent rounds



thick in the air. I signaled for Phantom to secure River while I pursued Bloodhawk.

But my initial shot went wide. Whether Bloodhawk sensed danger or heard the faint muzzle report, he was alert. I dove to cover as rounds ricocheted around.

“Engaged. Shots fired,” Chaos radioed.

Bullets pockmarked the wall, then a momentary reprieve.

I rose and kicked the door open. There was a bed and an open window. “Rebound,” I cried out in my earpiece. “He’s running.”

“He’s hit. I think he’s hit.” Rebound’s voice came clear through.

I looked at Phantom, and we both spared a nanosecond of whether we should chase after Bloodhawk or get out the client. We kicked the door open and flashed a light into the room. River opened his eyes and then closed them as if blinded.

“River Knight,” Phantom called out.

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m River.”

“We’re here to take you home.”

He closed his eyes and smiled. He tried to stand up and slumped. He had been beaten again, recently. There was a fresh wound on his forehead that we hadn’t seen before.

Phantom grabbed River. “I can walk.”

“Let’s go,” I whispered, but it sounded loud.

River blinked and focused on my face. “Am I dead?”

“Let’s go, buddy, and deal with existentialism later,” Phantom mused. And we grabbed River and walked him out, half stumbling, half dragging.

As soon as we made it past the compound. “Chaos, we’re out.”

River tried to look around him. “I think I’m hallucinating.”

“Get the fuck out of there, the Nigerian military is on its way,” Glitch said.

“Like hell they are,” Chaos called out. And as we ran into the forest with River, explosions surrounded us.

“Do you have eyes on Bloodhawk, Rebound?” I asked, but I wasn’t hopeful.

“Sorry, Phoenix.”

River was hanging on our shoulders as we entered the Nigerian rainforest, the canopy hiding us.

“Anyone after us?” I spoke into my earpiece.

“You have fifteen minutes to make it to the rendezvous point before the Nigerian military descends on the jungle,” Glitch informed us.

“We can’t fucking make that,” Phantom said. “We got the hostage, and he’s not in great shape.”



# Chapter 10

## RIVER

I was sure I was dead. I saw Sunny. Sunny *Fucking* French dressed like *Rambo*. *Obviously*, I was either dead or near dying. I was *definitely* hallucinating.

“Hey, Quincy, you around, babe?” I called out for my friend. He had just died; maybe he could show me the wave.

“Who the fuck is Quincy?” a gruff voice asked.

“The reporter with him who was killed,” Sunny replied.

I tried to open my eyes and couldn't. They'd banged me around after the interview for sport and thrown me into my cell. I think I had a concussion. Or, the more likely scenario, I was dead. But I didn't believe that. Because if I was dead, then my leg would not be throbbing as it was. Someone had planted a knife in my thigh. Or was it a boot with spikes? Who the fuck knew anymore.

“Look, if I'm dead, I'd like the pain to go away.”

*Unless this is hell, then the pain is for fucking eternity.*

“If you give him anything for pain, he’s gonna be useless,” a gruff voice said. “Let’s not risk it. He’s not losing blood.”

I couldn’t make out many sounds except I could hear Sunny, and she confirmed what I knew in my heart, “This is a death trap.”

Fuck, I was dead and in hell. No wonder Quincy wasn’t here. That guy was a veritable saint. I moaned, and someone leaned me against something to rest. A tree because the bark was poking my back.

I heard the man with a gruff voice say, “We can’t fucking make that. We got the hostage, and he’s not in great shape.”

I was the hostage. *Yeah!* And I wasn’t in good shape. I was dragged, my arm around two thick columns propping me up.

There were sounds of gunshots. This must be hell, I thought; it sounds like Fallujah.

“River, I need you to wake up,” Sunny said urgently. “Can you walk? We need to...fuck...Phantom, go, go, go.”

I opened my eyes, and there was nothing but darkness and the sound of...Budweiser frogs? *Ribbit. Ribbit. Ribbit.* A giggle erupted from me. There were frogs in hell. Maybe they served Budweiser in hell.

I fell again and was hauled up. I could smell the wet forest floor; I used to like that in my aged red wine. Smells like a damp forest floor. *Fuck!* I was in the Nigerian jungle.

“Jungle,” I mumbled, my eyes unfocused; everything was blurry.

“We need to run.” Someone grabbed my arm, and I felt the heat of a bullet whiz past my arm. Nothing wakes you up like the fresh scent of cordite. “Fuck me. Who’s shooting?”

“Does it matter?” came Sunny’s dry response. I swayed as she held my arm, dragging me.

I heard more bullet sounds going *pop, pop, pop, pop*. And then she turned me to face the sparkles of fireworks, which I understood were shots being fired. I gaped at Sunny as she one-handed fired her...M4 Carbine? What the fuck was going on? I was dead, and this was hell. In hell, Sunny was Rambo?

“Hey, Sunny. Sunshine. Baby. Hey, Sunny, Sunshine.”

I stumbled on forest vegetation and branches but kept my balance; I didn’t know how. I couldn’t breathe well, my ribs hurt like motherfuckers, and the soup-like air around us wasn’t helping.

“I need you to focus, River. Can you wake the fuck up?”

“Give me a kiss, Sunny sunshine,” I smirked, and pain hammered through my left leg right then. “Fuck. If I’m dead, why does it hurt so much.”

“River. *Shit.*”

Strong arms held me up. Gabriel or Lucifer? And I wasn’t even religious. “I got him. If need be, I’ll carry him on my back.”

“I weigh 190...*ha* if you can carry me.”

“This son a bitch is almost dying, and he’s cracking jokes?”  
The gruff voice didn’t sound happy.

“Yeah, he has a weird sense of humor.” This came from Sunny.

More bullets went pop, pop, pop, *popcorn!* A burning sensation ran through my arm. I knew that. That was a bullet grazing flesh and burning it. “Fucking hell. I wish they’d stop shooting.”

“Yeah, you and me, pal,” Sunny replied. “Hostage is hit.”

“Flesh wound.” I went down on my knees. I couldn’t support myself, and I sank, my head lolling. I wish they’d let me sleep. Did they have beds in hell? Once in Syria, I’d been taken, and they tortured me for several hours before someone pulled some strings. They kept the noises loud and tied my hands behind my back...but they didn’t shoot at me and make me run. Hell was obviously worse.

Suddenly, explosions went off everywhere, and I forced myself to stand. The hand on my arm guided me because my vision was fuzzy. I could see it was dark. I caught sight of some vegetation. I was having trouble computing much of anything.

“Phantom is hit. He’s hit. I’m taking the hostage.” I let Sunny drag me. I forced my legs to move. I felt I wasn’t dead, but I’d be if I didn’t follow Sunny. Fuck, like Sunny would be here. My mind was playing games.

I don't know how long we ran, walked, stumbled....she let me rest occasionally. Gave me small sips of water.

I heard a beeping sound. IED? No earpiece. Yeah, someone near me had an earpiece.

“Thank fuck, you got him, Glitch. Do you have my coordinates?”

The shooting became intense, and we hid under a tree, a bush, or some such place. Something crawled up my leg, and I hoped it wasn't a snake. Nigeria had some of the deadliest snakes in the world.

“Do you think that's a snake going up my leg, or am I happy to see you?” I managed to say.

I heard some cursing, and whatever was crawling up my leg stopped, but the shooting started again.

And then, suddenly, there was silence. The artificial sounds were gone, and the jungle reclaimed itself.

“Thanks, Rebound. Glitch, we need to identify if it's Bloodhawk. Send me coordinates for the rendezvous.”

We ran in the dark. Whenever I stumbled, Sunny pulled me. I was groggy, running on, I don't know what energy, probably adrenaline. I felt like I was drunk, which was one way to describe a concussion. I couldn't focus on anything, and the need to throw up was intense. But I'd already thrown up the little food I'd eaten after they'd beaten me up that second time. There was nothing to throw up. The dry heaves were making my stomach cramp.



“Water,” I croaked out.

Sunny said something, but I couldn't hear her, and everything went black. I felt Sunny wrap her arms around me, begging me to wake up.

“Sweetheart, I am awake,” I whispered. My hands tried to find her. Her hair was short. It used to be so long. But I liked this, thick and lush.

“His pulse is thinning,” I heard her say tightly.

“Sunshine, Sunny...I never meant to let you go.”

But I had.

*Then*, it had made sense, but as the years went by, I clung to my anger and resentment. A part of me felt foolish for holding a stupid grudge against a teenager. And now, after death, because I was pretty sure I was dead, it seemed even more senseless.



# Chapter 11

## SUNNY

It was by chance, the universe smiling at us, that I found a cave amid the dense tropical jungle. Actually, River found it because he stumbled and fell; as I picked him up, I saw the entrance to the cave covered with a thick canopy of tropical vegetation.

Nigeria's caves had been used to hide for years, especially during the civil war. We were not doing anything that much different. River was a big guy, so I had to prod him to walk even though I carried most of his weight.

There was a mystery to caves; this one was an unexpected haven reminiscent of the mystique that clung to the Ogbunike Caves. With each hurried step, the weight of our escape settled in my bones. The air was heavy with the scent of damp earth.

I guided River inside, his unsteady steps revealing the extent of his suffering under the Hausa Brigade. The mouth of the cave beckoned, giving way to its dim, inviting depths. I settled him onto a stone ledge, seemingly carved by nature for weary

souls like us. The murmur of a distant stream lent a calming ambience to our sanctuary.

Despite the pain shadowing them, River's eyes sparkled with appreciation as he settled onto the rugged ground. Faint light from the cave's entrance played upon his battered face, casting a subtle ballet of hope and relief. I observed him closely, his breathing uneven at first but slowly finding its rhythm.

Within the cave, a refreshing coolness enveloped us, accompanied by a faint mineral aroma from the walls. Stalactites and stalagmites formed intricate patterns, their silhouettes painting tales of time and whispered secrets. In that moment, our universe was this sanctuary of shadow and resonance, sculpted by the hands of nature.

I crouched beside River, my fingers brushing a lock of sweat-soaked hair from his forehead. His shallow breaths mingled with the hushed symphony of the cave, a lullaby of safety that gently cradled us both.

I walked around the cave and discovered it was one of the many undiscovered caves. Human beings may have been here, but it had been a long time. Vegetation had grown, creating a mossy, almost fairytale-like feel, and it was stunningly beautiful.

There were no exit points except the one we had entered from. If we were caught, we'd be sitting ducks. But with River now unconscious and needed the rest to gain his strength; it was a risk I would take. I made sure that the canopy hiding the entrance continued to do so. I had taken us deep inside the

cave and left gravel and stone at the entrance to warn me if someone came in.

Water wasn't an issue in this haven. The stream threading through the cave appeared pristine, filtered through the surrounding rocks. I refilled my bottle and set it beside River. Cleaning up as thoroughly as possible without fully disrobing was challenging. Getting caught with my proverbial pants down wasn't an option. Word that the Hausa Brigade had captured a high-profile American was probably spreading rapidly among the insurgent factions. It was only a matter of time before the American media caught wind. Anticipating unwelcome visitors, I knew we had to remain vigilant.

I'd lost contact with my team; I suspected the cave was blocking comms. I didn't want to leave River alone while looking for a signal. The last I heard, Glitch had found Phantom, who'd been hit, but as he said, it was a fucking flesh wound that wouldn't even give him a proper scar. Rebound had also made it to the rendezvous point, but they had had to leave because the Nigerian military had descended upon the jungle along with other insurgents.

Retreat was important. I didn't want to start a battle I'd lose.

They would give me an all-clear when and if I could receive the message and give me coordinates to a new extraction site. The fact was that River was not with the Hausa Brigade, and the even better news could be that Aminu "Bloodhawk" Dahiru was dead. Of course, we didn't have confirmation.

I pulled out a fresh pair of socks from my backpack and put my boots back on. I changed my shirt just to feel clean and used my old shirt as a towel. I washed it as best I could and wet it. I wiped off River. He stirred a little but didn't move. I had a timer set to wake him every hour since I was pretty sure he was concussed. Someone had slammed the butt of a rifle against his forehead, which was a guaranteed way to have your brain rattled.

As I wiped his face, his beard rough, I let my fingers touch his bruised cheek. His right eye was swollen. I wiped dry blood off him. His hands were raw. He's been using them to break his fall in the jungle. I covered the worst cuts with adhesive bandages and sprayed antiseptic on the rest.

His legs were a whole other story. He had a gash, probably from a knife, on his thigh. That needed stitches. I carried wound glue just for these kinds of injuries. I looked at my watch, and according to the alarm, it was time for River to wake up.

I gently cleaned the area around the wound on his thigh and then used the glue to close the wound. The glue stung like a mother, and River sat up, his chest heaving, and then he groaned.

He looked around hazily and waved a hand in front of him. "How many fingers?"

"Three," he automatically said.

Using my forefinger, I asked him to move his eyes from one side to the other. "Do you know where you are?"

He stared at me like I was a ghost. “I’m dead. And you are a hallucination.”

“You’re alive...but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We’re in the Nigerian jungle. We will have to spend the night here, in this cave, until my team can extract us tomorrow.”

He stared at me, his blue eyes flickering with uncertainty. “Sunny?”

“Yeah.”

“See, I know this is not real, Sunshine.” He closed his eyes and swayed. I helped him lay back down. He fell back asleep.

I wish he’d stop calling me Sunshine. It made me both angry and sad.

He started that one day when we were having a lazy Sunday in Central Park. We both were reading until he fell asleep on the blanket on the grass. As the sun dimmed, I shook him awake. He opened his eyes and looked at me, “Do you know you look like Sunshine?”

And so, it began. This strange friendship between a girl from the wrong side of the tracks and a boy with the world at his feet.

He’d been my biggest supporter and champion—telling me I could do anything I wanted. Assuring me I would get the scholarship to finish my degree at Columbia.

“If it falls through, I’ll take a year off, work to save money, and then finish my undergrad in Providence. I pay in-state tuition there,” I told River.

“Hey, you’ll get it, so no negative talk.”

I shrugged the past away and walked around the cave looking for a signal, so I could communicate with my team and let them know where we were so they could find an extraction point not too far from us. I looked at River, still asleep, and admitted that I was relieved that broken ribs, a concussion, and bruises were the only damage. They could have killed him. Bloodhawk’s vanity probably saved him. He wanted a big-time New York Times reporter to interview him.

I found a faint signal at the far side of the cave; probably, the walls were less calcified here. I sent an encrypted message to my team and waited. It took an hour for them to get back to me. They still didn’t know when they’d be able to return to the jungle—but they were working on it. This meant only one thing: the news of River’s kidnapping had hit the media, and the diplomatic wrangling had begun.

I sent another encrypted message: *Make sure Forest knows River is alive.*

I left the comm equipment where the signal was strong. The cave quickly became an abode with light peeking through holes in the cave walls. This was almost romantic if there weren’t militants out there wanting to catch and/or kill us.

I leaned against the cave wall by River and closed my eyes. I wasn’t going to sleep; one of us had to be awake, and according to my alarm, I had to do another concussion check on River in thirty minutes. I remembered the only time we had sex, and how we’d woken each other repeatedly throughout



the night. I was sore, but I didn't care. We were hungry for each other.

After that, everything changed.

Over the following days, our schedules clashed, making it hard to connect. I was engrossed in preparations for my scholarship presentation, while he was wrapping up a photojournalism assignment outside New York. Even though our days were packed, he never missed sending me texts and called every night. Once back in New York, family duties called, and he somewhat reluctantly spent time with his visiting parents. From our conversations, I gathered that he was close to his brother who, post law school, had chosen a career with the LAPD, a decision that hadn't sat well with their parents. They were also not pleased that River had not chosen to join the family business and was going to be a journalist.

Despite his hectic schedule, he made the time to come to my dorm on the day of my scholarship presentation.

"Hey, Sunshine," he greeted, leaning in to kiss me. It began as a gentle brush of our lips and deepened into a soulful connection that felt fresh, surprising, and beautifully ours. "You look wonderful."

I wore my only suit, a black pencil skirt, a white silk blouse, a black jacket, and my most uncomfortable and nicest looking pumps.

"I thought you had to see your parents today." I was so happy to see him. His blue eyes, that rakish blonde hair, and

unadulterated love on his face. Yes, it was love. We were in love.

“This is more important. Come on, I’ll accompany you to Schermerhorn Hall.”

We held hands as we walked, and while we did, River went through the questions we had been practicing for the Q&A session after my presentation.

“You think I’m ready?” I asked when I got to the building.

“Yes.” He kissed me. “I think you can do anything you want. You’re fabulous, Sunny French, and I’m one lucky bastard that you’re my friend and lover.”

We hugged, and I felt everything in my world was right.

That was the last time we hugged, the last time he’d looked at me with love and affection.

*Now*, in the Nigerian jungle he looked at me with confusion. “Sunny?”

He was awake. I nodded. “How are you feeling?”

“Sunny?”

I sighed. “Yes, River, it is Sunny French. I was sent to rescue you.”

He sat up, groaning slightly. He saw the water bottle and drank some. “Where are we?”

“In a cave in the Nigerian jungle. Looks abandoned. I think we’re safe. But...who knows. My team is working on getting us out of here.”

River nodded and ran a hand through his hair. It was such a familiar gesture that my heart clenched.

“And the universe decided you should be the one to save me?” There was some venom in his voice, and it hurt, even though it shouldn’t, even though I expected it to.

“Imagine how I feel,” I retorted. I pulled my backpack to me and pulled out field rations. I threw an energy bar at him, and he caught it. His reflexes weren’t bad for someone who was concussed and had only one properly operating eye.

He looked around, and I pointed toward one side of the cave where the water went downstream. It was not the Continental, but it served as a toilet.

He came back, stretched, and winced. “These broken ribs are killing me.”

“Why don’t you wash up?” I suggested.

“That sounds fantastic.” He took his boots off, and then *all* his clothes off.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

“Taking a dip in that water.” The stream that ran through the cave filled a hole in the ground. I had used that water to wash up as well. But I’d been reluctant to do what River was planning on.

“Are you nuts? We could be attacked at any minute,” I protested.

He winked at me with his one open eye. “Sunshine, I’ve been living in my filth for...how many hours has it been now?”

“Nearly thirty-eight.”

“We are using this water to drink, for god’s sake, River.”

“Just take the water upstream.”

Fuck! I turned my head to look away from him. But who was I kidding? This was River Knight. He was naked, and I couldn’t not see. His body was not a boy’s anymore. It was muscular and scarred.

“Be careful with the knife wound on your leg. I glued it, so try not to open it up.”

“Ah, this feels good. Come and join me, Sunshine.”

I stared at him. How dare he behave like we were friends? I hated this man with everything inside me.

“You can call me Phoenix.”

“What’s that? Your call sign?”

I nodded.

He lay back as if the little pond was a bathtub. You could take River out of the five-star surroundings, but you couldn’t take the wealth out of River. He always seemed to know how to make the best of any situation.

“We were attacked in Kajara. Do you have any information on the two people I was with? Quincy and Jelani.”



# Chapter 12

## RIVER

I knew they were dead, but I had to ask. Sunny confirmed it. It was still unbelievable that she was here. I'd been thinking about her for so many years and here she was, in the flesh. Different from before. Her hair was short, lush, and her face had lost that girlish beauty. She was a woman now and still remarkably beautiful. No make up, nothing hiding who she was. Her blue gray eyes had more steel in them.

She was muscular and yet there was an inherent femininity that could not be hidden. She had that same elegance I had been attracted to all those years ago.

I put on my filthy clothes and then sat down across from her.

“What are you?” I shook my head when I saw her expression, I'd asked that same question that day we'd ended our relationship. *What are you? A fucking gold digger?* “I mean, the US Army? Private?”

“Private.”

“I'm assuming my brother hired you.”

“Yes.” She rose and wiped her hands at her thighs on her pants. They fit her well. Before she’d been beautiful, now she was indomitable *and* stunning.

“How did you end up doing this?”

“My team was already in Nigeria, and I have experience with the Hausa Brigade. “

I peppered her with questions after that. How did you find me? Did you get the photos and videos? What happened to Aminu “Bloodhawk” Dahiru?

She answered patiently and in as few words as possible. She tinkered with her comms equipment, sending, and receiving information. She looked at her watch and then at me.

“We have an extraction point. It’s fifteen clicks from here in a clearing. It will take us about four hours to get there. How is your leg? Can you walk?”

“If I could walk while I was groggy, I think I can now.”

She nodded and then looked at her watch. “We will leave in fifteen minutes.”

“Who’s out there? Besides the Hausa Brigade?” I asked her

“Nigerian Military. And every other insurgent group in Nigeria who knows about you and is well aware that you’re their meal ticket. A man as rich as you is always a target; you know that.” Was she mocking me? Yeah, she was. I didn’t want to get into a discussion about the past, but it was unavoidable. We’d keep dancing around it.

“Sunny, what happened was a long time ago. I have let it go.” *In a pig’s eye* but when you were in the Nigerian jungle with a pissed-off ex with a gun, you had to make your peace.

“Have you? Well, that’s big of you.” She put on her tactical vest and checked her weapons. “Can you use a weapon?” “Like a gun?” She held up a SIG. I shook my head. “No.”

“You’re in fucking war zones all the time and you don’t know how to fire a weapon?”

“I shoot photos, sweetheart.” There was something insanely sexy about a woman comfortable with the violence of weaponry.

“Knife?” “No thanks.”

She sighed. “You know it’s not going to be a cake walk through the forest?”

“Yeah, I know that. But I have you.”

I walked up to her and put my hands on her shoulders. She looked up, and I had this insane need to kiss her. I remembered that mouth, her taste and how she moaned and gasped. It was many years and women ago and yet; she was indelibly in my blood.

“Are you okay with me?” I asked.

“What?”

“My life is in your hands. I need to be sure.”

She stiffened. “I risked my life and my team’s life to get you this far. You think I’m going to hold on to something that



happened a hundred years ago?”

I let go of her. “Thanks, Sunshine.”

“Sunny or Phoenix,” she snapped.

“Sunshine. You’ll always be sunshine to me.” I touched the hair that was on her forehead. “You’re exquisite. Despite all these bruises.” She had a scratch on her cheek, and I stroked it gently.

She stepped away from me. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing, River? Remember, you think I’m a gold digger.”

“You were.” The anger from the past flashed again inside me. She’d used me. I was in love with her, and she’d used me.

“This might be the wrong time to discuss the past, don’t you think? We have the Hausa Brigade, Boko Haram, the Nigerian Military, and god knows who else beyond this cave waiting to kill me and catch you, and probably kill you after they get their hands on the Knight fortune. So, right now, all I’m going to focus on is getting us out of here...preferably alive.”

She was right.

I was still having trouble wrapping my head around the fact that *she* was here. She ignored me and, with precision, she got ready, preparing her backpack, packing up her comm equipment.

“How did you become, ah...a security person?”

She was lacing her boots and looked up. “I dropped out of Columbia and joined the military. After a while I joined

special forces and from there went to the CIA. I left about five years ago and was hired by Steel Rain. That's the outfit that hired me to come get you."

She tightened the straps of her flak jacket and looked at me grimly. "You do as I tell you. No questions. No doubting. Got it?"

"Yeah," I smiled. "You always loved to give orders."

*Make me come, River, now, god damn you.*

She remembered as well; I was certain because something moved in her eyes. "River, do you get it?" She handed me a Kevlar vest. This was not US military standard issue; it was thinner and lighter, and probably better.

"Affirmative." I mock saluted her and put the vest on.

We navigated the forest as she skillfully wielded a machete to clear our path. Dusk was settling in, an opportune time to evade armed adversaries but also a risky moment, as we could bump into some local wildlife, as dangerous as the insurgents.

The humid jungle air clung to my skin as we pressed on, shrouded in palpable tension. With each step, the ambient sounds—the insects' buzz and distant birdsong—faded, replaced by a silent crescendo of anticipation. My heart raced, driven not only by the challenge of the dense terrain but also the mysteries lurking before us.

Sunny moved with the precision of a veteran warrior, her focus unwavering. Her keen eyes continuously assessed our surroundings, alert to every potential threat. The firm grasp on

her weapon spoke volumes about the dangers we faced. Her composure amidst the palpable tension was astonishing—while I had always recognized her strength years ago, this side of her was an impressive revelation.

The jungle itself was a living, breathing entity, its dense vegetation threatening to consume us at every turn. Vines and foliage seemed to reach out, attempting to ensnare us in their grasp. Shafts of the dimming sunlight penetrated the thick canopy above, casting dappled patterns on the forest floor. The humidity hung in the air like a veil, causing sweat to bead on my forehead and my clothes to cling uncomfortably.

As we pressed on, the jungle's inhabitants made their presence known. Strange calls echoed through the trees, a chorus of unseen creatures conversing in a language I couldn't comprehend. Every rustle in the bushes sent a shiver down my spine, my imagination running wild with visions of what might lurk just out of sight. I couldn't shake the feeling that we were intruders in a world that didn't belong to us.

And then it happened. The crack of a twig underfoot, followed by the ominous hush of the forest. Sunny's hand shot out, signaling me to freeze. My breath caught in my throat as I strained my ears, trying to discern the source of the disturbance. My pulse quickened as figures emerged from the foliage, their faces obscured by masks and their intent clear in the glint of their weapons.

Time seemed to slow as chaos erupted around us. Gunfire shattered the jungle's hushed ambiance, the sharp cracks

echoing off the trees. Sunny moved with a fluid grace and her training was evident in every precise movement. Her weapon spat fire, each shot finding its mark with deadly accuracy. My heart raced as I watched her, a mixture of awe and terror flooding my senses.

Caught in the crossfire, I felt utterly helpless. I ducked behind a tree, my heart pounding in my chest as the world around me devolved into a frenzy of noise and motion. Bullets whizzed past, and the air was alive with danger. All I could do was press myself against the rough bark and hope that Sunny's skill would be enough to see us through.

Eventually, the chaos subsided. The jungle, which had been a sanctuary of mystery and life, now bore the scars of our desperate struggle. Sunny stood before me, her chest heaving with exertion but her eyes still sharp and vigilant. The assailants lay still, their threat neutralized.

“Let's go,” she commanded, and I followed, feeling grateful.

“You think there will be more of them?” I wondered.

“Maybe but I doubt it. No one wants to be in the jungle this late in the night. Too many animals out and about looking for prey.” As if on cue we heard the laugh of a hyena, followed by several more. It creeped me out.

“Any leopards here?” I asked.

“Yep.”

“But no lions?”

“Not here.”

“Sunshine, I’m going to be honest. I’m fucking scared.”

Sunny laughed. “I’d be surprised if you weren’t.”

I walked behind her. She had night vision glasses. The jungle would have been pitch dark but for the waxing gibbous moon.

I could see her ahead of me. And that ass was *fine*. “Do you know leopards are smarter than lions? They are skilled climbers and ambush predators.”

“River with all the gunfire, I can promise you there are literally no animals around us, not for a while.” She sounded amused.

“Hey, did you guys get my eye blinking nonsense?” I asked. “It was so long ago that I took that hostage tactics course that I could barely remember what I was doing.”

“My team thinks you’re not just a pretty boy.” She held up a branch of a tree and gestured for me to go through.

“They think I’m a pretty boy?” “Everyone thinks you’re a pretty boy.”

She started walking again, and I followed.

The last time I saw her was in my apartment. She’d texted me, feeling down, as was her habit before dropping by. I’d not stopped her even though I didn’t want to see her. I knew I needed closure. After all, it was the first time I’d fallen in love.

I’d even told my mother, Lena Knight, about her.

“Are you dating?”

“We’re friends,” I evaded. I wasn’t ready to open my heart to my mother until I was sure about Sunny’s feelings for me.

“Bring her to dinner. I’d love to meet her.”

“Maybe another time. She has an important presentation that morning and she’s working that evening.”

“Working?” “In a diner, Mom. Not everyone has trust funds.”

My mother nodded stiffly. I knew she looked down upon people who were not at the same socio-economic status as us. Though Lena was often superficial, prioritizing appearances over morals, both my brother Forest and I still loved her. He had a greater tolerance for her antics. It was fortunate that someone should bear the patience for her. As for my father, Nathan Knight, our relationship was cold and distant, a dynamic we all preferred. As the head of Knight Constructions, his ethics were questionable at best—from infidelities to potential corruption. To be frank, I found it hard to stand his company.

“What is she studying?” Mom asked, her way of saying that she was fine with whatever I did and was on my side. I told her how fabulous Sunny was and how much I appreciated that she didn’t want me for my last name. My mother seemed genuinely happy for me. I should’ve known better.

At Le Cirque, despite the usual tension, the bustling environment helped diffuse some of the strain.

I ended up sitting next to Dr. Luca Framingham, a psychiatrist who was on the faculty at Columbia.

“I met your girlfriend today. Sunny French.”

*Girlfriend?* “You did?”

“Yes. She presented a paper to get a scholarship. It was good work but then she mentioned you and I’m guessing that she knew about my connection with your family.”

“Excuse me?” My heart was hammering. I couldn’t believe it. She was using my name to get ahead. We’d had sex *once* and now she was publicly calling me her boyfriend.

“I mentioned it to your mother.” He raised his glass and my mother raised hers to him. “She said I should ask you.”

“What did you think of her presentation?” I had to choke the words out.

“Good. Very good. But...honestly, River, next time just talk to us. A scholarship is something we can easily give to a friend of the Knights. Your family has done a lot for our university.”

He kept talking after that, but I couldn’t hear him over the buzz in my head.

“Ah, Professor, did Sunny say we were dating?” I asked. I had to know.

He looked at me confused. “Yes, she did. I’m assuming you asked her to name drop.”

I drank some wine. I had just turned twenty-one and could legally consume alcohol. Thank god for that because a night like this demanded booze. “Professor, I’m afraid Sunny was trying to take advantage of...well, we’re just acquaintances.”

The professor seemed incensed. “Ah...really? She sounded so sincere. Well, we can’t have that can we? Some people will do anything to get ahead. Good thing then that you’re not dating her.”

I went home that night feeling like a boulder had slammed into me. I’d trusted Sunny. She had never ever tried to take advantage of my money. She insisted on paying her share at restaurants, which was why I always picked inexpensive places to eat, or ordered in at my place. She was careful about how much she took from me and what she allowed me to give to her. I admired that about Sunny. Most people wanted something from me, not Sunny.

Well, so much for not wanting my money when she was happy to use my name to get a scholarship. Her paper was good enough, why did she have to drop my name?

My mother called me that night. “Are you okay? I spoke with Luca, and he mentioned Sunny. He said she was someone trying to take advantage of you. Is that true? I thought you were friends.”

“Yeah, mom, looks like she was.”“This is why I tell you to be careful. Women see a Knight and they want something.”She was a virgin when we made love. Did she think that was a fair exchange? It wasn’t about the fucking money. I’d have happily paid for her education. I’d offered, and she’d rejected it.

“Mom, are you somehow involved in this?”

“In what, darling?”



“Why did you seat me next to Dr. Luca Framingham? Because he was a professor in psychiatry?”

“Because he’s from Columbia. You know, Daddy and I always want you to expand your network.”

After I finished the call, I sat in my living room not knowing what to do. The city blinked in front of me. I hated everything about it.

The next day she texted to tell me she hadn’t gotten the scholarship and if we could meet, she needed a shoulder to cry on. I’d asked her to come over.

She’d looked devastated when she came into the apartment. The concierge downstairs knew her and allowed her up. But I’d already told him that from now on he needed to call me first.

“Something’s up. The guy downstairs wanted to call you to let me up, they haven’t done this before.” She put her bag down and came to me. She put her arms around me and laid her head against my chest. “I need a hug, desperately.”

I put my arms around her, feeling numb. She was not my Sunshine. This was a mercenary bitch.

She looked up at me, smiling and kissed me. I didn’t stop her, but I didn’t encourage the kiss. I set her aside and asked if she’d like something to drink.

“Hey, all good?” she finally noticed my dark mood.

“Wine okay with you?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No, nothing for me. River, is everything okay? You look...well, you look angry.”

I poured a scotch from the bar in the living room and sat down on the couch. She stood in front of me. I loved her and I hated her. I hated her very much.

“So, no scholarship?”

“No.” Her eyes filled with tears at that.

“You need money. How much? I can write you a check.”

She was taken aback. “What?” “How much money do you need? I mean without the scholarship you’ll have to drop out and I know how much you want to finish your undergrad at Columbia.”

“River, I don’t want your money.”

I took a sip of my drink. “Really? Then why did you mention me to the scholarship board.”

She frowned. “What?”

“Are you having trouble hearing me, Sunny?” I said, “Why did you mention me at your presentation? You told them I was your boyfriend?” She looked confused. “No...yes...I mean, I said nothing...I didn’t bring it up. Professor Framingham asked me who helped with my presentation, and I said a friend did. He asked if it was you and I said yes. That’s all.”

“Or maybe you knew that Dr. Luca Framingham is a close friend of my parents and that by dropping my name you’d get a scholarship.”

“River, cut this out,” she said sharply. “You know me. You know I’d never do something like that.”

“That’s what I thought and then here you are trying to use my name to get a stupid scholarship that’s worth...what, probably a couple month’s rent for me.” I felt the bile rise within me.

“Okay, you’re in a mood.” She picked up her bag. “Call me when you—”“Did you think because you gave me your virginity that I’d be okay with you using my name to get ahead? Your pussy was good, Sunny but not *that* good. But then gold diggers never have the best. What I don’t understand is, if you wanted money, why didn’t you take it when I gave it to you?”

She looked like I had struck her. Her eyes filled with tears, and I wanted to see them fall. I wanted to see her in pain so that she could share mine.

“River, I’d never use you.”“But you told the scholarship board that I was your boyfriend.”

She shook her head, her eyes filled with agony. “No, I said a friend helped me with my presentation. I didn’t even say your name, River. One of them knew your name and asked—”

“You know women like you think that if you fuck us, we’ll give you the ride of your life.”

Her eyes flamed with a flash of anger. “Women like me?”“Yeah, you know, poor women. Women who don’t have

prospects. You must've thought you hit your meal ticket with me."

She walked up to me then and slapped me across my face. I grabbed her hand and stood up. "Don't ever fucking do that again. I'm not your friend, your boyfriend or whatever else you've been dreaming about. I'm the man who hates you. Got it? Damn it, Sunny, of all the people, you doing this, it cuts deep. But you know what, you tried to use my name, it seems like a fair exchange for getting you in the sack. Now get out and never come back again."

She looked at me with such sorrow and grief that I wanted to ask her to explain herself. But I didn't. There was nothing she could say that could make this right. She'd tried to use me. And that was the end of the road.

She left, and I didn't see her again until now in a Nigerian jungle. And Sunny wasn't that young girl anymore. She was a woman. A female fucking Rambo.

And I still wanted her.



# Chapter 13

## SUNNY

The helicopter's deafening rotor blades reverberated through the air as River and I reached the extraction point. My heart raced, adrenaline coursing through my veins as I kept my senses sharp, scanning for any sign of trouble. We were so close, so close to escaping this nightmare.

River's breathing was ragged, his eyes wide with fear and relief. His broken ribs, I knew, were giving him trouble. He had many bruises and cuts, so our four-hour trek through the jungle had been challenging. He had not complained. He had done as he was told. He was the easiest hostage I'd rescued so far.

Sure, we'd gone some rounds with the past—how could we not, but we'd kept our heads. I could feel the weight of the situation pressing down on us, the knowledge that there were god knows how many bogeys spread across the jungle and after us. But we were fighters, survivors, and today wouldn't be the day we met our end.

The helicopter's searchlight pierced the darkness, illuminating the rocky terrain below us. I glanced up, my heart sinking as I spotted Aminu "Bloodhawk" Dahiru emerging from the shadows. *How could he still be alive?*

"River, stay behind me," I whispered, M4 in my hand.

Bloodhawk's intentions were clear; he wouldn't let us escape. The helicopter's engine drowned out all other sounds, leaving only the thudding of my heart.

I exchanged a quick look with River, a silent understanding passing between us. We needed to reach that helicopter; it was our way out of this nightmare. But standing between us and the helicopter was Bloodhawk, fueled by vengeance and hatred.

Gunshots shattered the air, bullets whizzing dangerously close. River and I took cover behind a large boulder, gunfire, and the helicopter's blades, creating a chaotic symphony around us.

"Stay down!" I urged River, my voice barely audible over the noise. I peered out from behind the boulder, squinting as I saw Bloodhawk advancing steadily toward us, his gun trained.

I took a deep breath, training taking over as I assessed the situation. Bloodhawk was a skilled shooter, and we were pinned down. But we weren't helpless. I returned fire, each shot a calculated risk. Bullets struck the surrounding ground, kicking up puffs of dust.

“River, when I give you the signal, move to the fallen tree on the right. We need to flank him,” I kept my voice steady.

River nodded determination in his eyes despite the fear. “Got it.”

Waiting for the right moment, I fired several shots, forcing Bloodhawk to take cover. “Now, River!”

As he sprinted toward the fallen tree, I kept up suppressing fire. Bloodhawk’s attention was divided, allowing River to find a better position. The helicopter’s spotlight swung wildly, casting light over the battlefield.

Rebound was firing on Bloodhawk and his people behind him, getting closer by the minute. His shots joined mine, gunfire creating a deadly harmony. Bloodhawk was forced to stay hidden as we closed in.

But as we got closer, Bloodhawk’s desperation was palpable. He emerged, firing wildly. Pain seared through my side as a bullet grazed me, staggering me.

“Sunny!” River’s panicked voice reached me, but there was no time to worry about my injury. Bloodhawk was advancing, his focus on River now.

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I pushed through, using my last strength to knock River out of danger. Gunfire echoed as I felt the bullet tear through my right thigh, and one hit me straight through my chest, the Kevlar no barrier to whatever armor-piercing shit these guys were using.



I hit the ground hard, vision blurring as agony consumed me. River's safety mattered most. "Sunny!" River's voice was frantic. "No, no, no!"

Through the haze, I saw my Phantom and Chaos. Gunfire erupted, a fierce battle raging. They had arrived just in time.

Strong arms lifted me, carrying me to the helicopter. The searchlight illuminated the chaos, casting shadows on the rocky terrain.

"Stay with me, Sunshine," River urged.

Someone was applying pressure to my thigh. Pain overwhelmed me, but I tried to cling to consciousness.

Lifted into the helicopter, the battle raged on below. Gunfire and the engine's roar merged into chaos. My vision blurred, pain overwhelming as darkness encroached. But as I slipped into unconsciousness, one thing remained certain: River was safe. And that was all that mattered.

*River, goddamn him.*

This was the worst of all the tricks the universe had played on me. How had he destroyed my life and my ability to trust anyone with my heart ever again, and yet, I saw him, and I wanted him?

I was heartbroken when I was informed that I didn't get my scholarship. I'd gone to River's place, wanting to hold him and have him hold me. He'd been so angry.

I still didn't know what happened. At the scholarship presentation, it was strange that Dr. Luca Framingham asked if

anyone helped me with my paper. I said that besides the library, Google, and research papers, a friend had. He'd asked if that friend was River Knight. I nodded but moved past that. I didn't want to dwell on River, not during something that had nothing to do with my personal life.

River had been furious. I couldn't understand why. But before I could ask him more questions, he'd said the one thing he knew would hurt me. I'd always been conscious of the difference between our socio-economic statuses, and he'd hit me where it wounded.

“Yeah, you know, poor. Women who don't have prospects. You must've thought you hit your meal ticket with me.”

After months of knowing me, being with me, he still thought I could be a gold digger. He'd accused me of bartering my virginity...my heart, for money. He'd never really known me. But then, men like him, rich men, didn't have to get to know people. They had the luxury of money, giving them the right to treat people however they wanted. Since River, I'd met plenty of wealthy boys who were all the same. *Entitled sons of bitches!*

But what sealed the deal for me was when River's mother visited me at the dorm. I knew of her; of course, I did. She was all over the internet with her philanthropy, and I'd researched River as one does when they have a crush on someone. Lena Knight barged into the living room of the apartment I shared with three others.

She approached our small dining table and set her Celine purse on it.

“You’re Sunny?” she asked.

I nodded.

“I know your situation,” she’d told me in that rich woman way, the same tone River had used with me.

I raised my eyebrows and folded my arms. “Who are you?” I asked as if I didn’t know who she was.

“I’m River’s mother, Lena Knight. I know you were thinking you had your claws in my son, and he’d fall in love with you, and you’d get married. That will not happen.”

My roommates flanked me; I’d told them what had happened with my scholarship and River. Betsy and Hannah had been my friends since I started at Columbia.

“You can’t talk to her like that,” Betsy said. She was in a goth phase with all its trappings.

“I’m not speaking with you.” Lena looked at Betsy with disdain. “Now, Sunny, you probably want to reach out to my son, and get back together. But let me be clear, that will not happen.” She pulled out a checkbook from her purse. “How much will it take for you to stay away from my son?”

Hannah got into Lena’s face. “Get the fuck out of here before I call security. And take your fucking money with you.”

Lena ignored Hannah and looked at me. “Sunny. I will pay you—”

“Mrs. Knight, I’m not interested in you, your money, or your son. Please leave.”

“I can write a big number on this check—”

“Didn’t you hear her?” Betsy picked up Lena’s bag and thrust it into her arms. “Get the fuck out, lady, and tell that dickless son of yours that he’s an asshole.”

It wasn’t funny then, but I could see the humor later. Had River sent his mother? I’d always wondered.

“Sunshine, baby, stay with me,” I heard River’s voice over the noise of chopper blades. Someone was pressing my shoulder to stem the bleeding.

“Keep putting pressure on the wound,” I heard Chaos.

“Will she be okay?” River’s voice was thin, like he was crying.

“Let’s hope so,” Chaos replied.

I felt his mouth on my lips as he brushed a kiss. “Sunshine, don’t you fucking die on me.”

“River,” I gasped. “Fuck you.”

I heard River laugh, and his lips brushed against my forehead.

“How well do you know her?” Phantom asked.

I groaned as the pain in my shoulder sang through me. And then I heard River, clear as a shot in the dark, “At one point in my life, I loved her more than anyone and anything else.”

I didn't want to believe what I'd heard and let darkness claim me.



# Chapter 14

## RIVER

**D**aisy flew into my arms and peppered my face with kisses. “You’re alive. You fucking idiot. I’m so pissed with you.”

I put an arm around Daisy and held her close as she cried. Behind her, my brother, Forest, stood with my nephew Kai in his arms.

“DeeDee, the man is wounded.”

Hector, the former Knight family majordomo now retired and living in Daisy’s pool house, came into my hospital room. I’d never seen Hector looking anything but perfectly composed. The fact that his eyes were red-rimmed, and he had a stubble indicated that my kidnapping had shaken up my family, but it was good.

Hector patted my arm, the one that didn’t have IV. “You’re going to be alright, Master River,” he said in his British accent, but his voice wavered. Hector understood war just fine. He’d been a medic during the Gulf War.

“Thanks, Hector. Forest, I need to see Sunny.” I zeroed in on him because he’d be the one who’d understand that I needed to see her with my own eyes. She’d taken a bullet for me.

“You’re getting up and going nowhere, River Knight,” Daisy admonished.

“Let me see what I can do,” Forest smiled at me and handed Kai to Daisy. Like all good couples, these two also had a silent language, and Daisy calmed down.

He leaned and kissed me on my forehead. His smile was stiff and his eyes were moist.

“Please tell me my mother isn’t here.” I closed my eyes, feeling the strain of the past few days. The aches and pains.  
*The Sunny of it all!*

“Your father isn’t allowed to leave the jurisdiction; and you know she won’t go anywhere without him right now.” Daisy rocked Kai, who was fast asleep.

My father had been indicted on various bribery charges in Los Angeles County. He’d probably get away with all his crimes or, at best, pay a fine—Nathan Knight was very good at manipulating the system. He had been removed as CEO of Knight Constructions by the Knight Trust, but they could do nothing about his position on the board.

“But she is quite worried and has requested a conversation on video with you,” Hector added.

“Yeah, no, that’s not happening.” I opened my eyes. “I’ll see her when I get back to the States.”



From the jungle, we'd gone straight to Abuja International Airport, where a jet was waiting for us with a medical team. Steel Rains was a well-funded and well-run outfit, and within seven hours of being rescued in the jungle, we were at the American Hospital in Paris under false names. I needed some stitching, patching up, and an IV, first with blood and then fluids because I was dehydrated.

Sunny had needed surgery. One bullet had torn through her thigh bone, and one had nicked her shoulder. The bullet that had gone through the abdomen had been the biggest problem. Regardless, from what I knew about bullet wounds, it would take Sunny months of physical therapy to walk again, and there was a risk that she'd probably never be a hundred percent.

Forest came back with a wheelchair and a nurse. I knew he'd get it done. I had tried, but the fact that I kept falling asleep didn't help.

The nurse checked my stats. "You need to rest, Mr. Knight. You can see Miss French for five minutes, and then I want you back here." She had a French accent, and before I met Sunny again, I'd have tried to hit that.

She was petite, blonde, and stacked. Everything a growing boy needed. As things stood, she did absolutely nothing for me. I wasn't surprised. The crap had been beaten out of me, so my libido was not performing at the peak. But then, put Sunny in front of me, and my libido was fine. I could put two and two

together. Sunny had fucked me up for other women. I'd just forgotten that until I saw her again.

“Aye, aye, ma'am.”

Forest and I looked alike and were alike in many ways, which was why he understood me best. For a Judge, he was always casually dressed in board shorts or linen pants. He mainly wore flip-flops, but today, he was in leather slip-on shoes, probably in deference to being in a hospital.

He wheeled me out of the hospital room.

“Daisy, Kai, and Hector are going to return to the hotel,” he told me. “I'll stay here with you.”

I could smell the disinfectant, a smell I hated. But right now, it was a relief. Because when I'd been in that room in Nigeria, getting the shit kicked out of me, I'd never thought I'd see the inside of a pristine hospital ever again; and I'd desperately wanted to, especially after one of those assholes cut me with a knife.

“How much does the media know?” I asked.

“Just that you were kidnapped, and you're now in Europe on your way to the US. Your editor knows. I talked to her.”

“Gabby is stand up.”

“Yeah. I told her you wouldn't want to be the story. She agreed and left it up to you how you want to handle the media. The choice you don't have is the DOJ.”

I nodded wearily. “I'm surprised they aren't here.”

Forest chuckled. “We’ve told them you’re in a coma. The advantage of securing Steel Rain to get you out of there and safe back in the States is that they manage the comms.”

He stopped at a glass walkway from where one could see Paris. A stunning city. “What time is it?”

“Two in the afternoon. You’ve been out of it for about ten hours.” Forest turned my chair to face a bench and put the brakes on. He sat down across from me on the bench. I knew he’d want to talk, just the two of us.

“Did you know about Sunny and me?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I’m assuming this was the girl Mom interfered with in Columbia when you cut her off?”

I nodded. “Yeah. She did her thing. Invited a professor for dinner and...anyway, I can’t blame her for what Sunny did, but that was the last time I told Mom anything about my life.”

Forest ran a hand through his blonde hair. “I should’ve learned my lesson from you.” Our mother had interfered with Forest and Daisy’s relationship because she disapproved of Daisy. She was left with no sons talking to her or our father. It was a relief for me. I had tolerated my mother to some extent because Forest had coddled her, but after she fucked him over—he was done with the whole parental unit as well.

“How bad was it?” he asked sincerely.

“Pretty bad,” I confessed. “I still can’t believe Quincy and Jelani are dead. I know I’m to blame.”

“Survivor’s guilt,” Forest informed me pithily.

I laughed in self-deprecation. “I’m going to need therapy.”

“It’s arranged. Vega and Mateo swear by Dr. Marcus Adams.”

Carolina Vega and Mateo Silva worked with our cousin Declan Knight at Knight Technologies. They were also friends of Forest and Declan; in fact, Daisy’s closest friend, Raya, was married to Mateo.

“I was sure I’d die. I knew you’d send someone. But...the Hausa Brigade, you know? They’re not structured, and Bloodhawk is...*was* a monster.”

“His death has been confirmed. Your Sunny seems to be very good at what she does.”

I smiled. “Yeah. I thought I was hallucinating. I’ve been dreaming about her for months now, and then she shows up looking like fucking Rambo.”

Forest laughed as did I.

“She’s still touch and go, River. And even if she makes it, she is going to need months of physical therapy. Her right femur splintered.”

I felt tears prick my eyes. “She saved my life, Forest.”

“I know, and that’s why I’ll do everything I can to make sure she’s taken care of. You know that, right?” Forest put his hand on mine.

I wasn’t a big fan of men crying, but I couldn’t stop the tears. “Fuck, Forest. She can’t die.”

“You want to tell me what happened between you?” he asked.

“Let’s go see her first.”

“She’s a few doors away, but I thought you’d appreciate the view.” He waved a hand at the city of lights at our feet.

“It’s one of my favorite cities,” I acknowledged, the city hazy through the tears in my eyes.



# Chapter 15

## RIVER

The sterile scent of the hospital room mingled with the soft hum of medical equipment, creating an atmosphere that felt both sterile and surreal. I sat by Sunny's bedside, my heart heavy with guilt and fear. She had risked everything to save me from the clutches of the Hausa Brigade, and now she lay here, unconscious and wounded.

Sunny's chest rose and fell rhythmically, the steady beep of the heart monitor a reminder of her fragile state. Tubes and wires snaked around her, connecting her to various machines that monitored her vital signs and delivered the medications that kept her sedated. The bandages on her chest and thigh were stark against her pale skin, a testament to the battles she'd fought...for me.

Forest sat next to me, his expression a mix of concern and somberness. His presence brought a small measure of comfort, a reminder that I wasn't alone in this agonizing wait.

I reached out and gently took Sunny's hand, holding it between both of mine. Her skin was cool to the touch, a stark

contrast to the warmth that had radiated from her during our escape. I stared at her closed eyes, willing her to wake up, to show some sign that she was okay.

“Hey, Sunshine,” I whispered, my voice barely above a breath.

I felt a lump form in my throat as I recalled the fierce firefight that had ensued during our escape. Sunny had been a force of nature, taking down enemies with calculated precision. Guilt gnawed at me, relentless and unyielding. It should have been me who got hurt, not her. She had risked her life without a second thought, and the price she had paid was so much higher than I ever could have imagined.

How had I ever thought that this woman was a gold digger? How had I ever thought that she’d use me? Youth was stupid, foolish. I was so focused on being a Knight, of making sure no one used me, I’d lost a friend. This woman had risked her life for me. This woman was not someone who would take advantage of me. She saved me.

“I’m so sorry, Sunny,” I continued, my voice trembling.

Forest’s hand landed on my shoulder, his grip firm and reassuring.

“We’re here for her. You’re here for her.”

I pulled back, my eyes never leaving Sunny’s face. Guilt weighed heavily on my heart, but Forest was right. I couldn’t change the past, but I could be here for her in the present.



They let me sit there for more than five minutes. Minutes turned into hours as we sat vigil by Sunny's bedside. The medical staff moved in and out of the room, adjusting monitors and checking her wounds. Every beep of the machines seemed to echo the rhythm of my heartbeat, a constant reminder of the fragility of life.

I couldn't let go of her hand, couldn't let go of the pulse thrumming at her wrist. She was alive. *She was alive.* That was enough for now.

"Come on," Forest finally said. "You need to rest."

I looked at him in agony, tears streaming down my face. "I can't leave her."

"There are people waiting to be with her," Forest informed me. When I raised a quizzical eyebrow he added, "her team."

I'd not officially met the men, but I wanted to so I could personally thank them. "Ask them to come in. It'll be good for her to hear all the people who care about her."

Forest came back with four very large men. They introduced themselves to me and we shook hands.

Glitch was the shortest of all of them at six feet. He was the comms expert he told me; I'd never seen an IT geek look like this. His skin was the color of café latte and he spoke with a slight Spanish accent. "You have some big balls," he said to me. "Taking those pictures and uploading them to the cloud. Genius."

“Thanks. I wasn’t sure if anyone was monitoring my account, but I hoped...and if the worst happened, then there would be documentation.”

Rebound was the sharpshooter. I’d seen him fire from the helicopter. “You dragged her into the chopper. If you hadn’t done that, she’d have not made it. Thank you.”

Was he thanking *me*?

“Since none of you would have been caught in that nonsense if I’d had the better sense to not travel into war zones, you all have my gratitude.”

Rebound shook his head, the toothpick moving from one side of his mouth to the other. He watched as Chaos, the bomb expert, and medic who apparently had a medical degree, I’d found out during our chopper ride to Abuja, checked on Sunny.

“You were doing your job, and we were doing ours. That’s the way this works. Without you guys out there documenting what’s going on, no one would know,” Chaos said, his focus on Sunny.

Chaos had Native American heritage. His long hair was tied into a bun and his cheekbones were sharp enough to cut glass. Navajo, I’d guess.

“Can you walk or is the wheelchair for show?” Rebound asked.

“My thigh is busted because of the knife wound. My feet are a mess. I can walk but it’s not fun and takes too fucking long,”

I informed him. “And my brother is here, so he needs a job.”

“Judge Knight.” Chaos held out his hand and Forest shook it. He gave him a once over. “You don’t look like a judge.”

“I do that part time. I’m a full-time surfer and father,” Forest grinned.

Phantom was a fighter just like Sunny. Bald and built like a tank, he was the one who was obviously closest to Sunny. She was their team leader, and they all looked up to her. My heart swelled with pride. These men looked to her to lead them. Fuck if she hadn’t come a long way from the shy, young girl I knew. The girl I’d hurt.

“What’s the story between you and Phoenix?” Phantom demanded, his stance very much like a protective big brother.

“None of your business, Phantom,” Chaos warned. “She finds out you poked your nose in this, you’re going to be lying on a hospital bed and they’ll be surgically trying to remove her boot out of your ass.”

Phantom shrugged. “Risk I’m willing to take. You the asshole who made her leave Columbia?”

I looked at Phantom with curiosity.

“She was supposed to get a scholarship, but you fucked it up for her. She was drunk one night and told me a little. I put two and two together.”

My heart constricted. Yeah, I had destroyed her chances at getting a scholarship. What did I think would happen? I left university and worked for *The New York Times*; she’d not had

the money to continue at Columbia. I hadn't given it a single thought. I'd decided she wasn't worth it. I was a fucking asshole. So, what if she used my name to get a scholarship? We were friends. We were lovers. I should've offered it to her, but I'd kicked her out of my life *and* made sure she didn't get the scholarship. How could I have been so petty?

"Yeah, I was that asshole," I confirmed. "I have no defense."

"And then you sent your mother to write her a check?" Phantom sneered. "You're a piece of work, aren't you? Man, I hate that she got hurt saving your sorry ass."

Rebound put a hand on Phantom's shoulder. "You don't get to pass judgment and you know that. Back off."

Phantom shrugged his hand off.

My mother had tried to write a check for Sunny? She'd obviously not taken the money. I wish she had. My mother fucking deserved it. Damn it! She'd orchestrated that whole thing, so I'd break up with Sunny. She'd done something similar to Forest and Daisy.

Forest sighed. "Our mother is a special kind of fucked up. Trust me, River didn't know what she was up to. But the rest, that's on him."

"With brothers like you..." I trailed off.

"Hey, I've been where you are right now." Forest looked at the men. "My mother may have done something similar to my wife...before she became my wife which may have led to her

almost not marrying me.” He looked at me. “You and I need to talk, River.”

I nodded. “Phantom, I’m sorry about what I did. I was a kid and a stupid one at that. I’ll apologize to her.” *If she woke up. Damn it, Sunshine, wake up. Just so you can kick my ass. Come on, baby, don’t let me get away with my assholery.*

“You look like you need to lie down now,” Chaos urged. “One of us will be with Phoenix. When she wakes up, we’ll let you know.”

Forest wheeled me back to my room and as I ate the French version of Jello and soup, which was superior to anything I’d received in an American hospital. I told him what had happened between Sunny and me.

“I can guarantee that Mom made sure the professor dropped your name. You told her about Sunny, and she interfered. She knew that one of your biggest issues with friends in the past had been how they tried to use you. With me she’d known that I was afraid of women cheating on me. That’s how she got me. And this is how she got you.” Forest’s explanation made sense, and I should’ve thought of it earlier.

“I’m still in love with her,” I confessed.

Forest grinned. “Well, brother, it’s gonna be fun for me to watch you win that woman back. And if you end up together, she’s going to win every fight ever, you know that right?”

I smiled. “Yeah. She took two bullets for me.” I closed my eyes as fear surged inside me. “Forest, what will I do if she

dies?”

He gripped my hand. “We stay in the *now*. And right now, she’s alive.”



# Chapter 16

## SUNNY

I was in a haze, but I could hear people.

Phantom was pissed with me. “Phoenix, you better fucking wake up because I ain’t doing this without you.” I wanted to tell him not to worry, I was on my way, but my mouth was rubbery. I couldn’t make it work.

Chaos used his calm Shaman voice. “Sacred earth, the roots entwine. From depths within, let energy climb. With every breath, with each heartbeat. Renew her body, her wounds retreat.”

Rebound’s voice was gruff, full of emotion. “Babe, you look terrible. I expected better.”

I wanted to reach out to them, but I couldn’t work my way through the cotton walls I was trapped within.

But the one voice that made my heart soar was River. “Sunshine, I’m so sorry you got hurt. I’m here. Wake up, baby. Don’t give up.”

He read to me. From my favorite novel. *Catch-22*.



“There was only one catch, and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one’s safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind.”

I smiled. He remembered.

“It doesn’t make a damned bit of difference who wins the war to someone who’s dead.”

I knew I was not dead. I was alive. Asleep but alive.

River Knight. Talk about a blast from the past. A giggle ebbed out of me. My first lover. My man. The one who I’d fallen in love with and never fallen out of love with. The man who’d taught me—.

“*She’s coding. She’s coding.*” Someone screamed around me.

I felt a jolt of electricity and then everything went blissfully and painlessly dark.



# Chapter 17

## RIVER

**S**he almost died the previous night. Since then, I'd told the hospital staff that they could go fuck themselves, I wasn't going away from her bedside.

Forest was still greasing the wheels for me, so I was being given the due respect owed to a relative of a Judge and future Governor of California.

"I'm fine with you sleeping here," Forest told me and pointed to the bed the staff had placed next to Sunny's. "But you have to sleep in a fucking bed. You can't sit on a chair holding her wrist."

"Got it." I would not fight him on this. As long as they'd let me be with her, I'd do whatever they asked of me. Her teammates came by on and off—and didn't question my presence, especially Phantom who had the biggest problem with me. I wasn't sure he'd come around, but he didn't always look at me like he wanted to punch my lights out.

“Has her family been informed?” I asked Chaos as we kept watch over Sunny on the second day. Every so often, she’d stir awake before succumbing to sedation again.

Chaos shook his head. “She doesn’t want her brother to know. She’s estranged from her father and her mother is dead. She likes to...you know her, she likes to keep it private.”

“What happens after? She’s going to need physical therapy.”

Chaos shrugged. “We have a facility in Colorado in the mountains. But Sunny would rather slit her throat than go there.”

“Why?” “Too regimented for her. She went there after the first time she was wounded and swore she’d never go back again.”

My pulse raced as I looked at her pale face, my fingers seeking her pulse. “What do you mean the first time?” “Three years ago. She was shot in her shoulder. She needed physical therapy to get back to full speed. This time though...there’s only this much a body can take.” Chaos stroked a hand over Sunny’s forehead.

“I can take her home with me,” I suggested. “I can make sure she has a private physio and whatever else she needs.”

Chaos grinned. “Brother, you have some balls on you. She got shot for you, and from what I saw, she’d rather shoot you than save you; and you’re thinking you can sweep her off her feet?”

“Considering she can’t walk very well, this could be my chance,” I smirked.

“If you hurt her they’ll never find your body,” Chaos informed me.

“Thanks,” I replied sincerely.

In the next few days Sunny woke up for short periods of time. She was still groggy, but she was getting better because once, when she saw me, she growled, “What the fuck are you doing here?” I kissed her on her forehead. “Hey, Sunshine.” I held a cup of water with a straw close to her mouth. I knew from experience that would be what she needed first.

“How bad is it?”

“I’ll call for your doctor or a nurse.”

“No, you tell me. They sometimes lie.”

“You have a steel rod in your right thigh because the bullet shattered your femur. You’re going to need to heal for at least eight weeks before you can start physiotherapy, which you will need to walk again. Your stomach needed to be sutured up, so it’s going to be a few weeks before you can enjoy a steak.”

She nodded. “I’m vegetarian.” “Really?” I remembered she loved a well-made steak.

“I was trapped in a slaughterhouse for a few hours once in Iran and since then I can’t eat meat.”

She'd lived a whole life that I knew nothing about. She'd been shot more than once. She was apparently locked up in a slaughterhouse. But then, if I told her my stories, between us we should have enough near-death experiences to have at least one full death.

“River,” her voice was thin, and I stroked her hair.

“Yes, baby.” My heart hurt to look at her like this.

“River,” she moaned and then fell asleep again.

According to her doctor this was normal. Her body had been through tremendous trauma, and she needed to rest.

When Phantom and Rebound came to hang out with Sunny, I left the hospital to have dinner with Forest. Since I wasn't in any shape emotionally to go to a restaurant, Daisy had arranged for dinner in their suite at the Ritz.

“How are you feeling?” Daisy asked as she walked me into the opulent suite.

“Good. I mean, the bruises are healing and mornings are hard, but I've started going to the gym and moving my body. Sunny is still...I mean, it's been five days, but the doctors say this is normal after surgery.”

As always Daisy looked like she'd stepped out of a Chanel ad. Today, she wore a maxi dress that was elegantly boho chic. She'd always been beautiful, but something had been missing—and it wasn't anymore. Her eyes were as bright as the diamonds on her ring finger, and I saw that same happiness in Forest. He was always laid back but when he held Kai in his

arms and looked at his wife, he transformed. Forest had always loved Daisy; and because he had, the years when he'd not been with her were ones that had left him unfulfilled. Now, with her, he was flourishing—and so was she. A Hollywood producer, she was at the peak of her career with her film having just been screened to a standing ovation at the recent Cannes Film Festival.

“Hey, little fella.” I picked up seven-month Kai from Forest's arms. I nuzzled my nose against his and he gave a full belly laugh only babies were capable of.

“You don't look like you spend a few hours enjoying the hospitality of the Hausa Brigade.” Forest went to the bar and poured himself and me a scotch, and a spritzer for Daisy who was still nursing Kai in the nights to put him to sleep.

“Tell that to my ribs. Apparently, it's going to take five to six weeks before they heal.” I sat down on a couch with Kai. My breathing was still shallow as it hurt to take deep breaths, so I got tired easily.

Kai immediately stood up on wobbly feet holding my hands and bounced.

“That's his new trick,” Daisy informed me and took a sip of her spritzer. Forest sat next to her across from me on a loveseat, his arm around his wife. She immediately leaned into him.

They looked so happy together and I was delighted to see them like this. They'd spent many years apart because of my mother's interference. Would Sunny and I find a happy

ending, I wondered? Would she forgive me? And had the decade and a half that had gone by while we lived separate lives changed us so much that we couldn't love each other as we had?

Hector came into the living room of the suite then and patted me on my shoulder before finding his seat on an armchair. His stance was very much that of a man ready to pick up his surrogate grandchild the minute I made a mistake.

“How's Sunny?” Daisy asked.

“Not awake but the doctors are not worried. She needs to heal, and her body needs rest. I found out this isn't the first time she got shot.” Kai threw himself at me, wrapping his hands around my neck. I hugged him close and found comfort in his chubby body and baby smell.

“She's going to need physiotherapy,” Hector mused. Upon hearing his voice, Kai turned to him and held his arms out. Hector picked him up and kissed him on his nose.

This man had raised us as well and we'd turned out alright because of that. My parents would have completely fucked us up but for Hector.

“I think Master Kai is ready for bed,” Hector announced and then waved a hand when Daisy rose, “Visit with River. This gives me time with Kai.”

Torn between wanting to spend time with me and not miss out on her son's nightly ritual, Daisy sighed and sat back on



the couch. “Fine. But tomorrow, he’s mine. You even got bath time with him today.”

“You had a meeting,” Hector retorted primly, “And we can’t mess with Master Kai’s schedule. It’s important for babies to do things at the same time every day.”

“He’s trying to steal our son,” Daisy muttered as Hector walked away with a gurgling baby in hand.

Forest kissed her cheek. “DeeDee, you’re thrilled he’s trying to steal our son.”

She grinned. “You should see him when my parents are around. They fight for Kai. It’s fabulous. We’re never short of babysitters.”

“Once I move back, I promise to join the babysitting legion,” I assured them.

“Well, of course, you’re his uncle.” Daisy looked at her watch. “Are you hungry? Or are you okay to wait until Hector gets back?” “I’m fine.” My appetite was on the fritz.

Forest regarded his wife and then turned to me. “Where would Sunny go for physiotherapy?”

“I asked the guys and Steel Rain has a facility in Colorado in the mountains, but Sunny hated it when she was there last time. I was wondering if she could come with me.”

Forest nodded. “I was thinking the same thing. You know Hector is a trained physiotherapist.”

I had forgotten about that. “You think he’d be interested?”

“The Venice house won’t do though,” Forest continued. “You need a gym and probably a pool...” he turned to look at Daisy who chuckled.

“What?” I asked.

“You could live with us,” Daisy offered. “We have plenty of space *and* a pool, a gym, *and* Hector.”

“And Kai,” Forest added. “And us.”

“Or...,” Daisy continued seeing my hesitation because I didn’t know if I could convince Sunny to come live with me in my brother’s house and I wasn’t sure if I wanted that either. “You could stay in the Venice house and use our home for physiotherapy. Much better than hauling her to some clinic every day. That way, you have your freedom, your beach, and the best physiotherapy for Sunny.”

“If I can convince her.”

“My money is on you,” Daisy remarked.

Hector came into the living room then. “The chef says that he’s ready to send dinner up. We should make our way to the dining room.”



# Chapter 18

## SUNNY

“No fucking way,” I emphatically told River when he suggested I move in with him. “I don’t know what you’re smoking, or maybe you’re still concussed. I don’t even know you, for God’s sake.”

“Sure, you know me.”

He watched me sit up in bed, which took enormous effort. A bullet going through a body tore tissue, bone, and skin.

“I’ll go home. I have a home.” I looked at Rebound for support, who was busy flipping through a magazine he’d found in the waiting area.

“I thought her tits were real,” he muttered.

“Hey, are you paying attention to me or Miss 36 double D?” I accused Rebound.

“Miss 36 Double D,” he confirmed. “Look, you have a few choices. You can go to the Aspen facility. Steel Rain has the best of the best there. You can heal, recuperate, watch the mountains...all that shit. You can go home to Providence,

where you're all alone in an apartment that doesn't have an elevator, which means you'll have to stay with your brother, and he has a full house, *and* his wife doesn't like you."

Rebound paused, flipped through a few more pages, and then looked at me. "You know I'd take you home, but I'm already booked for a mission next week, as are Phantom, Chaos, and Glitch. Phantom's mom said you could stay with her."

"She's lovely, but no thank you." Phantom's mother lived in a small town in a large state with no people on a ranch with fifteen cats. I was allergic to cats, small towns, and ranches.

They'd all discussed this, and they supported River's idea. "Damn it, he got to all of you, didn't he?"

Rebound threw the magazine aside on a table and stood up. He walked up to me and poked me in my stomach. I blanched because of the pain. "What the fuck?" I cried out.

"You're broken and beaten. Go to Aspen."

"I'm not dealing with Dr. Mengele."

Rebound sighed. "Dr. Meghlani," he corrected. "If you don't go to Aspen, you go with him. Or do you want us to worry about you while on a mission?"

I gave him the finger. "Are you trying to blackmail me emotionally?"

"Yeah," he admitted.

River picked up the magazine Rebound had discarded and went through it. "Were you talking about Shira Levy?"

Rebound nodded. “Yeah. Apparently, her tits ain’t real.”

“No, they’re real.” River angled his head and looked one way and then the other. He shrugged, “I know they’re real.”

“How?” “Because he fucked her, for god’s sake,” I bellowed, and everything inside me churned.

“You fucked a supermodel?” Rebound was not believing him that easily.

River gave a sheepish smile. “Maybe not the wisest thing to say in front of the ex I’m trying to convince to come home with me.”

“You think?” I lay back down, feeling exhausted. I was so tired, and all I wanted was to sleep for a hundred days, and hopefully, everything inside would be healed by then. I wasn’t looking forward to the physiotherapy. Last time, it had been my shoulder; this time, it was my right leg, and from what I could feel, it would be excruciatingly hard.

And that was the other problem. I didn’t have unlimited funds. I got paid to do a job. I got paid a decent salary, and I had savings, but I’d need to work to sustain life. What would I do if my body was not up to being a soldier?

The stress of knowing I was again at a crossroads and didn’t know my options was taking its toll. I knew a few fighters who’d taken desk jobs at Steel Rain; maybe I could do that. Perhaps I could work corporate. Maybe...all of that was moot because, right now, I couldn’t walk or sit or even eat very well. Being able to work was several months away.

River sat by my bedside after Rebound left to find *something*, code for leaving me alone with River, with whom I didn't want to be left alone. He'd just taken over and assumed that we'd be friends. Why? How? I hadn't seen this man in fifteen years. That was a lifetime.

He took my hand that didn't have IVs sticking out of it in his. I wanted to pull away, but it seemed petty, considering what we'd been through together. "First, I want to say I'm so sorry for how I treated you. I was young and stupid, and my mother ensured all my buttons were pushed. I was always weary of being used by my friends because it happened often."

He told me how his mother had manipulated the situation and also that he knew she'd come to me with an open checkbook. He was sincere; I could see that.

I looked at him—he was not a boy anymore. A man. He had a beard; he hadn't shaved in several days. His blonde hair was disheveled. He'd not left my side even though he should've been discharged after a week in the hospital. He'd pulled strings to stay with me.

"I should've offered to help you by influencing whomever," his voice caught as he spoke, "I should've...I'm so sorry you didn't finish your degree in Columbia. What I did is unforgivable. I know that. I'm not asking for forgiveness, but a whole new chance. Let me help you during this time. Let me take care of you, Sunshine. You saved my fucking life. Let me do something for you."

I took a deep breath. "How will this work?"

“I’m staying in my brother’s house in Venice...the beach, not Italy. It’s a nice little beach house with amazing views, peaceful yet in the middle of everything.”

He remembered I thought, with an ache in my heart, that I was not a let’s stay in a remote cabin in the middle of nowhere kinda girl. I liked the energy of a city and, especially now, considering how I spent so much time in places like that Nigerian jungle, I wanted to feel life around me.

“My brother and his wife—”“That’s the judge and his Hollywood wife?” I interrupted.

He smiled. “Exactly. They live close by...whatever that means in LA traffic. They have a house with a full gym and pool, and Hector. He...raised us, and he used to be a medic during the Gulf War *and* is a licensed physiotherapist. You’d go there for training. Now, Daisy and Forest are happy to have you live with them—”

“No way,” I snapped. “I barely know you, and now you want me to live with your brother and his wife, who I only know from tabloid magazines and the television?”He smiled. “I’d rather we stay in Venice. Come on, Sunshine, you’ll be able to feel the sand under your feet, smell the sea air, and...well, several other controlled substances since we’re in Venice Beach.”

I laughed; I couldn’t help it. “I like the beach.”

“And unlike in Rhode Island, here, the water is warm. You hate the cold, Sunshine. It’ll take at least six months for you to get on your feet. Why not do it in Sunny California?”



I considered what he was saying, and I was more than tempted. Staying with River. It was a dream, wasn't it? I had imagined him coming back to me exactly like this, apologizing, begging me for forgiveness. He was my first lover. The first man I'd given my heart to. Now, I didn't believe in love or any of that other sappy bullshit. Love twisted the heart and did to it what a bullet does to the body—it eviscerated and destroyed.

“Are you looking for absolution, River? Redemption? What?” I demanded.

His blue eyes twinkled. *Oh yeah!* They did when he was amused. The boy had become a man, but his eyes were still the same: beautiful, intense, and full of admiration when he looked at me. But I remembered when they'd been full of disgust.

“I want to take care of you, Sunshine. No caveats, no reasons beyond just that. You saved my life, and I want to give back whatever I can.”

“What about your job?” I asked, feeling uncomfortable with his sincere answer.

“I quit...several weeks ago. Nigeria was my last assignment.”

His eyes darkened, and I knew he was thinking of his dead friends. “I'm sorry about Quincy Galvis.”

River hid his tears by taking a deep breath. “I spoke to his ex-wife and kid. His son is twenty-five, getting married soon

himself. I...feel guilty. They came for me, and they were killed. I also contacted Jelani's family. They're all crushed."

*And so are you!* I wanted to touch him, comfort him, but that would be like the blind leading the blind. I'd lived a life of violence for a decade and a half; I was all out of compassion. You reached a point in my line of work where you saw the worst of humanity and could not believe that there was any good still left in the world.

"You go into a war zone; you know what you're walking into. This wasn't Quincy or Jelani's first rodeo. This isn't the first time you've been attacked, either. You all know...as do we, that we're ready to give our lives for a cause."

He looked at me then, his eyes boring into mine. "You're amazing, you know that? I still can't believe you're not a dream. I keep feeling I'm in a dream state, in a coma or dead, and you're here because I want you to be here."

I closed my eyes to shut out what I saw in his. He was the kind, loving River Knight I'd met all those years ago. I could so easily slip under his spell and fall again. I couldn't afford that, not now, never. Or maybe I didn't need to worry; Sunny French, a 33-year-old wounded fighter for hire, didn't fall for men anymore.

"Okay. I'll come to Los Angeles with you," I finally said.

He leaned down and brushed his lips against my forehead. "Thanks, Sunshine. I promise you will not regret this."



# Chapter 19

## RIVER

“This is beautiful,” Sunny exclaimed when I showed her the master bedroom. I was taking the ex-nursery painted like a forest as if I’d not had enough jungles. The wall art even featured a monkey hanging off a branch.

Forest’s bedroom maximized the view of the Pacific Ocean with a wall of glass—the glass continued into the bathroom, which, because Daisy lived here, had been remodeled to have a jacuzzi and a huge shower stall. The walls of the house were adorned with art, which was more Forest’s style than Daisy’s with rugged seascapes, but the colorful rugs were all Daisy.

The bedroom opened into a vast wraparound balcony that extended onto the beach. Forest had had a hammock there because that was all he needed, but now there was white and blue outdoor furniture. Comfortable wicker sofas stuffed with pillows, an outdoor dining table to seat eight comfortably, and a hammock that could accommodate two.

Sunny struggled with the crutches because of her painful right leg and weakened arms from two weeks of bed rest.

Additionally, the bullet wound in her abdomen protested against the pressure exerted by the crutches.

I gently took the crutches away, set them aside and let her lean on me.

I picked her up, and she sighed in relief. She'd fought this mode of transportation, insisting I was also hurt, but I was already in good shape. My wounds had healed because they'd been surface scrapes and bruises. My broken ribs were also doing well, though I probably couldn't carry Sunny long distance, considering she was a buck fifty, mostly muscle.

I put her down on one of the sofas on the patio. She immediately lay down, leaning against a cushioned arm, the beautiful ocean in front of her. Her breathing was harsh as she tried to manage the pain. She was taking *only* over-the-counter painkillers. I understood. In her work, many soldiers got addicted to heavy-duty painkillers while recovering from wounds. This meant she was almost always in pain.

"I don't think taking something stronger just for a little while would hurt," I suggested.

She shook her head, her eyes closed, her teeth digging into her bottom lip. She moaned a little, and I crouched by her side. "Sunshine—"

"This was six years ago...but I got addicted, and it was hell. That's when I left the CIA. I can't go back to that."

How many battle scars did she carry? What scars did she have on the inside? This warrior woman had given her body to

make the world safer. Had I pushed her to this? If she'd finished her degree in Columbia, maybe she would've found a different career where she wouldn't be worried about painkiller addiction, physiotherapy, and saving my sorry ass.

I brushed her sweat-dampened hair from her forehead, and she opened her eyes. "Can you get me something to drink?"

I was about to rise when I heard Hector come into the patio as if on cue, a tray in hand.

"Miss Sunny, you will drink fortified water from now on because you need to get nutrients back into your body." He placed the tray on the table before the sofa and held out a glass of colorless liquid with a straw.

Sunny took it tentatively and sniffed. "What is this?"

"Fortified water," Hector said pithily.

She looked at me, and I shrugged. "We all just do what he says."

"As will you, Master River." I got a similar glass; no straw for me. Forest and I'd stopped using them when I was a teenager—saving the ocean and all that. But Sunny was having trouble holding things, so a straw helped her get some fluid into her.

Hector took the glass from her and put it on the side table so she could access it easily. "You need to finish four such glasses every day." Hector opened a basket at one end of the patio, pulled out a blanket, and spread it over Sunny. It was getting cool as the sun was setting.

“Thanks, Hector,” Sunny managed to say as I saw her eyes close again, this time from fatigue.

“Should I take her inside?” I asked Hector, who shook his head.

“She’s been in a hospital room for two weeks; some fresh ocean air is good for her...and you. We will have lion’s mane for dinner.”

“A what?”

“It’s a mushroom that’s high in protein and oxidants. Since Miss French is a vegetarian, I have been researching the best food for her.”

“Who’s cooking?” I asked.

Hector looked insulted. “I am, Master River.”

“Hector, I don’t want to bother you, we could—”

“Shut up, Master River, and drink. You need to be hydrated. And I will not be cooking all the meals. Calliope, Master Declan’s cook, will also send you food. I don’t want to see any takeout food in this house until you’re both at a hundred percent. Am I clear?”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

He left the patio, his stiff back stiffer than ever. I’d tried to tell Hector I’d get a full-time nurse to care for Sunny, but he’d insisted that was unnecessary since he was there. She’d saved my life and for Hector that meant he’d lay his life down for her if need be.

I pulled out my phone and texted Daisy: *Does Hector cook at your place?*

Daisy: *Yep. He's strict about takeout. But he lets us go out for dinner once in a while.*

Me: *Didn't Mom and Dad have a chef?*

Daisy: *Yes. We said we'd hire one because we cannot cook, but Hector put his foot down. I think he feels he needs to pay rent and since I won't let him, he runs the house. I keep telling him he's retired, and he ignores me. I can't stop him.*

Me: *Has he always been this bossy?*

Daisy: *I asked Forest, and he said yes. How's Sunny?*

Me: *Beautiful and tired.*

I watched Sunny, conflicted about how I felt. I was still in love with her—but she was right, we didn't know each other anymore, not after being apart for fifteen years. And how long had we known one another when we were all but kids? Barely a year. Was that enough to build a relationship upon? None of it seemed to matter to my heart and my cock, though, because both wanted her. She was healing from a bullet wound. She had a steel bone in her right thigh. And I wanted to jump her. *River Knight—always keeping it classy.*

Maybe I was confusing gratitude—she'd, after all, saved my life—with love. But I knew that wasn't it. I knew myself. I knew why I hadn't been able to shed Sunny for fifteen years. I had never gotten over her, had never wanted to. She was the only woman who'd ever managed to get into my heart. Since



her, I had dated. I had sex. But there was a temporariness to those relationships. I never felt what I'd felt with Sunny, a sense of completeness. I'd had sex with her once. *Once!* What the fuck was wrong with me?

She moaned in her sleep, and her breathing fluttered. I put my hand on hers and bent down to kiss her cheek.

“River,” her voice was thin.

“Yes, Sunshine.”

I stroked her cheek until her breathing settled, and she slept peacefully. I held her hand, my fingers at her wrist, keeping track of her pulse. I'd done this in the hospital; the one thing that comforted me.

“I love you, Sunshine,” I whispered and felt the rightness of the words. So, what if I didn't know her anymore—my heart knew hers, didn't it?

As Shakespeare said, “*Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind; and therefore, is winged Cupid painted blind.*”



# Chapter 20

## SUNNY

**T**he nightmares came a few weeks after I was ensconced in River's brother's beautiful home in Venice Beach. I knew they would. Usually, I woke up and then a few hours later went back to sleep. This wasn't my first rodeo. But the nightmares were gut-wrenching this time because it was River who was hurt, not me. My screams woke River, and he came into my room. It took a while to calm me down, so as dawn burst out from the rose-colored skies, I was lying with my head on River's chest, his arm around me, holding me close.

We were back in Nigeria in the dream, and gunfire surrounded us. But I didn't have a weapon. I kept looking for one and couldn't find one. The helicopter made so much noise that I couldn't think, see, or hear anything but my heart thumping. River ran toward me, and then he fell, like I'd seen others fall. Slowly, like in a movie, the life seeped out of him.

"No," I screamed and ran to him. His blood was on my hands, and I called him, asking him to wake up. And that was

when River shook me awake. I sat up and stared at him with wide eyes.

I was breathing hard. “You’re okay,” I trembled.

He got into bed with me and gathered me in his arms. “You’re okay,” I kept whispering.

“Yeah, baby, I’m okay.” He kissed my hair, stroked my back, and held me close, rocking me like a child.

He laid me down and wiped my tears. He kissed both my cheeks.

“I thought you died,” I breathed and clutched at him, the nightmare still real, the feel and smell of it still inside me.

“No, baby. I’m right here.” I lay down beside him, and he pulled me into his arms. He put my hand on his chest so I could hear his heartbeat. And like he’d been doing for many days, his finger was on my pulse as if reassuring himself that I was alive.

“You got shot. I didn’t have a weapon,” I mumbled.

“You protected me, Sunshine. You let nothing happen to me. You stood in front of me. You got shot.” I felt a tremor run through him.

I lifted my head. “Am I hurting your ribs?” And I saw in the moonlight coming from the window that he was also crying.

“Never.” He pulled me back to him. “Holding you like this is good medicine.”

I chuckled. “You’re so smooth, River.”

He kissed my forehead as he stroked my back. “Do you often get nightmares?”

I snuggled against him, too weak to send him away. His smell was...well, good medicine, as he put it. He smelled woody and earthy, like he spent a lot of time outdoors, which I knew he did.

“They usually come after an op like this when...things get interesting.” I rubbed my cheek against the hair of his chest. He was only wearing boxers, from what I could feel. I was in a pair of panties and a tank top. I’d left a window open to allow the sea air to inundate my senses, make me feel like I was not trapped.

“One of the guys told me you’ve been shot before,” he said, his fingers weaving through my hair.

“I cut my hair after us.” The words spilled out of me before I could weigh and analyze them.

His hand stilled for an instant and then continued to massage my scalp. “I love your hair now. I loved it then, too. Did you cut it off because of me?”

Tears gathered again, and I couldn’t control the emotions choking me. “You used to touch my hair all the time. Pull my ponytail, push my hair from my face, and...it hurt too much, so I cut it off.”

He didn’t change his hold on me, but I could feel his sorrow. “I’m so sorry, Sunshine. I was a fool, a gullible fool. I dream

about you.” He gave out a dull laugh. “And I wake up sweating, with an erection that could hammer nails.”

I laughed at that imagery. “We had sex just that one time; don’t tell me you haven’t had more and better since.”

“Not better, no I haven’t,” he said simply. “Have you?”

His sincerity compelled me to be honest as well. “No. But I think it’s because the memory of that night has become elevated in our minds. In reality, maybe it was really terrible.”

“The memory of that night is better than much of my reality, baby.”

I moved my legs as my right thigh became uncomfortable, and I also wanted to see if he was aroused because our conversation had made me wet. When was the last time I’d been aroused like this...because of a man? *God! I couldn’t remember.*

“Yes, Sunshine, I’m hard,” he said, amused and taking the hand on his chest to touch him. We both groaned when I squeezed gently. He pulled my hand back to his chest and patted it as if saying, *stay here, don’t move.*

“Tell me about the last time you were shot.”

His fingers found the scar on my shoulder and soothed it.

“It’s a boring story.”

“Please.”

I let my mind wander back to when life and death danced on a thin line in South America. I took a deep breath, the

memories rushing around like a flood. “It happened in Ecuador,” I muttered. “It was a rescue mission, deep in the jungle’s heart...again. A high-profile French politician had been kidnapped by a drug cartel. Our mission was to get in, extract the hostage, and get out without leaving a trace.”

I closed my eyes, the images playing out vividly in my mind. “The night was thick with humidity, the air heavy and suffocating. You know how that is?”

He said nothing; he kept caressing me, more comforting than sexual. But this was River, my River, so it was emotional.

“I wasn’t a team leader then. I was in Steel Rain’s team. We tiptoed through the dense foliage, our steps barely making a sound. We had the element of surprise on our side and used it to our advantage.”

“You seem to spend a lot of time in tropical jungles,” he teased.

“When people say they want to go camping on vacation, I think they’re nuts.”

“What do you want when you’re on vacation?”

“Room service, beach, sunshine, colorful drinks with umbrellas in them,” I chirped. “Or mountains, space...but room service.”

“I’ll remember that.” he breathed.

His hands urged me to continue. “Everything was going according to plan, or so we thought. As we approached the makeshift camp where the politician was being held, we split

into teams, each with a specific role. I was the distraction, meant to distract the guards from the main extraction team.”

Flares had lit up the night sky as I set off explosions at the edge of the camp. Turmoil erupted, gunfire echoing through the jungle. My heart raced, adrenaline coursing through my veins as I darted between trees, engaging the cartel members in a deadly dance.

“And then, amid the chaos, a shot rang out,” I whispered, rubbing my lips against his chest. His heartbeat quickened, and I smiled with satisfaction. “I felt a searing pain in my shoulder.”

It was the first time I’d been shot—and the pain was unbearable. But I couldn’t afford to stop. I couldn’t let them catch up to the extraction team. I’d fought through the pain, each step feeling like a battle. Blood soaked through my clothes, my grip on my weapon wavered. I rejoined the team just in time as we reached the extraction point.

“It was touch and go,” I trembled slightly with the weight of the memories. “But we made it out. The politician was safe, my wound was treated, and I recovered over time, but the scar reminds me of the risks we take in this line of work.”

I opened my eyes, meeting River’s gaze. His eyes held a mixture of awe and respect, and I offered him a small, sad smile. “That’s the story.”

He brushed his lips against mine then. “Darling, scars aren’t just marks on the skin; they’re stories etched into our lives, reminding us of the battles we’ve fought and the strength we



carry within us.” He increased the pressure of his mouth and demanded access.

I opened it and moaned. His taste was the same. I recognized it immediately. That night with him had changed my brain patterns—it was always him I wanted, no matter who I lay down with.

“Sunshine.” He let his mouth trace a path to my ear. He cupped a breast and traced a hard nipple. “You’re so beautiful. I...” He pulled my tank top down and took my nipple into his mouth. I melted into him. I moved against him and cried out in pain.

River stilled immediately. “Baby?”

I chuckled, finding humor in my situation. “I moved my thigh and...I...”

When he tried to draw away, I held him. “No. Don’t stop.”

He looked at my face and kissed my nose. “You’re hurt, my love, and I don’t—”

“Please, River.”

I saw how his eyes changed and went hot in the moonlight. He gently pushed me, so I was on my back. He sat beside me and removed my tank top.

He put his hands on my breasts, his breath coming in small puffs like there wasn’t enough oxygen in the room. “They’re a handful, baby. A beautiful handful.” He squeezed, and my hips shimmied in response.

“Sunshine, you need to stop moving your thighs...” he smiled widely, “until I ask you to. Otherwise, you’ll hurt yourself.”

He bent his head and laved one nipple with his tongue and then the other. And then started to suckle. My hands went to his hair, and I pressed him closer, wanting his tongue, his teeth, anything to wipe that dream away, replace it with pleasure, with River.

One of his hands went between my legs. “Are you wet, baby?”

I made a humming sound. He found me moist and wanting. He dipped a finger inside me and brought his hand up to my breasts, spread my juices on my nipples and devoured me like a starving man. “I remember your taste, your smell. You always smell like sunshine.”

He moved down my body and pulled my panties down until they got stuck at the bandage on my right thigh. “Let me,” I offered.

He shook his head. “You like these panties?”

“What?”

He tore them, and I gasped. “River.”

“Now, move your thighs gently, baby. Let me help you.”

I closed my eyes and waited to feel his mouth on me. I remembered that first time long ago when he taught me about oral sex—how to receive and how to give.

He nuzzled my pussy. And then slowly, leisurely licked me. As I got closer to release, he pulled away, and I protested by trying to get him back with my hands in his hair. He blew on my heated flesh. "I've waited fifteen years for this, baby. Don't rush me."

I whined. "River, I need to come."

"I know, baby. I know. I need you to come too. But let me taste you. Let me." He sounded so desperate that I waited, fascinated by his need, which seemed to propel mine.

"River?" I queried.

He looked up at me; his eyes were damp and moist, and I couldn't understand. "Are you okay?"

He smiled. "I missed this. I didn't even know that I was missing this. You understand?"

I felt my eyes tear up in sympathy, understanding, and perfect harmony. "Yes, River. I understand."



# Chapter 21

## RIVER

**H**er taste was intoxicating. How had I lived so many years without this? How would I live without it after she left?

I edged her for as long as I could stand it and then because I couldn't wait, I focused on her clitoris. Her thighs shook, and she moaned, both in pleasure and in pain.

“Ah,” she cried out, and I put my hand on her thigh to steady her.

“I'm so sorry. Are you hurting?” She laughed, a half hysterical, half amused laugh. “This is the first time I've had an orgasm while I'm recovering from a bullet wound. It's a... strange combination.”

I kissed her thigh, right above her bandage and lay back, her taste and smell making my dick beg for surcease.

“River,” she sounded amused. “I want to...” she sighed, “I can't. This hurts too much.”

Fuck! I was a selfish asshole. That's what I was. I had no business playing sexual games with her a few weeks after she'd nearly died. My erection shriveled within seconds.

"Painkiller?"

She groaned and opened her eyes, she wasn't upset, she looked...pleased with herself. I couldn't help but smile at her.

"Yes, please. And if you could just pump it all straight into my thigh, it would be great."

After she took the painkillers, we settled back, her head on my chest. Her thigh settled on a pillow so it wouldn't jostle.

"Next time I promise not to leave you hanging," she said sleepily.

"You can leave me hanging *forever* and it would be fine as long as you let me back between your legs."

She nuzzled me like she'd been lying like this with me for years and that this was not a novelty. The heart knows what the mind cannot understand.

"Have there been a lot of women?" she asked.

"Some."

"I saw pictures of you with models and actresses."

"Cyber stalked me, did you?"

"You can't blame me." She kissed my chest.

"I went to your Facebook page to see your pictures."

She stilled. “Facebook? I haven’t used any social media since...I don’t know, university.”

“I know. I tried to find you online, but between special forces, CIA and now Steel Rain, I’m assuming your identity is well hidden.”

“Yeah. Did you ever think about me?”

“Every day.”“Oh, please.”

I had to make her see how much she meant to me so I lifted her face so she would look at me. “Every day. At least once a day. Sometimes more. When I saw you in Nigeria, I thought I’d died, and you were an angel. But then you started shooting, and I thought you were more Rambo than angel.”

“I thought of you too,” she whispered.

On that note she fell asleep. I lay awake for a while, happy to have her with me, scared that it was temporary.

Just date her, I told myself. Yeah. We’d date. People did that. And we’d get to know one another. We had time. Her physical therapy would take a few months—enough time for us to find each other.

Sex would have to wait until she was healed. No way was I putting my needs first again like I just had. She’d been in pain, and I hadn’t been able to stand it.

I woke up with her and it was the best morning I’d had in years; and this from someone who’d woken up with some of the most beautiful women in the world. But none of them made me feel at peace, like I was home. *Only Sunny.*

“Did you sleep okay?” I asked as she shifted to lie on her back.

She stretched and then winced. “I hate all these aches and pains.”

“I’m so sorry.”

She opened her eyes, turned to look at the clock and grinned. “Do you know how long it’s been since I slept in?” I shook my head.

“Forever. I think I just discovered the best sedative in the world.”

“Which is?”

“An orgasm by River Knight.”

I brushed my lips against her. “Let’s get you to the bathroom. You start physiotherapy today.”

“No. Already? I hate it. It’s going to hurt, and it’s going to be soooooo slow.”

“I know, Sunshine. But if you want another orgasm, I’d much rather it didn’t end with you crying out in pain.”

She punched me playfully on the shoulder. “Not *only* pain... also pleasure.”

It had taken no time at all for us to become comfortable with each other again. *Just like that!*

“Let’s get you ready. Hector will be here soon to re-dress your bandages. Today, he said he’d keep it simple, just some basics to get you started.”



She pouted. “I know the drill. This ain’t my first rodeo, cowboy.”

I went for a run despite my broken ribs and the gash on my thigh that was healing well. Hector had given me the stiff-upper lip evil eye that no one could achieve but him and probably Wooster from Wodehouse; but I’d told him that if I didn’t get out, I’d go mad.

Sunny was having nightmares, but I was feeling fear while I was awake. I’d sometimes be back in that little room with the rats in Nigeria, waiting for death. Sunny thought I helped her sleep, but the fact was she’d helped me sleep. Sex as distraction had worked ever since humans existed and with Sunny it was magical, as long as *we didn’t injure each other*.

“Master River,” Hector admonished, his nostrils flaring.

“What? What did I do?” *Did he know about the almost-sex we had?*

“You have caused your stitches to open.”

I looked down at my thigh and sighed. “Fuck me. No wonder it was hurting.”

Sunny hobbled into the living room on her crutches, looked at me and laughed. “We make quite a pair don’t we?” *Oh, baby, we make a fabulous pair.*

“Sit down,” Hector commanded.

Sunny peered over Hector’s shoulder to look at him minister my thigh. “That’s not too bad. It’s not like he opened it up completely.”

“See.” I resisted sticking my tongue out at Hector. He made me feel like a toddler at times.

“Master River, I don’t think someone who is healing from bullet wounds is the role model you should follow for taking risks with your body.”

Sunny stuck her tongue out.

“I saw that, Miss Sunny.” Hector hid a smile, pursing his lips as he bandaged my thigh. “I’m assuming you will take a shower?”

“Yeah, no one wants to smell me right now.” I winked at Sunny. “Unless you want to join me in the shower.”

“Miss Sunny is going to *need* a shower *after* we complete physiotherapy. Now, Master River, off you go and remember to wash behind your ears.”

“Hector, I’m trying real hard to not stomp my feet but you’re pushing me.”

He ruffled my hair as he did when I was a kid. “You’re going to be alright, Master River.” He turned to look at Sunny. “Both of you are, that is, if you listen to me.”

I took a shower without worrying about my bandage as Hector had used a waterproof one. I stood naked in front of a mirror and examined my body. The bruise on my stomach was now yellow. Both my eyes were open, but the left was turning a nice shade of purple and green. My thigh looked good because of the bandage. I took inventory of the bruises I could see and ignored the ones I couldn’t.

A loud sound came from somewhere and I froze; and for a moment I was back in Kajara, watching Quincy fall and then Jelani. I took deep breaths as I leaned against the sink, the muscles in my arms quivering because I was holding on so tightly.

I called Forest and left a message with his judiciary secretary to call me back. I had been doing this for a long time and knew PTSD when I saw it. It would take some time for my mind to heal along with my body—because a bullet may not have ripped through my body, but it did through my psyche.

Forest called me while I was watching Hector and Sunny on the beach. He was putting her through her paces—and it didn't look easy. Before she got hurt, Sunny could probably bench press her body weight; nothing like a couple of bullets to beat a body down.

“How's it going?”

I took a deep breath. “I need to contact the therapist you talked about.”

“Right. Do you want to do this face-to-face or—”

“Face to face,” I confirmed.

“Okay. My secretary will send you details as soon as she gets an appointment. You want to tell me what's going on?” He kept his voice light, but I knew he was worried.

“Sunny woke up screaming last night. I slept with her—and slept well. So did she. She thought I did her a favor but...”

“She did one for you as well?” Forest concluded.

“Yeah. And...sometimes I hear a sound and I’m back in Kajara. If I can’t get the bathroom light turned on quickly enough, I’m back in that room with the rats...” Just talking about it was increasing my stress. I could taste my fear.

“Yeah. I’ve not experienced what you have, but I was in a couple of shootouts when I was in the LAPD. It takes time to not think every time someone bangs a door shut too hard that there’s a weapon drawn on you.”

I sighed. “I’m tired, Forest.”

“I know.”

“I don’t know how long it’ll take before I can start working again. I feel...I don’t know...numb inside. I don’t even have my cameras with me. I have some stuff sitting in storage and I need to buy some equipment, and I don’t know...” I paused. “I’m rambling.”

“It’s okay to ramble,” Forest said gently. “Would you like to join us for dinner? Raya and Mateo may join; maybe Dec and \_\_\_”

“I can’t handle people. I don’t think Sunny can either.”

“I understand. Take your time. How’s Hector working out?”

“He’s bullying Sunny. She’s in pretty poor shape...and...fuck, Forest. She could’ve died. Because of me. For me.” I felt the panic rise again as I remembered her blood on my hands, her weak pulse, her slow gasp of breath.

“River, you’re in Venice Beach, not a single fucking insurgent in sight,” Forest’s voice was calm and clear. “The

only problem you'd have there is with someone smoking weed.”

“This place smells like weed. I think you can get high just by taking a walk on the beach.”

Forest laughed. “I must warn you that Mom may drop by. She knows you're back. She knows you're staying in Venice.”

I sighed. “Did you tell her that Sunny is with me?”

“She spoke to Hector and yes, he informed her of that. She was contrite according to him and promises that she's turned a new leaf.”

“Mom wouldn't know a new leaf if it came and bought her a Christian Dior bag.”



# Chapter 22

## SUNNY

The morning sun painted the sky with shades of pale blue and soft gold as it rose over Venice Beach. It had been four weeks since that fateful mission, four weeks of healing and introspection. I wanted another four weeks of healing and introspection before I started physiotherapy.

“Miss Sunny,” Hector said in his calming voice, “We’ll begin with gentle stretches today. Your body is still healing, so we’ll take it slow.”

I nodded, my gaze turning to the shoreline where the waves lazily met the sand. The breeze carried a hint of salt, a reminder that life’s rhythms endured, even in the face of adversity. Hector’s experience as a Gulf War medic made him a beacon of understanding in this journey of mine—as well as a total taskmaster, I had no doubt.

With a steady hand, he guided me through each stretch, his touch a mix of gentleness and determination. My muscles protested, the ache pulling at my resolve, but I pressed on. Physical therapy was a battle, not just for my body but for my

mind as well. The scars of war ran deep, so did my will to overcome.

Encouraging words flowed from Hector. He thought he was bolstering my spirits, I felt like a complete loser. I could do one hundred pushups without pause...well, in the past I could. Now I struggled to take my panties off when I needed to pee.

Hector didn't push me beyond what I could do with my arms and left leg. With my right leg he was extremely careful. The metal femur was new and my muscles protested each movement.

“We will do a different kind of physiotherapy to get you used to your metal bone. But we need the tissue to heal and accept the bone. So, only some gentle stretches for now, we don't need to open any stitches like Master River did.”

I sat on the beach and pulled my body toward my left leg as Hector kept me in place on the sand. “Why do you call them Master and me Miss? I mean...I'm *just* Sunny.”

“I know, Miss Sunny. It's just...let's say habit.”

“Would you rather I called you Mister Hector?” I asked.

“Oh, that would make me very uncomfortable.” He stretched my leg, and I whimpered at the new pressure I was putting on disused muscles.

“You're doing splendidly, Miss Sunny. A little more, and then we'll rest.”

I felt the pull, the discomfort, but amidst it all, a glimmer of hope slowly emerged. Hope for strength regained, hope for



battles fought anew, hope for life reclaimed. Venice Beach, bathed in the morning light, was the perfect canvas for this fresh start.

“Now, let’s do a few seated forward bends.”

I couldn’t reach my toes—just a few weeks ago I could but now everything hurt. I felt dejected. This was the hardest part of physio, knowing that it started out slow and took time, a lot of time to get back to a hundred percent. This time I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to get back to where I used to be. And that worried me.

Hector’s presence, his reassuring touch on my back, reminded me I wasn’t facing this challenge alone. “Just one more stretch, Miss Sunny. And then we’ll pause. Remember to breathe.”

As I stretched, as my muscles pushed against their limits and my breath found a steadier rhythm, I understood that healing was a process, not an erasure. The scars and the pain were reminders of resilience and survival.

“Excellent, Miss Sunny,” Hector said, his smile genuine as we eased out of the stretch. “Take a moment. Catch your breath. You’re progressing well, and I believe in your ability to conquer this.”

I met his gaze, an unspoken understanding passed between us. His eyes reflected my determination, a silent affirmation of the road ahead.

River was on his laptop in the living room when we got back. I collapsed next to him on the couch.

“You know,” I said as I caught my breath, “I used to be able to do a hundred pushups without taking a break and run four miles before my hands shook.”

He put his laptop away and put both his hands on my sweaty face. He kissed my lips. “And you’ll do that again, soon. Until then, give the body a vacation.”

“Physiotherapy, Master River is no vacation,” Hector interjected.

River considered Hector’s tracksuit. “You know, in my head I thought you’d do physiotherapy in a suit.”

Hector smirked. “Well, maybe next time. Now, Miss Sunny, if you can, take a bath to soak your muscles.”

“Thanks, Hector.”

“Why don’t you sit here, and I’ll run a bath for you?” River offered.

I sat back, grabbed the bottle of water Hector offered me and drank thirstily. “Hector, I can’t thank you enough for doing this for me. I hate medical facilities and how they make me feel.”

“It’s my pleasure, Miss Sunny. In a few weeks we’ll meet at Miss Daisy’s house so we can start doing some water exercises for your right leg and also start using weights so you can build back muscle.”

I groaned.

“We’ll do it slowly,” he promised me.

I fell asleep on the couch as I waited for River to get my bath ready. I felt like a newborn puppy—falling apart suddenly, all energy leaving my body from one instant to the other.

I woke up as River carried me.

“You have broken ribs,” I mumbled.

“I know, baby. Trust me, I know.”

I laughed and winced as some aches made themselves felt.  
“You make me laugh, River.”

He sat me down in the bathroom and I admired the frothy water in the jacuzzi. It looked like just what a tired body ordered. I let River undress me. After last night it was petty to behave like we were not doing this. We were. Some people had holiday romances, I was having a rest and recuperation romance.

He helped me get into the bathtub and I groaned as the hot water soothed my tired muscles. “This is heaven.”

“Happy to hear that.”

“Are you joining me?” I asked because I wanted him to. “I need someone to hold me, or I’ll float away.”

“Is that right?” He took his T-shirt off and then his shorts and boxers. He was beautifully naked and shockingly bruised. As he turned to put his clothes away, I looked at his back. “Oh my

god, River. You're bruised everywhere."He came inside and sat next to me.

"Is it okay to take a bath with your knife wound?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Hector said the bandages were waterproof. I'm testing it out."

"You know we're a pathetic pair."

"A brave and courageous pair. A victorious pair."

I put my head on his shoulder. "It feels so...you know, normal to be together. It confuses me...or rather it would confuse me if I wasn't so tired all the time that thinking is just so much work."

He nuzzled his nose against my cheek. "I feel the same way. It's so easy to be with you. So natural. I've never had this with anyone but you."

"When I asked you about other women yesterday, you didn't answer. Have there been many?" Undeniably, I felt jealous. It was a new sensation for me; I'd never been envious of past relationships, but just the thought of River with another woman made me want to hit something.

"You really want to know?" He touched my cheek and then stroked my lips with a forefinger.

"Yes."

"I've never been in a relationship with any woman but you. There were one-night stands, a few one-week stands, but never

more than that. Because every woman...was a substitute for you.”

My heart hammered at his words, the look in his face, the stark honesty.

“You can’t say such things, River.”

“It’s the truth.” He smiled. “And you asked. How about you, Sunshine?” “How many men?”

He nodded.

“Are you jealous?” I asked curiously.

“Yes. I cannot stand the idea of any man but me touching you, making love with you, being inside you. I was your first and...I know it sounds a bit too alpha macho male, but I want to be your only; and since I blew that, I’d like to be your last.” He kissed me then, slowly, taking his time.

“What are you saying?” I asked, wrenching my lips away from his. And then, before he could speak, I covered his mouth with a hand. “No, don’t say it.”

He kissed my fingers and then licked them.

“Okay.”

I nodded, feeling weak, scared, and anxious that I was still in love with River Knight, and he was saying he was in love with me as well. I didn’t quite know what to do with that.

“There haven’t been many men,” I admitted. “A few. No relationships. No one-night stands. It was usually men at work

—because who else would I meet in special forces. And mostly it was a release because the work is *very* stressful.”

“Is that what you’re doing with me now?” His hand cupped a breast, and his thumb aroused my nipple. “Releasing stress.”

“Do you mind?”

He slid his hand between my legs. “Do I look like an idiot?”



# Chapter 23

## RIVER

The water was warm, the steam rising gently, but nothing could quite compare to the warmth of Sunny's presence beside me. I could feel the outline of her body, marked by recent ordeals, and the proximity brought back memories—of love, of passion, of pain.

I didn't mind that I was stress relief for Sunny. I minded that she didn't want me to say *the* words. I had to remind myself that even though, for a minute a long time ago, we'd been each other's—a decade and a half had passed by. This was in many ways a brand-new relationship. But even though we hadn't been this close in years, the moment felt timeless, as if we could simply pick up where we left off.

"Does this feel good?" I circled her clitoris with my finger, gently arousing it.

Her eyes closed. "Yes."

I slid a finger inside her and felt her clench around me. My breath caught. She was perfect. I caressed her, a relief, an



easing of both our souls. She was beautiful when she came, her breath hitched, and her body convulsed.

She floated and leaned back into me, and I instinctively wrapped my arms around her, careful not to touch her wounds. The sensation of her skin, still soft despite the scars, sent shivers down my spine. “I missed this,” she whispered, her voice carrying a hint of vulnerability.

I rested my chin on her shoulder, taking a moment to breathe in the scent of her hair, mixed with the subtle aroma of the bath oils. “I never thought I’d see you again, let alone like this,” I admitted.

She turned her head slightly, allowing our eyes to meet. In the dim light of the bathroom, I could see a reflection of my pain in her eyes, but there was also a glimmer of hope. “Life has a way of surprising us,” she mused.

I remembered how fiercely she had fought to save me in Nigeria, and the realization that this woman would always be my hero overwhelmed me. I gently traced the outline of the gunshot wound on her stomach, my fingers barely grazing her skin. “You’ve always been strong.” My voice was thick with emotion. “But I hate you had to prove it like this.”

She caught my hand and squeezed it, a sign that she understood my guilt, my gratitude, my love. “We’ve both seen the worst of the world,” she responded. “But maybe it’s time to focus on the best parts.”

I leaned in, pressing a gentle kiss on her forehead. The weight of our past mistakes, our lost time, seemed to dissolve

in that moment. As the water continued to ripple around us, we found solace in each other's company, two wounded souls reconnecting and healing together.

She moved then so she could face me.

"What?" I asked, the look of mischief on her face inviting me to join in.

"Let me." Her hand found me hard, and I closed my eyes. She pumped me and I knew I wouldn't last long, not after last night and just now.

"Baby, harder."

"I wish I could taste you." There was such need in her voice that I opened my eyes to look at her. Her face was flushed and not pale as it had been when she came back from the beach with Hector.

"We have all the time in the world, Sunshine."

I put my hand over hers and squeezed myself and groaned. A hand job from Sunny was more arousing, more potent than full on sex with any other woman.

I came violently and leaned my forehead on her shoulder to catch my breath.

"I think we need a shower now," Sunny teased.

I kissed her nose and then her lips. "Let me help you."

That night we ate quietly on the wraparound patio; and then lay together on the wicker sofa, watching the white frothy waves crash against the dark sands. She leaned her back

against my chest as if we'd always sat like this, in harmony. I'd turned on the outdoor firepit and put a blanket over us to ward off the ocean chill.

"I'm scared," she blurted.

I nuzzled my chin on her hair. "Tell me."

"If I don't get well, I can't go back to work and if I can't go back to work, I don't know what I will do."

I wanted to tell her to not worry because I'd be there with her—but that was patronizing, like I was some superhero who could solve all her problems. This was a life she'd built over the past decade and a half, and she was reasonably afraid she may lose it all.

"A few months ago, after I came back from Ukraine, I felt burnt out. I told my editor that I would do one more story and then I was out. I wanted to come home and do nothing for a while. Let my head clear. I want to write a book...but right now I can't write anything. Hell, I can't even take a photo. I feel empty."

She gripped my hand that lay on her stomach. "I feel the same. Burnt out. A part of me doesn't want to go to another jungle or bunker or wherever to find a person or destroy an arms dealer's warehouse, or whatever else we do. But that's all I know how to do. I don't know what else I could do."

"Why don't we worry about that after you're able to live again with no pain. It's constant, isn't it? The pain?"

She nodded, cuddling closer. “I need to be careful with painkillers. I can’t take the heavy stuff. I’ve been here before. Healing takes a long time. You never wake up one morning and everything is fine. You wake up each morning and it’s marginally better than the last day.”

“We’ll heal together.”

I felt her smile against my forearm. “I know I fought you on this, but I’m so happy that I came here with you. I don’t want to be alone right now.”

“You don’t have to be alone.” *Ever again if you don’t want to be. I’m not going anywhere.*

That night we decided that we’d sleep in the same bed from now on. There wasn’t much point in pretending we were not together, because we were. We carefully and tacitly avoided talking about the future. I would’ve been happy to, but I knew she wasn’t ready.

Lying next to Sunny, I felt her body stiffen abruptly. A soft moan of discomfort escaped her lips, pulling me from the edge of sleep. The darkness of the room was pierced only by the thin sliver of moonlight filtering through the curtains.

“Sunny?” My voice was low, filled with concern.

“My arm... and leg,” she gasped, her voice tight with pain. “Cramps.”

Hector had warned me about this, that her muscles after being pushed for the first time in a long time would protest. I sat up immediately, instinctively reaching for her. My fingers

found the knots of tension in her forearm, and I began massaging gently, trying to ease the pain. She groaned, her face contorting as the spasms gripped her muscles.

“It’s okay,” I murmured, trying to comfort her as I worked her muscles. “Just breathe.”

Her free hand clutched at the sheets, the strength of her grip betraying the intensity of her pain. Her leg was next, the muscles taut beneath my touch. I applied steady pressure, kneading the contracted tissue, feeling it resist then slowly release under my fingers.

She exhaled a shaky breath, her body trembling. “God, that hurts,” she whispered.

I continued massaging, focusing all my attention on relieving her pain. Each touch was calculated, driven by the fierce desire to help her, to protect her, even from something as mundane as muscle cramps. We were silent, the only sound being our synchronized breathing and the soft rustle of sheets.

After what felt like hours, her muscles finally relaxed, leaving her limp and exhausted in the bed. I laid down beside her, pulling her close to me.

“Thank you,” she murmured, her voice hoarse. “I didn’t expect therapy to hit back like this.”

“It’s a sign that you’re healing,” I whispered, kissing her forehead gently. “Even if it doesn’t feel like it right now.”

She nestled closer, seeking comfort in my embrace. “I’m glad you’re here with me, River.”

I tightened my arms around her, a silent promise that I'd be there for her, through every painful step of her recovery. "Always," I vowed.



# Chapter 24

## RIVER

As I entered Dr. Marcus Adams' office, the air smelled of lavender and patchouli. The muted beige walls, adorned with various certifications, contrasted with the dark wood of his desk. Like many others I'd seen, the therapy room was quiet, understated, and designed to promote comfort.

Dr. Adams, a tall and broad-shouldered African American man, stood as I entered, extending a hand with a warm, practiced smile. His deep-set eyes, though gentle, seemed to pierce through me, and for a moment, I felt like the photographs I'd taken over the years—captured, raw, and exposed.

“River Knight.”

I nodded, taking the proffered hand. It was firm and reassuring, an anchor to reality. “That’s me.”

He motioned for me to sit on the soft-looking couch, and I complied. As I settled into its cushioned embrace, he sat opposite me.



“Have you had therapy before?” he asked.

“Yeah. On and off. Usually, when I had a crisis. I...am...was a war photojournalist. I’ve been in every war zone around the world in the past ten years. Sometimes, I see things that need me to process.” I knew the drill. I knew that therapy only worked if you wanted it to. I wanted it to.

“What do you mean you *were* a photojournalist?”

I smiled. “I quit my job...a while back. I was...*am* tired.”

Dr. Adams leaned back. “Tell me, what brings you here today?”

The question, simple as it was, stirred a whirlwind of memories and emotions. I looked down, trying to find words. How could I encapsulate the fear, the pain, and the sheer trauma of the past few weeks in mere sentences?

“I was kidnapped a few weeks ago. I was held by the Hausa Brigade in Nigeria,” I began. “It was only a few hours, but it felt like a lifetime.”

Dr. Adams nodded slowly, “I’m sorry to hear that, River. That’s a lot for anyone to endure. Has something like this happened before?”

“Nothing like this. I was in Myanmar a few years ago, and they detained me for a day. But it’s different when it’s a government versus mercenaries. Four of us were threatening us with some nebulous charges, but the US Embassy was on it, and we were quickly released.”

“But it could’ve been worse?”

I dragged a hand through my hair. I really needed to get a haircut. “Yeah. I mean, take Austin Tice, who has been in Syria since 2012, and Evan Gershkovich, who has been in Russia for months. It can get pretty dangerous. I was taken in Syria...that was a long time ago and...”

“And?” I took a deep breath. “I was tortured. I was there for some very long hours...you know how it works...do you?”

He just watched me, not saying anything.

I swallowed and cleared my throat, trying to find the words. “They take you to an abandoned building and tie you up, throw water on your face to wake you, play...in this case it was a soccer game. I can still not watch soccer without remembering. They didn’t beat me as they did in Nigeria. This was different. They wanted something...”

“You seem uncomfortable talking about this?” Dr. Adams noted.

“I dealt with it then...but it comes back from time to time. Nigeria was different...it was kidnapping for ransom. These guys were undisciplined. The Syrian military is not undisciplined.”

“Did you have any PTSD then?”

“Yeah, but it was different. I was younger then. I was invincible. I wasn’t tired.”

“And now?”

“Now, every loud sound in the city outside takes me back to that place—the dark, damp room crawling with rats; the

feeling of cold, metallic cuffs biting into my wrists; the sharp sting of a blade against my thigh.” I stopped talking because describing how I felt made it real again.

“You were tortured in Syria...why is this worse than that?”

I thought about it and the answer was staring at me. “Because of Sunny.” The image of her bloodied body, fierce determination, and whispered words of comfort still haunted my every waking moment.

“Who is Sunny?”

“We used to be a thing, a lifetime ago. She’s changed... become tougher, more distant. She’s a private fighter now.”

I told him the whole sordid story.

“So, the woman you knew a decade and a half ago shows up in the Nigerian jungle to save you?”

“Yeah, if this was a movie, you’d say it’s too much of a coincidence. I still can’t believe it.”

Dr. Adams smiled. “Stranger things have happened. How do you feel about her?”

I took a deep breath. “Grateful. Confused. Hopeful. In love. All rolled into one.”

He leaned forward, his fingers tented. “Sounds like there’s a lot to unpack there. But let’s start with your immediate trauma.”

Flashes of the ordeal rushed through me—Quincy falling, the bullets hitting Jelani, the shouts, the rough hands that

dragged me, and that horrifying moment when I thought Sunny might not make it out alive.

“Every time I close my eyes, I’m back in that room. Even the smallest noise, like a door slamming, sends me spiraling,” I admitted, my voice shaky. “After Syria...I felt invincible in some ways, like if I could survive that then I could survive anything.”

“You don’t feel like that now?”

I shook my head. “I feel weak, tired, beaten. Afraid. I get that metallic taste of fear in my mouth whenever I think back. See, in Syria, I had this confidence that I’d be rescued, in Nigeria, I was coming to terms with dying.”

“Did you come to terms with it?” I laughed sardonically. “I thought I was dead when I first saw Sunny and she was the light at the end of my tunnel. Now, I want to grab her and keep her close, safe. I hold her wrist all the time, the beat of her pulse is like a fucking security blanked.”

Dr. Adams nodded, making notes. “Sounds like post-traumatic stress disorder. It’s common in individuals who’ve experienced traumatic events.”

I looked up at him, desperate for answers. “I need some tools to help myself.”

He took a moment before replying, “Recovery is a journey, River. There’s no one-size-fits-all solution. But with therapy and time, you’ll learn to process and deal with your trauma. What are you doing to help yourself now?”

I grinned despite myself. “Sunny and I are...ah...sleeping together. We haven’t had sex...but we’re having sexual relations. Considering both our bodies are beaten and bruised...the logistics have been interesting. She has nightmares, cramps...and we sleep better together.”

“Both of you have been through a traumatic experience together. It affects relationships, often amplifying underlying issues or creating new dynamics.”

I felt a lump form in my throat. “I just want to be there for Sunny. To reconnect with her, start over. But she’s distant, wary.”

“That’s understandable,” he replied. “Have you talked to her about your feelings?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. Every time I try, I can feel her reluctance. I don’t want to burden her further.”

Dr. Adams leaned back, “It sounds like you’re shouldering a lot of guilt, River.”

“I am,” I confessed. “I feel like I did this. I got her kicked out of university, so she joined the military. And now she almost died because of me.”

He paused, appearing to choose his words carefully. “You might feel responsible, but the only ones to blame are those who inflicted harm upon you. And in the past, you were manipulated by your mother, *and* it was a long time ago. Recognize and acknowledge your feelings and start to differentiate between guilt and responsibility.”

As our session drew to a close, Dr. Adams smiled warmly. “This is a good first step, River. Remember, recovery is a process. Allow yourself to grieve, to feel, and most importantly, to heal.”

As I exited his office, the world outside felt a little brighter and a little less overwhelming. I knew the journey ahead would be long and challenging, but for the first time, I believed I could face it—piece by broken piece. As long as Sunny was with me.

She had shown me her vulnerable side. She was afraid of the future. I understood that well. I did not know what I was going to do. I couldn’t go back to being a journalist who chased after every conflict zone on the planet. I couldn’t see any more dead children, mass graves, broken bodies, and ghost cities.

And I had achieved more than most did. I won a Pulitzer. I did good work. I had to find something else to challenge myself.

But I felt like Sunny did, burnt out, tired. My brain didn’t function. I was diverting myself with books. In the past few days, I’d consumed a book by Adam Grant called *Think Again* and enjoyed my friend Wall Street Journal Reporter John Carreyrou’s book about Theranos called *Bad Blood*. Sunny was reading as well. Her poison of choice was mysteries. Neither of us were big television watchers, though at one time I used to keep the news channels on as background—but now the sound of that fucking breaking news jingle triggered me.

So, right now, I was just as unclear about my future as Sunny, except I knew one thing, which she refused to admit: we were in love, and we were meant to be together.





# Chapter 25

## SUNNY

**W**e followed a rhythm for the next few weeks. Some light physiotherapy with Hector on the beach while River went for his morning run. I would soon be ready for more, Hector promised. I didn't feel ready. I felt lazy.

There was an ease between River and me, one that I recognized from the past. We were comfortable talking, but we were also relaxed in our silence. We did little with our time. We read a lot. I was on my iPad, and he, the real thing because he liked the feel of paper. We went on short walks on the beach. I could now walk short distances without a crutch, but it was still painful, and sometimes, when I overdid it, I paid for it at night with severe cramps. River had become an expert at massaging the knots out.

We still hadn't had sex, but we fooled around plenty, discovering each other's bodies. I'd finally given him a blow job. By trial and error, we discovered that the position that worked for us was the sixty-nine.

Hearing his groans and having him cum in my mouth had been so exciting that it had become my best sleep aid. We fell asleep in each other's arms. We woke up and snuggled into one another. We spent most of our day together as well. He'd become an extension of me. We were best friends like children are. And like children, we didn't make plans for the future and lived in the now. There was no yesterday, no tomorrow, just today.

In a recent video call with Phantom, Rebound, and Chaos, I'd said as much when they asked me what my plans for the future were. I didn't have any. I was freeloading off wealthy River Knight—staying in his home, eating his food, and getting free physiotherapy. Sure, Stellar Rain would pay for my recovery, but Hector would be insulted (at least, that was what River had told me) if I suggested some kind of payment.

“You think you'll come back?” Rebound asked as he gnawed on his toothpick.

“Hey, we discussed this, and we weren't going to pressure her with that question.” Phantom punched Rebound on his shoulder.

“Where are you?”

“I'll tell you, but then I have to kill you,” Chaos grinned. “I think we can say we're on the continent of South America.”

“I'm sure you're all heartily sick of tropical jungles.” I picked up my iPad and showed them my view. I was sitting outside on the comfortable patio. It was late afternoon, and the

sea air was already cooling a warm September Southern California day.

They teased me about my cool digs and protested their current accommodations, which looked like a bunker in the ass-end of nowhere.

“Are you doing okay?” Phantom asked when it was just him and me. Of all my teammates, he and I had worked together the longest.

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“It takes time. How’s the thigh? You’ll forever beep when you go through an airport security gate. Not that we go through too many of those.”

I laughed. “When you take off and land from runways used by the French legion and/or drug cartels, they’re lax on security and passport control.”

“Look, it’s none of my business, but here is what I think.”

I waited.

“I think you’re done.”

Everything inside me clenched in protest. This was one of my closest friends. “Why?” I could barely get the question out.

“It’s been going on for a while, Sunny.” He was using my name. This was serious.

“Eli, I have nothing else I can do.”

“You can manage ops.”

“You mean sit in an office and download intel to you guys?”  
*No! I couldn't do that. It would drive me crazy.*

“Think about it. You know no one would be happier than me if you came back.”

That evening, as we sat outside on the wicker sofa, River reading his book and me leaning against his chest, reading mine, I told him about my conversation with Phantom.

River set his book down and secured me closer to him with his arm around my waist. “I’m going through the same thing, trying to figure out what to do next. It’s proving harder than I thought it would. I’d thought I’d write a book, but...I’m still too tired and can’t get my brain to work.”

“I feel the same way,” I admitted. “But I eventually have to go back to work, River. I need to earn a living. I’m freeloading on you and—”

“Don’t say that.” he interrupted harshly. “Never say that again. You’re my...mine. And we’re taking care of each other.”

I kissed his forearm. “Don’t be like that, River. You know I have to—”

“Let me be clear with you.” He turned me, all but hauled me. I winced, but he didn’t seem to notice, which meant he was furious, considering how, usually, he was so careful with me. “I love you. What’s mine is yours. I have a lot, and it’s all yours too. So, next time you want to give me bullshit about earning a living, think about how you’re hurting me.”

I stared at him. I'd been waiting for him to say he loved him even though I'd told him not to say the words. I'd been dreading him saying it anyway. Did I love him? I didn't know what love meant anymore. I barely loved myself these days.

"River," I began softly, "We're not in a relationship. I need you to understand that, so no one gets hurt in the end."

"If there's an end, I'm going to get hurt. I've come to terms with it. Have you?"

I licked my lips. "We barely know each other."

"Really? After all this together, you think we're still strangers. Tell me, when was the last time you were this comfortable with another human being?" he demanded.

I sighed. "I don't want to argue about this."

I turned my back to him, leaning against his chest.

"I love you, Sunshine," he whispered close to my ear and bit my earlobe.

"I don't know if I can ever love again, River," I wanted to be honest with him. "I feel like I lost the ability after I killed someone that first time. People who do what I do, they can't love."

"I don't believe that."

"I'm not the girl you knew in Columbia."

"I'm not the man you knew then either," he countered.

His phone beeped then, and he picked it up. I felt him stiffen. "What?" I asked, watching the sunset spread its wings across

the vast sky and sea.

“Incoming,” he announced. “My mother will be here in fifteen minutes.”

I stiffened as well. I didn’t know if I wanted to see the woman who’d broken my young heart. But then again, it was so long ago. I still couldn’t be angry about that. Or could I?

“Do you want me to find a bar to hang out in while you deal with her?” I asked. Venice Beach had some excellent bars, and I could now hobble to one if push came to shove, though I was not keen on being around too many people. “Or I could hide in the bedroom.”

He kissed my hair. “No. Stay right here with me. Fuck my mother.”

“No thanks. I’ll pass.”

“She can’t hurt us anymore.” River was angry; I could feel it vibrating off of him. “I won’t let her.”

“She’s still your mother.”

“I don’t believe in staying in toxic relationships—I learned that long ago. I don’t deal with my father at all. I tolerated my mother, but I hadn’t liked how she’d tried to manipulate me with you. I didn’t know the extent of her interference, but what I knew meant that I spoke to her maybe once every two months and only because Forest asked me to. Now, neither of us has a relationship with her.”

“What happened with her and Forest?”

He hugged me tighter. “She sent Forest doctored pictures of Daisy having sex with someone.”

I turned around, shocked. “What? No way.”

“Yes, way! And then last year, she and my father leaked videos of Daisy to fuck up their marriage. Deep fake AI videos of Daisy in some BDSM threesome situation.” He laughed then, and I frowned. “Daisy was pissed about that because she’d never had a threesome. It fucked with her career. And it didn’t help that Forest was all over the news and he hates dealing with the media.”

I remembered reading tidbits and nodded. “He pulled out of some judgeship nomination.”

“Yeah. It was his dream job, but he realized he didn’t want it as much as he did his family. He’s happier than he’s ever been. Of course, they’re pushing him to run for governor now, which will be wild. I don’t think Daisy has a filter.”

“Maybe it’s time we had more politicians who didn’t have filters.” I leaned back into him. “Your mother must really not like Daisy. But why? She’s beautiful, successful, and wealthy. I came from the wrong side of the tracks.”

“Daisy is half Creole.”

“No. Please tell me your mother isn’t a racist on top of everything.”

“Yep. And she probably didn’t like you because...ah...as you so poetically put it, come from the wrong side of the tracks. Mom would prefer if Forest and I were with some

socialite like herself with whom she could arrange ridiculous charity balls.”

His dislike for his mother was palpable, and I felt terrible for his family. Sure, my father was not in our lives and my mother had passed, but my brother was my family. We weren't close but we were in each other's lives and he'd do nothing to sabotage me.

“Isn't your father indicted for something?”

“Oh yeah, my family is a cluster fuck,” River chuckled. “So much being from the right side of the tracks.”





# Chapter 26

## RIVER

I didn't let Sunny leave my side when we saw my mother's Bentley stop in front of the gate.

"At least let me sit up," she protested.

"Shut up and read your book," I instructed. "You're comfortable like this aren't you?"

"Yes."

Of course, she was. We spent every evening like this, wrapped around each other and then we did some more of the same at night. We were in a cocoon. Hector came by and I visited Dr. Adams regularly. But we saw no one else. I'd asked Forest and my cousin Declan to give us some time before we could visit them or have them come over. We weren't ready for people. And let's face it, people weren't ready for us.

Lena Knight had an uncanny way of looking almost a decade younger than she really was. I'd always noticed the subtle changes in my mother's appearance over the years. She was sharp, blonde, and clearly had undergone some work to

maintain that youthful glow. But beneath that exterior was a woman driven by relentless determination. Six days a week, she had a personal trainer who pushed her to her limits, ensuring she remained as fit as a fiddle.

But her obsession with her looks wasn't merely vanity. It was a deep-seated competition with Aunt Nina, my uncle Gerald's ex-wife, and the mother of my cousin, Declan. Nina was a force to reckon with—she'd made her mark as a California Supreme Court Judge and had since risen to political influence within the Democratic party.

Mom had always felt overshadowed by Nina's intellect and prowess. Where she felt she couldn't match Nina in brilliance, she competed in beauty. The dynamic between the two women was palpable, a silent tug-of-war that had persisted for years.

But then with my mother everything was a zero-sum game. Someone won, and my mother lost. I heard the doorbell but didn't move.

“Come on, River.” Sunny squirmed.

I was reading my book and told her to hush. “My mother knows we're out here. She can walk around the patio. I'm not leaving my comfortable spot here with you to open the door to someone I don't want to see.”

My mother finally gave up pretending that she was ringing the doorbell and walked from the front of the house on the wraparound deck and came to where we were.

“Didn't you hear the doorbell?” she demanded.

She wore a black dress with a bolero jacket. She was decked out in diamonds. She was probably on her way to some formal event, and this was a pit stop.

“Didn’t you see us sitting here when you got out of the car?” I retorted.

“And who’s this? Your latest floozy? We need to talk, River,” my mother pursed her lips and glared at Sunny. “Could you excuse us?”

Sunny turned to face my mother. “I don’t think I reach floozy status, Mrs. Knight.”

“Mom, this is Sunny French. You remember her, don’t you? You tried to write her a check to break us up.”

My mother’s expression didn’t change. Botox? I wondered.

“I can’t remember all the girls you’ve been with, River. But what I need to talk to you about is familial and—”

“Mom, she’s going nowhere. So, either talk or leave. I don’t give a shit either way.”

“*River*,” my mother cried out.

“Stop with the drama.”

“Can’t you give your mother a hug? I almost lost you, son.” There were tears in her voice. She did that when she wanted something. It always used to work on Forest but not anymore. My mother had hurt Daisy and he couldn’t forgive that. I understood. I felt something similar about what my mother had done to Sunny and me.

“I don’t feel like hugging you. I’m sorry if that hurts you. But...” I closed my eyes. I didn’t *want* to hurt my mother, but I was also tired of a lifetime of interference in the name of *I know what’s right for you and don’t forget you’re a Knight*.

Sunny pulled away from me. She might have been shot twice, but she was stronger than me. I didn’t want to tussle with her in front of my mother...or at all. She’d kick my ass.

“I’m going to go make myself some tea.” She left the patio. She was now available to walk short distances without her crutches. According to Hector, Sunny was recovering remarkably fast, and he admired her courage and persistence to become whole again.

“What is *she* doing here?” my mother demanded.

“Resting and recuperating.” I leaned back on the wicker chair and held a hand to a matching armchair across from me.

She sat down. “I’m going to a charity ball and thought I’ll stop by and see you. I’ve been calling and texting. Why haven’t you gotten back to me? I only know what’s happening because Hector tells me. And...you know he left us? Moved into *that* woman’s house.”

“You mean my sister-in-law and the mother of my nephew? Her house?”

My mother sighed. “It won’t last. I can tell you that. People like her—”

“You want to stop right there, Mom.” I held a hand up. “Why are you here?”

“I wanted to see you. I’m allowed to see you. I have rights.”

“No, you don’t. Your rights disappeared when you went to Sunny to write her a check. When you manipulated me into breaking up with her. When you manipulated Forest.” I looked at her perfectly made-up face. She wouldn’t cry, I was certain of it, not when it could fuck up her makeup. “Do you know, Sunny almost died saving me?”

“So, what? It’s her job,” she replied flippantly.

“Yeah, it is. What’s your job, Mom? What’s your responsibility towards your children?”

She was taken aback. “I want what’s best for you.”

“Forest is happier than he’s ever been. He loves his wife and son.”

“Happy?” my mother exclaimed. “He gave up a ninth circuit judgeship. Do you know what that would have meant?”

“He’s happy. The problem is that you can’t see it.”

“And are you telling me you’re happy with that Sunny woman? Do you know her background?”

I got up then. I didn’t want to deal with her any longer. The one thing a near-death experience told you was that life was short, and it was meant to be lived to the fullest. I was out of fucks when it came to my parents!

“Goodbye, Mom. Find your way out. Don’t come back. I’m in love with Sunny. I’m going to marry her if she’ll have me. There isn’t anything you can do about it.”

My mother got up, her eyes flashing fury. “Well, we’ll see about that.”

I laughed without humor. “Mom, she fought with a very bad man in Nigeria to save me. Sunny is beyond your reach and so am I. Have a good party.”

I left her alone on the patio, wanting to get inside the house and to Sunny to do damage control.

The soft rays of the setting sun filtered through the sheer curtains, casting a warm amber hue over the living room. Sunny lay sprawled on the couch, her breathing rhythmic, with signs of fatigue clear on her face. The daily physiotherapy sessions with Hector were intensive, pushing her to the brink each time, and it was clear the toll they took on her.

As I walked in, the floorboards creaked under my weight, and she stirred. Slowly, her eyes fluttered open and fixed on me, sparkling with that familiar fire. “How did it go?” she asked, her voice thick with sleep.

“It went fine,” I replied.

With a weak but affectionate smile, she stretched out a hand towards me, beckoning. “Come here.”

I approached her and, in an unexpected gesture, she tugged me close, enveloping me in a warm embrace. As we held onto each other, our wounds, reminders of the recent past, pressed painfully against each other. We both winced at the sharp sting, but it didn’t last long.

Pulling away slightly, I met her gaze. There was an underlying humor in her eyes that was infectious. And before we knew it, we were both laughing heartily, the kind of deep laughter that was therapeutic in its own right.

Between chuckles, I managed to say, “I love you, Sunny French.”

Her response was playful yet tender. “Kiss me, River.”

I raised an eyebrow in mock surprise. “Is that how you’re going to respond every time I confess my love?”

She tilted her head, her lips stretching into a teasing grin. “Sometimes, I might even ask you to make love to me.”

“Oh, really?” With that, I captured her lips in a passionate kiss, pouring every ounce of emotion into it. As we parted, breathless, I whispered, “I want you, Sunshine.”

She bit her lower lip coyly. “I know. Do you think... maybe we could try tonight?” We hadn’t had sex even though we’d tried most everything else. It was an education for both of us, to learn each other’s body, what she liked, what I liked, what made her moan, what made me come.

Instead of replying, I bent down, scooping her up in my arms. “Tonight? Why wait? Let’s try right now.”

She laughed as she wrapped her hands around my neck, the sound echoing around the room. It was the very best sound in the entire world.

Sex with Sunny was everything. Intense, passionate, fun, funny, and most importantly, intimate as fuck. She didn’t close



her eyes, she looked into mine when she came. When she took me in her mouth, she made me come harder than I ever had before. There was nothing sexier than seeing my cum dripping out of her mouth.

With her thigh still healing, the abdominal bullet scar still pink, and my ribs almost healed and my thigh wound only itching now, we touched each other without jostling any of the raw wounds. Well, most of the time.

“I can’t do that,” Sunny had protested when I wanted to throw her thighs over my shoulder so I could taste her deeper. “My thigh can’t manage that.”

“Baby, your elbow is digging into ribs,” I’d once had to tell her.

It was frustrating and yet liberating to touch, feel, and release without the ultimate penetration. She asked me once if I was getting bored with the non-sex sex. I’d been honest with her, “Sunshine, making out with you while making sure we don’t open any of our stitches is more erotic than any sex I’ve had with anyone.”

She felt the same.

No one compared to her.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked as I lay above her, my weight on my forearms, the tip of my erection at her entrance.

“Yes, come inside,” she said with irritation.

I grinned. “Are you in a rush, Sunshine?”

She smirked. “Don’t Sunshine me, River, because you’re just as desperate as me.”

“More. I’m more desperate. Are you sure about the no condom?”

“I want to feel you. I have an IUD.” I knew it was common for women fighters to have implants or IUDs, in case the worst happened, at least they were protected from an unwanted pregnancy.

“It’s been so long.” I slid into her, and we both groaned.

“River,” she cried out as I slammed inside her. We both stilled as the world stopped rotating and the moment was timeless, forever.

“Fuck, you feel good,” I whispered and pumped in and out of her. “Sunny, how does it feel, baby?”

She looked at me with wide moist eyes. “Like I’m home.”

“Yeah, for me too.” My eyes filled with tears as well. I’d missed this woman. My heart was overwhelmed with this feeling of closeness.

I kissed her mouth and our tears mingled with one another. I’d thought this first time would be hard and quick, but we were patient, like we had oceans of time. We kissed sloppily, mouth to mouth, tongue to tongue, tears to tears; as I moved inside her, feeling the tightness, the clench of her cunt around me.

“River,” she gasped when I moved a hand down between us and thrummed at her clitoris. I wanted to feel her orgasm

around me, milk me.

“Yeah, baby. You want to come?”

She moved then and cried out. “Ouch.”

I immediately pulled out. “What?”

She was in pain; she’d moved in a way that her thigh didn’t like. She looked at me and laughed. “For god’s sake, can we just have sex without all the bullet wound drama.”

This was what I loved about her—this ability to laugh when things were not working out. I move back inside her. “I’d like to finish this time...preferably inside you.”

She smiled at me, her hands on my shoulder. “Make me come, River.”

Since she asked so prettily, I did. As orgasms went, this was in my top two, the first one was inside her all those years ago when she gave me her virginity.

“You’re the only man who has made me come twice,” she told me as she lay against me.

I pinched her ass. “No talking of other men you’ve fucked while you’re in bed with me.”

“Oh please, like you haven’t slept with every eligible woman under the age of thirty...actually, I have a question. A lot of those models were really young. What on earth did you talk to them about?” Sunny settled into me.

The air smelled of sex, of Sunny and sunshine. I was replete. “I think you’re getting a big part of this fucking thing wrong,

baby. We don't talk that much."

"You and I talk."

I stroked her hair. "Yeah, we do. But we're...different. We're epic. You and I. Legends will be written about us."

She giggled. A happy sound full of delight.

"Hector is going to start me on full-on physio tomorrow," she once again told me. I knew she was worried about how her body would handle it.

"Hector is careful. He'd never push you beyond your limits, always within."

She nodded. "I want to get better. But then I worry that this...*us*, will be over."

I kept my breath calm and my mind still. It wouldn't do to push her to believe in me, believe in us.

"Why don't we *worry* about that after you're feeling better?"

If I told her she wasn't going anywhere, that we were going to get married and live here or any other place she wanted, she'd run for the hills, metal femur or not.

"Okay," she whispered before falling into a deep sleep.



# Chapter 27

## SUNNY

**F**orest and Daisy's private gym was a far cry from what I was accustomed to. Instead of the pungent odor of sweat and rubber, a gentle fragrance of roses wafted through the air. The sleek and shiny equipment captured and reflected the warm, ambient lights overhead, making the entire room seem bathed in a golden hue. This wasn't the grungy, chalk-dusted gym I knew; it was an elegant battleground where I'd face one of my most formidable challenges: reclaiming control over my right leg.

Standing poised beside the specially arranged physio bed, Hector eyed me critically. His piercing dark gaze seemed to take in everything, every twitch, every uncertainty. "Ready, Sunny?"

My eyes flitted to my thigh. To anyone else, it appeared normal, but beneath the skin lay a skeleton of metal, not bone. Drawing a deep breath, I said, "As ready as I'll ever be."

With a nod, Hector began. "First, we'll concentrate on passive movements. Getting those muscles accustomed to

movement is essential, especially around the new metal infrastructure.”

Reaching for my right foot, Hector articulated my leg, slowly bending it at the knee. An icy sensation emanated from where the metal had replaced bone, spreading outwards causing the surrounding muscles to shout their discomfort.

“Steady,” Hector cautioned, noticing my distress. “Deep breaths, Sunny.”

Through gritted teeth, I retorted, “I’ve faced bullets, taken brutal kicks, and survived nasty falls. This? It’s just stretching.”

His chuckle seemed out of place in the tense room, but his eyes kept their sharpness. “Remember, this is a different battlefield. You’re not facing armed enemies but battling your body’s newfound limitations.”

As he pushed the stretch slightly deeper, a sharp jolt of pain surged through me, causing me to gasp involuntarily. Hector quickly eased off. “Did I push too hard?”

Biting back the sting, I shook my head. “I’ve endured worse.”

“Your resilience is your strength,” Hector commented, continuing the meticulous motions.

The session felt endless, with every muscle stretch, every gentle push acting as a duel. Hector played dual roles—the mentor guiding me and the coach challenging my thresholds.

After an exhaustive series of exercises, Hector finally let me sit up. “Today was just the beginning, Sunny. Tomorrow, we’ll introduce weight-bearing exercises.”

I grunted. “I can’t wait.”

Hector’s lips upturned into a smile. “That fierce spirit is exactly what I hoped for.”

I left the room to come out into the pool patio, limping slightly but with a fire reignited. Hector was right. This was a new battleground, and I was ready for the fight.

River was on a chaise lounge under an umbrella, reading. He raised his head and looked at me.

“How’s it going?”

I walked to him with excruciating difficulty. I held up my hand to stop him when he tried to get up to help me. I gingerly sat on the lounge next to him and rotated to stretch my leg in front of me and rest my back.

River helped me and shoved a pillow at the small of my back for extra support. He went to the patio pool bar and returned with a glass of something...probably one of those fortified waters that Hector made me drink to get my energy back.

He sat down on a chaise lounge next to me. “How about a swim? The pool is heated.”

He always knew, I thought. I knew I hated cold water and needed warm water to bathe in, no matter how warm it was. It came from washing in cold water or any water I could get my hands on during an op.



“I don’t have a swimsuit.”

“There’s no one here. You don’t need a swimsuit.”

“Where are Forest and Daisy?”

“They won’t be back until much later in the evening. Kai is with Daisy, and Hector is going shopping for dinner.”

I looked at the tempting pool and sighed. A swim would be nice. A soak would be nice. Floating without stressing my muscles would be nice.

The evening shadows slowly stretched across the shimmering surface of the heated pool, the Californian sun sinking beneath the horizon. The pool patio lights gave it a magical glow, an irresistible one. I took my clothes off as River suggested and slipped into the water. The warmth enveloped me, a welcome balm to my aching muscles after an excruciating physiotherapy session.

I gingerly kicked off from the pool edge, the buoyancy of the water relieving some of the weight from my healing injuries. Each stroke of my arms and push from my legs was deliberate, careful not to overstrain my right thigh. The metal rod felt alien, a constant reminder of that dreadful day eight weeks ago when a bullet had shattered more than just my bone.

A cold uncertainty settled in my heart despite the soothing warmth around me. I was a fighter, always had been, but this... this felt different. What if I never regained full mobility? What if my days as an independent operative were over?

And then there was River. Our history was complicated: a passionate past and a tumultuous breakup, followed by that intense, adrenaline-fueled rescue in Nigeria. I'd pulled him out of the clutches of death, both battered and bruised. Since then, we'd been recuperating, our bond growing stronger each day. But was it real? Or just a byproduct of trauma and proximity?

I halted mid-pool, floating and allowing the water to cradle me. I could hear the distant chirping of evening birds and the soft water lapping against the pool edges. Everything felt suspended then, my doubts, fears, and hopes hanging in delicate balance.

Taking a deep breath, I started swimming back, each stroke more robust and determined. I might not have all the answers now, but I would explore, challenge, and fight. Whether it was regaining my strength or navigating the complexities of my relationship with River, I was in it for the long haul. The evening might settle in, but it felt like a new dawn for me.

I stood at the shallow end, the buoyancy of the water helping me stand with ease.

"Forest, do you mind?" River's voice snapped me out of my reverie.

"Hey, naked woman in my pool."

My eyes opened, and I saw Forest standing by the pool with a big smile. "This is shit I dream about, and now it's happening."

I sank down to hide said nakedness.

“Forest cut that out.” His wife Daisy came out, a child in her arms. “Give her some privacy. I’m so sorry, Sunny.”

“*Naked woman in my pool,*” Forest repeated like he was a stuck recorder.

“I know, honey. Let’s go inside.”

“You know this never happens, right? Especially when the tits are nice. Or any tits at all” Forest let his wife drag him away.

I stared at River, humor bubbling out of me. This was the first time I was meeting River’s brother face to face.

“He’s a Judge?” The corner of my lips twitched.

River grinned. “Yeah. But he’s married now, so he gets excited when he sees non-Daisy boobs.”

I shook my head, laughing. “I can’t believe it. I met your brother for the first time, and he saw me naked.”

River came up to the edge of the pool with a towel. “Just your boobs, baby. Imagine if he saw your pussy? He’d still be here, probably having a heart attack.”



# Chapter 28

## RIVER

“My husband is not a lecherous imbecile,” Daisy announced as we sat for dinner.

Hector had been kind enough to make a vegetarian meal with Sunny in mind. He’d cooked a mushroom lasagna with a spinach salad. The man was focused on getting more iron and protein into Sunny.

“All evidence to the contrary,” I retorted, and my brother threw the cork of the red Bordeaux he’d opened for dinner.

“It’s not every day I see a naked woman in my pool,” Forest protested.

“All evidence to the contrary,” Hector mumbled. “I’m pretty certain Miss Daisy has been skinny dipping in that pool occasionally.”

“I see her naked all the time. These were new boobs.”

“Good god, Hector, have you been seeing *my* boobs?” Daisy shook her head, but her eyes were dancing with laughter.

Hector snorted. “Miss Daisy, I’d never.”

“I am flattered,” Sunny offered. “After you’ve been poked with bullets, it’s nice that someone thinks I look good naked.”

“Sunshine, I think you’re gorgeous naked and clothed.” I put my hand on hers. *This* was what I wanted. *This* moment when she was mine with my family, the one that mattered. I wanted this forever.

I caught Forest looking at me, his expression saying, “*Yeah, she’s good for you. I like her. And her boobs.*” Lecherous pig!

After dinner, Hector excused himself, and with Kai sleeping in his room, we all went back to the pool patio, the moon shining bright, lighting our little haven in Los Angeles.

This was the first time we were with other people socially. I wasn’t sure how I’d feel, and I worried needlessly that Sunny would be uncomfortable. She fit in instantly. Daisy embraced everyone and was impossible to resist.

“Mom came by,” I told Forest.

Daisy groaned. “God, she came here the other day. She wanted to *play* with Kai. I said, ‘Go ahead, woman,’ and bless my child, he spit up on her Celine dress. I’m hoping she won’t come back.”

Forest put his arm around his wife and kissed her on her mouth. “I’m sorry, DeeDee.”

“No. It’s fine. I don’t trust her and don’t want her around me and mine. She looks at Kai, and she sees he’s a quarter Creole, not that he’s her grandchild.” Daisy hugged her husband.

“Sunny is from the wrong side of the tracks,” I commented.

Forest laughed out loud. “Anyone in your family indicted for bribery of a state official, Sunny?”

She just smiled.

“Exactly.” Forest took a deep breath. “Riv, I need to talk to you about something.”

“Okay?” I was instantly serious.

“I need your help. I’ve put together an exploratory committee for this Governor business, and I hope you’ll be part of it. As a journalist, your help will be invaluable.”

He said it casually, like he’d just thought about it, but I knew my brother. He wanted me to have something to look forward to because he knew I was at a crossroads, unable to see which path to take.

“Oh, that would be wonderful,” Daisy chirped and pouted when I glared at her. “Fine, we want you to have something to do so you don’t go out of your mind.”

“I’m not going out of my mind.” I held my empty glass up to Forest, who filled it with red wine and then topped off Sunny’s glass. “I’m healing...with Sunny.”

She put her hand on mine, and I felt the warmth of it. I was the one who always touched first. I was the one who started intimacy. The fact that she’d taken the step was...well, heart fucking warming.

“You aren’t getting bored, River?” Daisy wondered

“Am I? I guess I don’t see your naked boobs enough,” I joked.

“That’s what I’m talking about. More naked boobies,” Forest joined in.

“Is that part of your platform as Governor of California?” I asked. “And...I’m happy to consult, but it’s not my wheelhouse, Forest. You’d be better off with a more pundit type. But...have you decided you’re doing this?”

Forest drank some wine and shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s an invasion of our privacy. I hate the fucking media...and it’s a big fucking responsibility.”

“Why did you want to become a Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals Judge?” Sunny asked. She’d been quiet for most of the evening, so when she spoke, we all listened.

Forest set his glass down on the side table next to him. “I wanted to push a liberal agenda for the court and the country. I want more environmentally friendly policies. I want to protect a woman’s right to choose. I want to make sure we take care of the poor and elderly. I want to elevate California by working on homelessness and housing. I...I’m giving you my Governor’s stump speech.”

Sunny smiled. “Looks like you want to do this.” He took a deep breath. “I’m afraid I’ll lose my way of life and my family when I let the world walk all over our privacy.”

“Hey, they already did that,” Daisy quipped. “I’ll try to get a filter. Esme said she’ll train me, so I don’t run my mouth off.



*And* I do like the idea of being the first lady of California.”

“You’d make a lovely First Lady,” Forest assured her. “And you don’t need a fucking filter. Speak your mind, DeeDee; the world needs to hear the truth.”

I watched Sunny as she enjoyed the banter between my brother and Daisy. As couples went these two were oil and fire but it worked for them. They were miserable apart and so happy together that it gave me a toothache to see them *canoodle*.

“Sunny, what are your plans when you’re well?” Forest asked.

I wanted to protect Sunny from that question because I knew it was eating at her; but then again, she could take care of herself, and she wouldn’t appreciate me playing alpha male.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t know if my body will be a hundred percent after...” she waved a hand at her leg, “all the physio. And if it’s not a hundred percent, I can’t go back to the field. I would be a danger to myself and my team if I did. I know nothing else...so...” She looked at me desperately.

“Both of us are working on our future plans.” I gave Forest a look that told him not to pursue this further.

Forest seemed to not care about my look and continued. “You know, Sunny, you have a skill set many companies would appreciate. My cousin, Declan runs Knight Technologies, a security company. I’m certain they’ll want your expertise.”

I sighed. “Forest, back off.” Subtlety wasn’t working with my brother.

“I’m not trying to push her, Riv. I know what it’s like to come back from an injury. I had colleagues in the LAPD who had to find a way. I’m just giving her options.” He then turned to Sunny and smiled his pretty-boy, trust-me-I’m-harmless smile, “Just think of this as a possibility. You saved my brother’s life; if you were the type I could pay, I’d set you up for life. But—”

“I like money,” Sunny interrupted him, her eyes shrewd. “Why do you think I won’t allow you to set me up for life?” Forest grinned. “Because you turned my mother down when she showed up with a blank cheque and *then* you needed the resources thanks to my ass of a brother. *And* I know River would not let you work a day in your life if you didn’t want to. The fact that he’s not a put ring on it—” “Whoa!” It was my time to interrupt him.

Daisy punched him on the shoulder. “Stop it, Forest.” “What?” He asked absently, rubbing his arm where her fist had connected. “He’s in love with her. I know my brother.”

Daisy shook her head. “You’re unbelievable, Forest. Show some fucking subtlety. Sunny, I’m so sorry for my husband.”

I thought Sunny would be upset, but she was amused.

“I appreciate you, Forest. I will think about your offer to talk to your cousin. I may have to. Regarding the Knight money... you’re right, I don’t give a damn.” She looked at me with sincere eyes. “I never did.”

“I know, Sunshine.”

“See.” Forest kissed Daisy on her mouth. “I did good.”

“I hope this doesn’t mean you won’t return, Sunny. Next time I’ll make sure he doesn’t see you naked, tell you how to live your life; or propose on behalf of his brother.” Daisy put her head on Forest’s shoulder. “You know, for a Judge who knows how to weigh his words, you’re...socially...fucked up, dude.”

On our drive back, I asked Sunny if she was okay with what Forest had talked about.

“I like him,” she surprised me by saying. “He’s nothing like your mother. I’d expected Daisy to be a little like her even though I knew she wouldn’t, because your mom doesn’t like her either. But she’s...something else.”

“My mother and Daisy are light years apart.”

She laughed. She was happy. I was glad that she liked my brother and his wife. They were the family I was closest to, besides Hector. I also had a good relationship with our cousin Declan Knight; and I’d gotten to know his wife, Esme, though not too well. I knew that Esme and Forest had a close connection, and he was madly in love with Esme’s daughter, Mireya.

We were driving with the top down. Since Forest’s 1963 Chevrolet Corvette Stingray Convertible sat in his garage at the beach house, I’d commandeered it. I was going to get a car

and driver for Sunny, what with her thigh, but she'd been vehement in her protest.

“Are you kidding me? I wanna ride in that. Hell, I want to drive it.”

I'd told her she could drive when she could walk without a crutch for over five minutes. She agreed to those terms.

“I'm anxious about the future,” she said almost absently. “But you're making it easy for me not to worry too much. Being here with you, having Hector help me...all this is...,” she turned to look at me; her voice was filled with emotion, “You're my guardian angel, I feel. Without you, I don't know how all this would have worked out. Thank you.”

I put a hand on her thigh. “You never ever have to thank me for taking care of you. I love you, Sunny. I'd do anything and everything for you.”

“I wish you'd stop saying that,” she said bleakly. “I feel guilty.”

“Baby, I'm not saying this to make you feel obligated or to hear you say it back. I just want you to know that between us, there's no need for apologies or gratitude. Just love and affection.”

She took a deep breath and put her hand on mine which rested on her thigh. “I need time. And...I don't know if time will bring me to where you want me to be.”

“You're exactly where you need to be, and I'll never pressure you for more,” I assured her. “We're a team,

Sunshine. We're going to get healthy, you and me, both mentally and physically; and then we'll see how to move forward. For now, you focus on physiotherapy, and I'll focus on therapy."

She squeezed my hand, laid her head back on the leather seat and closed her eyes. She had a smile on her face, and it made me feel like a rock star to see it.



# Chapter 29

## SUNNY

**T**he cool breeze of Venice Beach hit us as we approached River's front door. The salty tang of the sea mixed with the gentle scent of night-blooming flowers. A few years ago, this would've felt like a night in paradise—my man, the one who got away, and me. But things were different now. I was not the girl I used to be. Eighteen was a very long time ago.

“I've been resenting an intrusion from anyone, but I thought it was a good evening,” River said as he looked for the house keys in his jean's pockets.

I wrapped my arms around my midsection. “Me too. But... I'm ready to get right back into our cocoon.”

“Me too, Sunshine.” He leaned and kissed me.

There was a sharp sound from somewhere and he immediately pulled away, looking around in panic.

His hand shook slightly as he inserted the key into the lock. I could see the tension in the taut lines of his back, in the way he held his shoulders rigid.

Just as he was about to turn the key, another loud sound echoed through the night—the unmistakable sound of a bottle shattering. To anyone else, it might have been a minor disturbance, but to River, it sounded like something much more ominous.

His body went rigid, eyes widening. He was no longer at his home in Venice Beach; he was back in that terrifying place where every sound could mean danger. I could almost see the images flashing through his mind: the cold, hard ground, the hostile faces, the feel of cold metal cuffs on his wrists.

“Sunny!” he gasped, his eyes darting around, searching for some invisible threat. His fingers gripped my arm with a strength that was almost painful.

I pressed my hand to his face, forcing him to look at me. “River, it’s okay,” I whispered, trying to keep my voice steady even though the sting from my wound reminded me of our own recent ordeal. “We’re home. You’re safe.”

His frantic breathing eased slowly, his tense muscles gradually relaxed. “I... I thought it was...”

“I know,” I murmured, pulling him close. The rugged smell of him, mixed with the lingering traces of fear-sweat, was oddly comforting. “But you’re here now. With me.”

His eyes, so full of torment just moments ago, now softened with a hint of gratitude. “I don’t know what I would do without you, Sunny.”



Holding him, feeling the steady thump of his heartbeat against mine, I wondered what I'd do without him.

I opened the door and between me limping; and he heaving to catch his breath, we managed to get inside the house.

I took him straight to bed—our bed, the one we were sharing like it was the most normal thing to do. We got into bed naked, his body still shivering, and he hugged me close.

“It was the strangest thing,” he said, almost breathless.

I stroked his hair, my eyes filled with tears. I knew PTSD, understood it very well. I could do nothing more for him than hold him, keep him grounded in reality.

“I know, baby.”

He buried his face in my neck, and I felt the moisture of his tears. How was I supposed to guard my heart from this man? This man was vulnerable, open, and let me see deep within him.

“I couldn't see the house. I was back in that cold, damp room in Nigeria. I could see the sneering faces of those guys who beat me; felt the chilling touch of chains. I could hear the fucking rats, Sunny.”

I kissed the parts of his face I could reach. I knew how it felt to be back in hell (like he'd just been) trapped, the weight of despair pressing down.

He held on to me like I was a raft in stormy seas. “A part of me knew I was here with you. But the distance between where

I stood and reality was vast. I felt disconnected, like I was hovering outside my body, witnessing my fear.”

His naked legs tangled with mine. “I know, baby. You’re with me now. We’re in our cocoon.”

He pulled away a little so he could see my face. “You’re so beautiful. You’re so...everything. Don’t leave me, Sunshine.”

My eyes clouded. He couldn’t ask this of me. He just couldn’t. I was emotionally as devastated as he was. My body, which I used to control with such ease, didn’t listen to me anymore. I felt helpless all the time and not just when I was triggered.

I could barely take care of myself; how could I take care of him? But I would. I knew that. Nothing had changed. Not the decade and a half. River could ask me for anything, and I’d give it to him.

“You’re going to be alright, baby. I promise.”

He pulled me into him and probed my mouth with his tongue. “Kiss me, Sunshine. Let me taste some happiness.”

I let him kiss me, though I wasn’t sure I could provide *anyone* with joy. It was hard to explain what was happening to me. After a decade and a half of seeing the worst the world had to offer—I had gotten used to that numbness inside, feeling nothing, just following orders. But now...River had stimulated something within me, my nerve-endings were alive again and I was feeling everything like painful pricks of a sleeping limb coming awake.

“Sunny,” he sounded desperate as his hands squeezed my flesh, wherever they touched. He pushed me onto my back and looked at me, his eyes boring into mine. And then he was inside me. “Every time I’m inside you, I feel like I’m home.”

He moved within me, rasping my flesh that was not sufficiently wet., But, I didn’t care. I wanted it like this, wanted to feel his impatience and let it fuel my desire.

“I can’t ever let you go,” he cried out as he slammed into me.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, lifting myself to receive him. My right thigh protested. I ignored it. “River,” I whimpered.

“It’s always been like this, hasn’t it? I can’t resist you. I don’t want to.”

“You don’t have to.” The words spilled out of me despite my best intentions of keeping my head and heart safe.

“You’re so tight. You’re so mine.”

He spilled into me at the same time I found my release.

“I love you, Sunshine. I love you so much.”

I fell asleep to his whispered words, feeling secure, at least for a moment.

He was still sleeping when I woke up for my morning physiotherapy session with Hector. The early morning sun bathed Venice Beach in soft hues of orange and pink. Waves rolled gently onto the shore, their rhythmic motion a gentle

counterpoint to the distant hum of the waking city. As we warmed up, the sand cool under our feet, I stole a glance at Hector. His toned body moved with the precision and discipline of a soldier, a reminder of his own past in the military.

Taking a deep breath, I ventured, “River’s been struggling. Last night, just the sound of a breaking bottle sent him spiraling.”

Hector paused, his face tightening momentarily, as if my words had triggered some deep-seated memory. “PTSD,” he murmured, his voice heavy with understanding. “It’s a beast, Miss Sunny. Especially when the triggers are everywhere.”

My heart was heavy. “How do I help him?” *Can I help him?*

He resumed his stretches, and I followed his movements. “First,” he began, “understand that what he’s going through isn’t a choice. Those flashbacks, the dissociation, they’re his brain’s way of coping with overwhelming trauma.”

I knew about flashbacks. I experienced plenty of my own. “But how do I bring him back when he’s lost in those moments? Honestly, sometimes I feel like the blind leading the blind. I’m not a hundred percent and neither is he.”

Hector looked at me, his eyes compassionate yet firm. “Ground him. Use his senses. Talk to him, touch him, let him feel you. Remind him of the present. The scent of the sea, the feel of the sand beneath his feet. Anything that pulls him back to the now.”

A tear slipped down my face as he continued, “And be patient. Healing isn’t linear. You know this. There’ll be good days and bad ones. Your compassion can be his anchor.”

We began to walk, the weight of our conversation making each step feel heavy. My thigh was improving every day and now I could walk longer and longer without a cane. “Hector,” I whispered between breaths, “I don’t know if I’m the right person to help him.”

“Why do you feel that?” he asked. “You’ve been through worse; you understand how he feels.”

I felt self-conscious for an instant, but I let it go. I needed to speak to someone, and Hector had proven to be understanding and knowledgeable. “He says he’s in love with me.”

“You sound like you don’t believe him.”

I stood to stretch my right thigh as it tightened. Hector kneeled in front of me and helped me loosen the knots.

“I don’t,” I admitted. “I think his love is...gratitude. I saved his life. Almost died to do so. And he feels guilty about the past. But that was fifteen years ago.”

“Was it?”

“Yes.”

“Or was it yesterday, a minute ago?” Hector wondered. “You don’t trust him. That man you knew...that boy has grown up. If you didn’t know Master River when he was twenty-one and...well, single-minded about his own sense of right and wrong, what would you say about the man you know now?”

“That he deserves better than me.” I took a deep breath and stood up straight. “I’m damaged goods. I’ve spent so many years trying to feel nothing so I can get through my day...I don’t know if I can feel the way he wants me to.”

“War is painful,” Hector agreed as he rose. Then he did something unexpected. He gave me a paternal kiss on the forehead. “You’re healing as well. I think, together, Miss Sunny, you both can and will heal better and faster.”

“I don’t know if I’ll stay with him when this is over. He keeps saying, *never leave me*. What the hell does that mean?”

Hector narrowed his gaze at me. “Don’t bullshit me, Miss Sunny. You know what he means.”

“Marriage? Children? Is he nuts? I’m not that person anymore. I was, fifteen years ago but River killed it. He was my first lover and I’ve never been in love since. I have never been in a relationship since...except maybe with my teammates and my brother and his kids. That’s been my circle of people.” I halted, the weight of sadness anchoring my steps.

Hector put an arm on my shoulder. “You don’t have to have all the answers today. And if Master River pushes you too hard, tell him you need time.”

“Like he’ll listen.”

Hector grinned. “Master River has always pursued what he wants with a focus that is enviable. He wants you. I understand it can be overwhelming.”

“You have no idea.”



# Chapter 30

## RIVER

**M**y PTSD was not getting better nor was it getting worse. I never knew when I'd freeze and when my mind would wander back. The nightmares had almost ceased for both Sunny and me. We agreed that sleeping together was healing.

My editor was making *very* loud noises about getting me to send her the photos and videos from Nigeria that I'd uploaded to the cloud. She was particularly interested in the mock video interview I did with Aminu Dahiru, the now deceased leader of the Hausa Brigade. The insurgent group had gone through an internal civil war and a new leader had emerged, Ibrahim Nasiru, known as Desert Viper. Nasiru had been responsible for some of the most gruesome attacks in various Nigerian military strongholds.

"Gabby, I haven't even gone through the files," I protested when she finally got me on the phone. I felt guilty after missing twenty calls in as many days so picked up the next time the phone flashed her name.



Gabby Wong, a legend at *The New York Times* and winner of two Pulitzer awards was non-nonsense with all her staff, but had a soft spot for me. Since I'd been kidnapped, she was handling me with kid gloves. But three months had passed now, and she was running out of patience.

“Either send me everything you have or edit the fuckers yourself. I'm putting you on deadline, Knight.”

I sighed. “I...can't go through the files right now, Gabby. And you know I can't just send them to you as they are.”

“What do you mean you can't go through the files? Something wrong with your eyes?” she demanded sarcastically.

*Fuck it!* “I have PTSD. I get triggered and I don't even like the idea of looking at any of that footage...I'm not ready.”

There was silence on the other end. “Then send me the files. I'll go through them. You trust me, don't you?”

“Yeah, I trust you...just give me time.” I was loath to give my work to anyone to finish.

Gabby laughed. “I'm assuming you wouldn't be interested in working up a profile on Nasiru?”

“Hell no,” I immediately responded. I would not go back to the fucking Nigerian, or any other, jungle, not for a while.

“Might be best,” she continued. “There is a rumor that he put a hit out on the soldiers who rescued you.”

My blood froze. “What?”

“Something about the fighter who killed Bloodhawk.”

*Sunny!*

“Where did you hear this rumor?” I felt a headache coming as I tried to wrap my head around this news. If there was a hit on Sunny, we were exposed in a million ways right now.

“Usual channels.” She didn’t seem interested in pursuing the topic. She didn’t know about Sunny. “Feel better, Knight.”

I hung up and stared at my phone for a moment and immediately called Forest. He didn’t pick up the phone and according to his judiciary secretary he was in court all day.

I watched Sunny and Hector on the beach from the living room and wanted to ask them to come back inside where it was safe. But was it? I had to tell her. I had to keep her safe.

I called my contact in the CIA, a friend and now relative who usually picked up the phone when I called. “What?” Dominic Delacour, Daisy’s brother demanded in a sleepy voice.

“Dom, it’s River.”

“I know. Why do you think I answered the call? Daisy okay?” Concern displacing sleep.

“Sorry. Yeah, everyone is fine. Kai is good. Forest is still alive.” I tried to joke.

“Fuck. It’s the middle of the night here and I...what’s up? How are you? I heard about the Hausa Brigade. Good work

getting rid of Bloodhawk.” I heard the rustle of sheets. A female moan came from somewhere.

“My editor said that Ibrahim Nasiru is the new leader of the Hausa Brigade and has put a hit on the team that killed Aminu Dahiru.”

I heard the click of a lighter. “That’s pretty standard.”

“The soldier who killed Dahiru is...a friend.”

“You’re friends with Sunny French?” he asked, and I heard a woman swear on the other end of the phone, “You can’t smoke in my bed, Dom.”

“Women,” Dom muttered as I heard him get out of bed and walk. “How do you know Sunny?”

“She saved my life,” I said sarcastically. “How serious is this threat?”

He paused, probably to take a puff or two. “The usual serious. She should watch her six, probably stay in a Steel Rain base. Do you know where she is?”

Sunny and Hector walked into the living room then. “In Forest’s beach house in Venice with me.”

There was another long pause. “*So*, you guys are *those kinds of friends*? Interesting.”

“Dom, is she in danger?”

Sunny stopped to look at me when she heard my words.

“Yeah, she’s in danger. They’ll have to kill someone to avenge the death of their beloved leader.”

“Fuck. What should we do?”

“Get her the fuck out of Venice Fucking Beach and somewhere with security. Steel Rain is experienced with this sort of thing. They’ll take care of things.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. If not...what time is it there?”

I told him.

“Let me call some people and get back to you on threat level.” Another feminine moan came from his end. “Dom, come back to bed baby.” This voice differed from the previous one.

“How many women are there with you? Wherever you are?”

He chuckled. “Now, that would be telling, wouldn’t it. Got to go, Riv. Say hi to sis.”

He hung up on me and Sunny waited for me to explain.

“I spoke to my editor, and she mentioned that there’s a hit on you and your team for killing Dahiru.”

She nodded.

“What?”

“Yeah. Steel called me and let me know. It’s what they do.”

Hector and I both stared at Sunny like she’d lost her mind. “Miss Sunny, I’d take a threat like that seriously. I’m certain that being out in the open is not wise if someone is after killing you.”

Sunny sat down on the couch next to me. Her thigh was bothering her as it did after physio. She did mild physio on the beach three times a week and more intense therapy in Daisy and Forest's gym three times a week. She was getting better. I could see it in the way she moved. But as she was getting better, she was becoming sadder, and I couldn't understand what was bothering her.

"This isn't the first time I've been threatened." She leaned back and winced a little as she stretched her right leg to rest on my thigh. "Who were you talking to?"

I immediately undid her shoe laces. I removed her socks and massaged her foot. It elicited a small groan from her.

"Dom...Dominic Delacour. He's Daisy's brother and... I think works for the CIA."

"No, he doesn't," Sunny protested.

"I said I *think* he works for the CIA. We actually don't know who he works for and what he does. Do you?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Come on, spill."

"You don't have that kind of security clearance."

"I have *no* security clearance," I remarked.

"Exactly. What did Dom tell you?"

"That you should be in a safe house."

Sunny snorted. "The problem with these government types is that they're risk averse—afraid of their own shadows."

I looked at Hector and he shrugged in that prim British way of his. “Miss Sunny, maybe it would be better to move to a more secure location. This house is...well, very open.”

“We hardly ever lock the door,” Sunny smiled as she spoke. She liked not worrying about locking doors, about being free. I didn’t know what her apartment in Providence was like, but I knew she liked the space here, the ocean view, the expanse in front of her. “And if we have to worry about someone, let’s worry about River.”

Hector looked at me with concern and I knew Sunny had talked to him about my PTSD incident from the previous evening. “I’m fine,” I told him. “And I’m seeing Dr. Adams. I’m working on it and, Sunny, that was a cheap fucking shot, diverting Hector’s attention onto me.”

She sighed and leaned back as I massaged her feet. Didn’t she see how comfortable she was with me? How intimate this was?

“I’m glad you’re not taking your triggers lightly, Master River. Miss Sunny, you need to find other accommodations... safer ones.” He raised a hand when we both got ready to protest, “Master River and I will accompany you.”

Sunny rolled her eyes. “Can we stop overreacting? Until someone actually tries to kill me I’m going nowhere. I will not let some ridiculous insurgents half way across the world control my life.”

“I don’t know how I feel about you actually getting hurt before we get you to safety.” I felt my temper rise.

She tried to pull her foot away, but I didn't let her. Instead, I raised her other foot onto my lap and removed her shoes and socks. She got comfortable again, her eyes closed and let me handle her feet.

"I'm not going anywhere," she announced. "Don't pressure me. And if push comes to shove, Steel Rain has a few safe houses that they have offered."

"Sunny—," I began.

She groaned. "Let it go."

"Where is the safe house?" Hector sat down across from us in an armchair. His gaunt face was serious.

"Steel Rain told me that if there was a need..." she trailed away.

"For god's sake, Sunny, it's like pulling teeth with you," I yelled. "Can you just tell us what the fuck Steel Rain said to you?"

She snapped her eyes open. "There's nothing to say. He suggested a place in Utah, which is a ski-in, ski-out lodge where he thought I could get better before going back into rotation. It's going to be colder than a witch's tit there. No one is worried that the Hausa Brigade is going to show up in California to try to kill me. Okay?" I decided not to aggravate her further and talk to Dom instead. He'd be more direct and less prickly.

Sunny got up suddenly and walked away, saying she needed a shower.

“I don’t like this one bit, Master River.”

“You and me both! If Dom tells me the danger is real, Sunny is going to a safe house, whether or not she likes it.”

Hector rose. “Let me know how I can help. I need to get back. Miss Daisy has a meeting, and it’s time for Kai’s lunch.”

I went into the bathroom and found Sunny in the bathtub. She now used the jacuzzi nearly every day to soothe her aching muscles as they became used to activity.

I sat on the edge of the bathtub and stroked her hair. She nuzzled her head against my hand.

“Have you been threatened before?” I asked.

She stiffened but didn’t pull away. “The team has a few times.”

“And...”

“And nothing.” She moved her head away and turned to look at me with angry eyes. “I’m trying to relax here. Either join me and relax *with* me or *go away*.”

We both were using sex as a panacea, to not deal with our problems, current, and future.

I undressed and got into the bathtub with her. I slid behind her as I always did so she could lean against my chest, her lovely ass nestled against my now straining erection. No matter what and where we were, she aroused me. I felt like a teenager when I was with her, always ready to go. It was



exhilarating and exciting. It was also temporary, considering Sunny refused to commit to anything more than now.

“I don’t want to hide,” she told me softly. “I hate the idea that *they* can control my life.”

“You didn’t tell me if anyone was threatened at Steel Rain and got hurt.”

“Come on, River, this is what we do. And, yes, there are threats and most of the time the bad guys don’t know our identities.”

“But they do this time?”

“Maybe.”

“How about the rest of the team?”

She sighed and rubbed herself against me. “Are you trying to distract me, Sunshine?” I held her hips to still her.

“Yes. Is it working?” she asked mischievously.

“Yes and no. I’m aroused. I want you. I also want you safe. Where is the rest of the team, Sunny?”

She turned her face. “Kiss me.”

I brushed my lips against hers. “Sunny?”

“Make love to me.”

“I will,” I said firmly. “But, first, answer my question.”

“They were somewhere in South America, the last I spoke with them,” she evaded.

“Sunny?”

She sighed. “I don’t know. Phantom...I think it is right now somewhere in East Asia. Chaos is in New Mexico for a family thing. Glitch is with Phantom. Rebound...I think he’s in Ukraine.”

“And none of them are in safehouses?”

“No.”

“So, I shouldn’t take this seriously?”

“No, you shouldn’t,” she whined. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I nuzzled her hair with my chin. She would not tell me and if I pressured her, she would pull away. I turned her around so she could straddle me. Her thighs and knees could now carry her weight. I impaled her on me, and she moaned.

“When you fill me it’s...” she whispered.

“It’s like coming home,” I finished for her.

“Yes.”

I helped her ride me and slowly, slowly because we had all the time in the world, we made love and drove the demons away.



# Chapter 31

## SUNNY

**C**haos was somewhere in the mountains in New Mexico when he answered my call.

“No, I’m not in a fucking safe house. I’m in my fucking cabin,” he said in shaman voice. “They can fucking go fuck themselves.”

“That’s a whole lot of fucking.” My team understood. None of us wanted our lives to be altered more than they already were. I understood River’s fears, but we were soldiers, and this was *the* life.

“Speaking of *fucking*, what’s up with you and Knight?”

“We’re resting and recuperating,” I sighed.

“The hit is on *you*, Phoenix, not Steel Rain, not the team. You know that, right?” Chaos said softly. “They may come after you.”

“Let them. They did in the past.” I’d dealt with threats like this before; I’d do it again.

“You were a hundred percent then. You’re not now. Getting old sucks when you get shot.”

I laughed. “I’m not as old as you.” Chaos was three months older than me, and I always lorded it on him.

“It’s only for a short time until the threat is neutralized. Steel Rain is working it and maybe you should take him up on his offer of a safe house. Or come here to my cabin. No one will bother you here, maybe except a bear or two and some mountain lions.”

All of us needed a place where we could go after an op to bring the temperature down and find peace. I did that with my brother and his kids in Providence. Chaos went to his cabin in the mountains. Phantom went to New York city and partied. Rebound went to his family ranch in Texas and rustled cattle. Glitch had a place in the Keys where he went light’s out.

“River is worried. A part of me wants to go away, just to be alone, start living without him but another part...”

I looked around the beach as I sat on the beautiful patio where I had spent a good part of my time in the past three months, letting the ocean air and the sea views heal me. I didn’t want to give any of this up. I didn’t want to leave River. I didn’t want to lose him...not yet.

“How are Phantom and Glitch?” I changed the topic.

“They’re on an op in East Asia and relatively safe...at least from the Hausa Brigade.” I thought about the various operations that had been on the docket before I was put out of

commission. “Abu Sayyaf?” I asked. The Abu Sayyaf Group, ASG was a violent Islamic separatist group in the southern Philippines and Steel Rain had tangled with them unsuccessfully in the past.

“Yeah,” Chaos confirmed.

“And you’re good?”

“Fantastic. I spend my day hiking, fishing, and soon once it snows, I’m looking forward to skiing.”

“How long are you planning to stay there?” I heard a long sigh. “For a while. I’m taking a break.”

I was shocked to hear that. “From Steel Rain?”

“Yeah,” he acknowledged. “I’m tired, Sunny.”

“Niyol?” I used his name as he just did mine. “Are you *really* okay?”

“Probably as okay as you are. There is a Navajo saying, *coyote is always out there waiting, and coyote is always hungry*. Our jobs are like that and now, I need peace. I look up at the skies here, Sunny and I see stars, the Milky Way and it’s beautiful.” His voice had dropped several notches and touched my heart.

“*Before me peaceful, behind me peaceful, under me peaceful, over me peaceful, all around me peaceful.*” This was a Navajo saying as well that Chaos had told me once as his goal.

“Yeah,” he breathed. “Stay safe, Phoenix.”

I felt melancholy after the phone call. I wanted to get better and be on an op like Phantom and Glitch. Or did I want what Chaos had? I didn't know.

I was still contemplating that when a black car stopped in front of the house. I immediately went on alert, but I didn't have a weapon or...I almost laughed at myself. Here I was in a pair of yoga pants and a sweatshirt, a crutch leaning against the wicker sofa, and I was ready to go to battle.

I needn't have worried, three women poured out of the Escalade. Daisy and two women I didn't recognize. One was a tall blonde with hair shorter than mine used to be. Now my blonde hair was longer, hanging below my chin, absolutely *not* styled. The other was a tiny brunette who looked like a fairy.

Daisy waved to me and came around the wraparound patio with her companions. "Sunny," she cried out and leaned down to give me an unexpected hug.

"Ah...River is not at home," I blurted out.

"I know. Why do you think we have descended?" she winked at me and introduced me to Raya Silva, the chief technology officer for a software company and Esme Knight, their cousin Declan's wife.

"We thought it was time you had some girl time," Daisy announced and sat down next to me. "And I needed a break from Forest who's at home today with people from the democratic party. Politics and me...we're not friends."

“You’ll be fine.” Esme directed the driver of the car to place a picnic basket on the big wooden coffee table. “Thank you so much.”

The three women differed greatly in appearance and personality. Daisy, the gorgeous redhead was bold and bright in a figure-hugging red sheath and high beige heels. Raya was the tall cool blonde who wore jeans, military-style boots, and a leather jacket. Esme wore a pair of jeans, a peasant top, and a denim jacket to ward off the October chill with ballet flats.

“We brought food and wine.” Raya settled across from me.

I had fought against the most vicious fighters in the world. I had been interrogated by the Iranian military. I had been shot several times. These women overwhelmed me. I had never had many female friends after Columbia. Once I was in the military—I had fellow soldiers; then I had colleagues and now I had teammates...battle buddies.

Esme was the wine aficionado and had brought *excellent* bottles of wine. I would not be able to tell the difference. There was champagne for Raya who only drank that; a white burgundy for Daisy who was still nursing Kai and needed something low in alcohol and only one glass at that; and a red burgundy for Esme and me.

“I know you’re on painkillers, but Hector said a couple of glasses of wine should be okay.” She poured me a glass of wine. “And since you’re a vegetarian, Calliope whipped up some goodies for you...and yes, Raya, we have something



carnivorous for you as well.”“I’m exclusively *not* vegetarian.”  
Raya winked at me.

I didn’t know these women and wasn’t sure what was expected of me. But they didn’t seem to mind that I was quiet and underdressed.

Once we’d all soaked in some food and wine, Daisy asked me casually, “I’m curious. How is River in bed? I’ve always thought he’d be the silent *beast*. I mean Forest talks so much...but River is the quiet type.”

“I know,” Raya added. “Strong and silent.”

Esme shook her head. “I think sex is private.”

“Considering that once Maria and Mark both saw Dec give you an orgasm in the living room, Esme, I’m not sure he got the memo on the privacy part,” Daisy mocked her.

I grinned. “He’s the strong but not too silent kind.” *If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.*

“You know if Vega was here she’d yell at us for talking about men,” Raya mentioned and then explained, “Carolina Vega is one of our good friends and works for Knight Tech. She’s a lawyer.”

“Too bad Maria couldn’t make it,” Esme murmured, and I raised an eyebrow. Who were all these people? “Maria is a close friend. She’s with her fiancé in Golden Valley.”

“Golden Valley?” I asked.

“It’s a farm—”

“I know...it’s a very big farm.” I remembered reading about Golden Valley being one of the largest farms in California. I think I was their customer as they were an exclusively organic producer.

“Yep. She’s engaged to Alejandro Santos, the CEO of Golden Valley,” Daisy stated. “What we’re trying to say is, Sunny, that we’d like to bring you into the fold...our little group of men and women.”

My answer, if I had said it out aloud would have been, *I don’t do groups*, but Esme stepped in. “I know it’s a lot and Daisy is a handful, but I promise we’re fun. We drink and talk about our lives. We also support each other. You’re going through a difficult time,” she glanced at my crutch, “and we want you to feel that you have other people to support you, not just River and Hector.”

Understanding dawned. Hector had probably reached out to Daisy. It was the sweetest thing anyone had done for me. It was kind and compassionate. A little forced, yes, but they weren’t pretending that they were here by chance.

“May I have one more of those mushroom canapes?” I asked as a peace offering.

Esme flushed and held out the platter of canapes. I took one and popped it into my mouth.

“Calliope sends food for us, please tell her we love everything she cooks,” I told Esme.

“How’s the thigh?” Raya asked. “We hear you have a metal femur?”

“How does that feel?” Daisy wanted to know.

I thought about it and my hand went to my thigh where the scar was puffed up but not pink any longer. “There is pain and discomfort, but I’m told it passes. It’s the strangest thing, but I *know* that it’s not my femur...that it’s a foreign object. But that passes as well, I hear. The hardest part is the stiffness...terrible when I first wake up. But Hector and I usually do physiotherapy in the mornings, so it keeps getting better.”

“How long before you’re...I don’t know, back to normal? Or is that even going to happen?” Raya filled her glass with champagne, her feet up on the railing of the patio.

They were not coddling me. They were not pitying me. They were matter of fact and I appreciated it. I liked these women. “I think in another three to four months I’ll be able to walk without a limp, and I’ll be able to work out. Then in another eight-nine months I should be back to normal—whatever that means.”

Esme was all compassion. “That’s a long recovery time. I’m so sorry. That sucks.”

“Esme knows all about broken bones.” Raya patted her friend’s shoulder.

I looked at Esme and she looked uncomfortable. “Ah...”

“Her father used to knock her around,” Daisy interjected with some heat. “But he’s in prison now and we’re hoping he’s

getting knocked around by someone called Big Willy.”

Esme laughed softly. “I don’t wish anyone to be hurt.”

“Good thing we do,” Raya murmured.

I thought that Daisy revealing something so personal about Esme would bother her, but it didn’t. She told me how she ran a women’s shelter, Safe Harbor. “I see such horrors that it makes me appreciate our ability to talk about whatever has happened to us. That way we don’t feel lonely or, worse, normalize abuse.”

I wasn’t abused, but I understood what she was saying.

They reminisced about a summer week in Santorini, which seemed utterly delightful but undoubtedly beyond my budget and social circle. These women belonged to affluence, much like River. I hailed from a working-class background, with a job that ensured my bills were paid. While it was a decent-paying job, I couldn’t afford to just drop everything for a life of leisure. But then again, these women were working at the moment, and here I was, relaxing on a beach with my boyfriend.

They stayed for several hours, and I enjoyed their company. When it became cool outside, we took the party into the house, which was when River came home with Forest.

*Home?* Yes, I had felt this house on the beach was home because River lived here with me. I didn’t even think of my apartment in Providence as home. It was my place—a base

where I could leave my suitcase and close enough to visit my brother, niece and nephew.

Forest sat next to his wife and River sat next to me, like I was his partner, his woman. They all treated me like I was *his*. It was disconcerting but also wonderful.

That night when we were in bed, I asked River, “Did you ask them to come over and keep me company?”

“Hector talked to Daisy, and she got Esme and Raya to take the afternoon off from work.”

I sighed. “I’ve been bumming for so long that I forgot today is a weekday. They didn’t have to take time off work for me.”

“Sure, they did. They’re my friends and family, which means they are your friends and family as well.”

I cuddled into him. “They’re very nice and...normal.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re all so wealthy and—”

“No, they’re not. Not all of them. Raya grew up in foster homes as did her husband. They worked to get to where they are. A lot like you have. Esme’s parents had money, but she was raised by her grandmother who had very little money. Daisy...well, she’s a princess, but that’s got nothing to do with money, it’s who she is,” River explained.

“But now they all have a lot of money,” I countered.

“Define a lot of money,” River chuckled and rolled me to lie on top of him. “Baby, it’s just money. It’s not important.”

“Only people who have money say that.”

“Whatever I have is yours,” he whispered. “In sickness and in health, and till death do us apart.”

I felt tears in my eyes. “Oh, River.”

“Hey, no crying when I’m professing true love and all that jazz.”

I sniffled. “I’m so sorry that I’m not ready.”

“That’s okay,” he said cheerfully, arranging me so his semi-hard erection was nestled between my thighs. “I’m ready enough for both of us. Take your time, Sunshine.”

I felt fear slam into me. But what if he left me...again? What would I do? I’d become so dependent upon him. I had to stop this. I had to—.

“You’re not going anywhere either.” He hugged me tight. “Stop that mind of yours from wandering into the past. It’s over. Today, I love you and I’m not letting you go, no matter how much you want to leave. Kicking and screaming, I’ll keep you tied to me.”

I smiled at him. My heart in my throat, the words aching to be released but something held me back. “Thank you.”

“Why don’t you thank me properly, Sunshine?”

“And how would that be?” I asked, my eyes bright with laughter.

“Ride me, baby.”

And so, I did, promising myself that I'd reduce my dependency on River...soon.





# Chapter 32

## RIVER

**R**ecovery from a bullet wound was slow, especially when it meant you had to get a new bone. Sunny was healing well but was frustrated with how long it was taking. She pushed her physiotherapy as far as she could, as far as Hector would let her. She'd started to walk almost without a limp and had even jogged, albeit slowly, with me on the beach in the mornings.

She got tired easily and the cramps at night, though didn't come often, still attacked her, telling her she was not a hundred percent ready to go back to her *normal* life, as she liked to call it.

October turned into November; and living together meant that we were closer than we'd ever been—than I'd ever been to anyone. I couldn't imagine how she could even think she was not in love with me. She was madly in love with me. I could see it, I could feel it and even though my heart ached to hear the words, her silence was evidence that she wasn't ready.

And even if she never said the words, how she looked at me, how she touched me, made love with me—it was enough.

*Like hell!*

Sunny was frustrated with her healing, and I was frustrated with how difficult it was to get through to her. She had said she wasn't that same girl I had known, and she wasn't. This was a tougher, harder, and stronger woman.

We had fallen into the habit of having lunch on the patio, after which we turned on the gas fireplace, wrapped ourselves in blankets and read, sitting together on Daisy's wicker couch, her back against my chest as I leaned on the edge of the couch, my legs holding hers.

I'd never taken time off in a decade and a half. This was the first time I was doing absolutely nothing—and it felt...well, oddly good. I'd not expected it. I loved to work. I was a bona fide workaholic.

I kissed Sunny's hair as she read her eighth Jack Reacher book. I was *trying* to read the *Times*, but I was distracted and couldn't keep focus.

“What do you want to do for Thanksgiving?” I asked.

“I'm going to Providence,” she immediately replied.

She'd made plans without talking to me. She was still thinking this relationship was not a real one—a temporary diversion while we got healthy.

“How long would we be there?” I pretended she'd invited me to come along.

She stiffened, and I expected her to turn around and argue with me, but she didn't as if understanding that would be futile. "A couple of days. I was planning to book tickets."

"How about I take care of that?" I suggested.

Like hell she was getting on a commercial flight, not with all that Knight money sitting around, growing in size and doing no one any good. Forest and I didn't flaunt the Knight fortune like our parents did. We flew commercial, we lived in modest homes, and drove...well I didn't even have a car, but Forest had splurged on his Stingray. I didn't have a home either. I used my parents' place as a base, but mostly I traveled. If I wasn't working, I traveled for pleasure. I stayed with Forest often in the beach house whenever I was in California.

We were not the *let's charter a flight* people. But I'd do it for Sunny. I just didn't know how to go about it. I'd have to ask Hector or maybe Dec who had a company jet that I knew his friends and family often used.

"Don't spend too much money...I mean, I'm fine with flying economy, okay? And..."

"And what?"

"I was about to say, let me pay you back but here I am living off of you, so it seems petty to say let me pay the few hundred bucks for a monkey class ticket to Providence."

I smiled. She was catching on.

We watched as a family walked on the beach, the children throwing a ball to a dog who was happily yipping.

“You are *not* living off of me. We’re both living off of Forest, I think.”

“He’s your brother. Who am I to him?”

“The love of his brother’s life,” I replied immediately. She could try to forget but I’d remind her at every step how I felt about her until she admitted she loved me as much as I did her.

“Stop saying things like that.” She kissed the forearm that was around her. “It makes me uncomfortable.”

“I’m okay with that.” I kissed the side of her head. “Would you like to go to Golden Valley?”

“The farm?”

“They’re Raya’s family...the Santos who own the farm. They have a beautiful Inn and several cottages. They throw a post-Thanksgiving party, which we’re invited to. I thought it would be nice to spend some time staring at the mountains.”

“A change from staring at the sea?” she asked, amused.

“Exactly. I knew you’d understand.”

We sat together for a long time until it was time for dinner.

We’d accepted an invitation to join Daisy and Forest at a restaurant in Venice Beach on Abbot Kinney road. Sunny was still not comfortable around people and preferred to be alone with Hector and me. I felt the same, but we’d accepted Daisy and Forest as part of our cocoon now as we saw them often.

Sunny had always been an introvert—but her job had made her even more isolated. I didn’t mind being alone...for a

while, but I needed people in my life. I had friends and family—and I wanted Sunny to get used to them.

“Your limp is almost gone,” I commented as we strolled to the restaurant.

Sunny wore a dress, which I hardly ever saw her in. It was a dark green woolen dress that she’d bought online. The dress had a long side slit, which showed off her brown thigh-high boots. Her hair had grown longer as she’d not had it cut; and hung loosely around her shoulders. She hardly wore any makeup—but she didn’t need to. There was a freshness about her, a healthy pallor that I was happy to see since I’d seen her pale so often since Nigeria.

“I know,” she beamed. “It’s such a relief to walk again. I spoke with Steel Rain, and I may go back to work in January.”

“Will you be ready?” I asked as my heart sank. She was making plans for the future, ones that did not include me.

“I think so.” She didn’t look at me when she spoke, as if the sidewalk had such interesting tidbits to observe.

I stopped her with a hand on her elbow. She turned to face me but hung her head.

“You’re going to leave after Christmas. Is that what you’re telling me?” I lifted her face with a finger under her chin.

“Sunny?”

She licked her lips; her eyes were wide, bright under the harsh glow of the streetlight. “Yes, that’s what I’m telling you.”

“You’re going to end our relationship or were you thinking we do something long distance?” I kept my voice calm, cool. If I showed I was angry or hurt, she’d fight me.

“End the relationship,” she said with finality and challenged me with her eyes.

“You think you’ll be able to do that?” I asked casually, but the hurt was deep, the wound would probably never heal if she truly left.

“Yes.”

“Really?”

She took a deep breath and her body angled in a way that was both fight and flight at the same time. “I’m not in love with you, River.”

I nodded. “True. That’s true.” I smiled tightly and turned her so we could continue walking. A fight on a sidewalk in Venice would not be beneficial to my cause. She had put a timeline on our relationship, on her need and want for me.

“I never meant to hurt you,” she whispered.

“I know, Sunshine.” I would not let her hurt me. I would not let her leave. It was as simple as that.

“People like me don’t get married and have children and picket fences,” she said harshly. “You understand that don’t you?”

“No, I don’t understand and no, baby, you can’t explain it to me. But maybe you can tell me what you mean when you say

*people like me.*” I took her hand in mine, tangling our fingers as we walked, maintaining a connection while we coolly and calmly discussed our relationship, which belied the fire inside me.

“People who do what we do. Fighters. Killers. Warriors.”

“Why?”

She tightened her fingers to hold my hand in a painful grip. “Because we don’t know how long we’ll live and...we see so much...I don’t think you can understand.” She was now dismissive because she couldn’t explain herself.

“I understand just fine. I’ve been in every war zone from Algeria to Zimbabwe in the past fifteen years. I’ve seen dying children, mass graves, raped women...you name it. I have looked at them, taken their photos, and told their stories. So, don’t tell me I don’t understand.”

“But you’ve killed no one, have you?” she snapped.

The few people walking around us stopped to look at us.

“No.”

“Well, I have, and it destroys something within you.” She didn’t look at me, but she was now dragging me, walking faster.

I stopped her. “Hey, I know what you do. I’m grateful that you do what you do. I don’t judge you. You shouldn’t judge yourself.” *Or me for not being a warrior like you.*

She looked at me and flung her arms around me. I hugged her close. She was delusional if she thought she could walk away from me, from us.

“I’m so sorry, River. I can’t be what you want me to be,” she breathed.

I stroked her back. “Come on, let’s go eat some good food and enjoy some excellent company.”

“Can we not talk about this again?” she pleaded.

She wanted to quietly disappear. Well, she could dream. I made a noncommittal hum, and we held hands again as we walked to the restaurant.





# Chapter 33

## SUNNY

“**W**hen you said you’ll take care of our travel arrangements, you were not talking about booking seats on American Airlines, were you?” I scowled as I looked at our *flight*.

The plane was a luxurious G6, the kind that screamed privilege. Its silver hull glistened in the sunlight, and its interior was fitted with buttery leather and gleaming accents. This was River’s world, and every time I stepped into it, I felt like an imposter.

River noticed my hesitation. “It’s just a plane, Sunny.”

“Just a plane, he says,” I muttered, brushing a stray hair behind my ear. “It’s like a palace with wings.”

He smiled, taking my hand. “Come on.”

The interior was extravagant as expected. Large plush seats faced each other, separated by a shiny wooden table. It felt like a posh living room, except it was in the sky. River watched me with his piercing blue eyes, reading my discomfort.

“What was the last flight you were on?” he asked, the corner of his lips upturned.

“When we went to Nigeria,” I replied. “In a cramped military transport, sandwiched between ammo crates and sweaty soldiers.”

River laughed. “Quite the difference, huh?”

“Understatement.” I took my seat and River sat across from me. A flight attendant came by and asked us if we’d like champagne, to which River, who looked absolutely comfortable with all of this, replied in the affirmative.

Two glasses of Ruinart champagne were poured. Even I knew that was pricey bubbly and not something you picked up at the neighborhood Ralph’s.

“You don’t have to put on a show for me, River.”

“I’m not,” he replied. “I just want you *and* me to be comfortable.”

I frowned. “In this? It’s like putting a wild animal in a gilded cage.”

He gazed at me. “You’re not an animal, Sunny. You’re just... free-spirited.”

I huffed. “Yeah, well, that spirit might be too wild for all this,” I gestured around. “Or for you.”

River’s face tightened. He took a deep breath, sipping his champagne. “You keep pushing me away, but have you ever

thought that maybe, just maybe, I want the wild spirit? The fire? The passion?”

“It’s not that simple,” I whispered, looking down at my hands. They were rough, scarred from years in the field, fighting, saving, and sometimes killing. “There’s so much you don’t know about me.”

“And there’s much you don’t know about me,” he replied gently. “We’re both products of our past, but it’s our choice how we let it define our future.”

The engine roared to life, interrupting our conversation. As the plane taxied on the runway, I felt a churning anxiety in my stomach. It wasn’t about the flight; it was about going home to Providence. To see my brother Sam, and my niece and nephew—and show them River. What would they think of him? What would he think of them?

River must’ve sensed my tension because he reached across the table, holding my hand. “Nervous about seeing your family?”

“A bit,” I admitted. “It’s been a while, and... you know how it is.”

He squeezed my hand. “They love you. They’ll be happy to see you.”

I nodded, my throat constricting. Sam was my anchor. My constant. But years overseas, missions that took me away, the mental toll of warfare—it all made me distant. It didn’t help that his wife didn’t like me.

Hours passed. We chatted about inconsequential things. The champagne helped lubricate the conversation, as did River's gentle humor. I fell asleep after a while, lulled by the alcohol. I lay against River on a long seat, his arm around me like we were back in our patio.

*Our patio?* No, it was River's...not even his, Forest's patio in Venice Beach.

I felt him envelope me the entire time, a balm for my jangled nerves. I woke up to River gently straightening me so he could secure my seatbelt.

"Hmm." I stretched, feeling utterly relaxed.

"Good nap?"

"Always, when you're with me. Did you sleep or did I keep you up?" I asked.

"Good thing we're sleeping in your apartment and not your brother's house." He kissed me softly.

"It's too small for us," I told him. *Not like your brother's house where he has a pool, a pool house, a gym and ten extra bedrooms.*

As the plane began its descent, I peered out the window. Providence, with its historic buildings and charming streets, lay below. It looked quaint, peaceful. So different from the war-torn countries I was used to.

River leaned over, kissing my temple. "Almost there."

I nodded, my heart racing. This wasn't just a visit. It was a statement. Bringing River to Sam was like bringing him into my world, something I had never done before with any man.

The plane landed smoothly. The crisp autumn air greeted us, and I took a deep breath. I loved the smell of Providence in the fall, a mix of dried leaves, wood smoke, and impending winter.

A car awaited us, of course, it did, and River held the door open for me. I let the driver know my address. We held hands, but the ride was quiet, both of us lost in our thoughts.

The lights of Providence twinkled in the early evening as I led River up to my apartment building. It was an old brownstone, with that classic charm that the city was known for. The entryway was dimly lit, the bulbs flickering occasionally, hinting at the building's age.

I hesitated for a moment before putting the key in the lock, suddenly self-conscious. Not that my apartment was a dump, far from it, but after seeing the sprawling beach house in Venice and knowing of River's multiple estates worldwide, it felt... mundane.

The door creaked open, revealing the coziness of my home. I had a small living room with a couple of vintage armchairs and a sofa, and the open kitchen was just a few feet away. To the side was my bedroom, simple with its white linens and a picture window that overlooked the city. My walls were adorned with photographs of my family, a few abstract paintings, and mementos from some of my travels.

“This is... it,” I said, gesturing around, trying to gauge his reaction. I walked up to the windows and opened them to get some air in. A cleaning crew came in once a month while I was traveling, so it wasn’t as stuffy as it would be when unoccupied for nearly six months.

River stepped in, looking around slowly, taking everything in. He put our suitcase and bag down and moved to the open window, gazing out at the city lights. “It’s beautiful, Sunshine.”

I snorted, brushing off his compliment. “Come on. It’s just a small apartment. It’s not much, especially compared to what you’re used to.”

He turned to me with sincere eyes. “It’s beautiful because it’s yours. It’s a piece of you.”

I felt my cheeks heat. “It’s where I can be *just* Sunny. Not the fighter, not the operative... just me.”

He approached one of the walls, examining the photos. There was one of Sam and me as kids, another with Penny and Victor during a summer visit, and then a picture of me backpacking across Europe in my early twenties. He pointed at that one. “I didn’t know you went to Switzerland.”

I smiled, recalling the memory. “Yeah. It was right after I left the army and before I got into the CIA. A sort of... finding myself trip.”

River took a deep breath, glancing around the room again. “I love it here. It’s warm and inviting. It feels like a home.”

“Well, it’s all I could afford,” I said with a shrug. “It’s not a beachfront property in Venice.”

He took my hands, pulling me close. “Sunny, it’s not about the size or the price tag. It’s about the life you’ve built. The choices you’ve made. This place reflects you. Simple, genuine, and filled with memories and dreams.”

Tears pricked my eyes, and I looked down, overwhelmed. “I’m not sure what you see in me, River. Our worlds are so different.”

He lifted my chin, making me look at him. “I see a woman who’s fierce, passionate, and unapologetically herself. I see someone who’s faced unimaginable challenges and came out stronger. I see someone I love.”

I blinked, taken aback. “I can’t believe you love me.”

He smiled, brushing a stray tear from my cheek. “I know. But I do. And not because of where you come from or what you have. I love you for who you are.”

My heart swelled, and I hugged him tightly. The walls of my apartment might’ve been close, but in that moment, the world felt vast, filled with infinite possibilities. River had a way of doing that, making everything feel endless, boundless. And as I nestled into River’s warmth, I wished that love could bridge even the widest of chasms. But as Chaos would say in his Shaman voice, “*You cannot see the future with tears in your eyes.*”



# Chapter 34

## RIVER

**W**e went for dinner to Sunny's favorite restaurant that was just a few blocks away. The soft amber lighting of the Italian bistro bathed everything in a warm glow, making the intimate space even cozier. Tables dressed in white cloth were spread out just enough to give patrons their privacy, and the air was perfumed with the comforting aroma of garlic, tomatoes, and fresh basil. As Sunny and I settled into our seats, I caught myself lost in thought, playing with the silverware absentmindedly.

I glanced up to find her watching me, her eyes shimmering with concern. It felt odd to be on the receiving end of such attention. It was usually the other way around, me, the observer, looking at the world through my lens, always separated from reality by the glass of my camera.

"I've been thinking," I began, choosing my words carefully. Sunny tilted her head, prompting me to continue. "Ever since I got back from Nigeria, I've felt... adrift."

Sunny's face softened, and she reached out to grasp my hand. "You and I both. You've been through a lot, River. No one expects you to bounce back overnight."

"I know." I rubbed the back of my neck. "But before Nigeria, I'd already decided that I was done with war photography."

She raised an eyebrow. "I know you quit but why?"

"Journalism is...maybe *was* my passion, who knows," I sighed. "In the beginning I was excited about telling a story but now after so many years, every time I look through that viewfinder, all I see is pain. Anguish. Desolation. After a while, it ate away at my soul. I felt like I was profiting from the miseries of others."

She squeezed my hand. "You were shedding light on issues, making people aware. That's not exploitation; that's advocacy."

I smiled ruefully. "Maybe. But each assignment weighed on me, building a burden I couldn't shake. By the time I took that final trip to Nigeria, I was already spent."

"And Nigeria was a doozy," she teased.

I laughed. "It was a nightmare...but if I hadn't been taken by the Hausa Brigade, I wouldn't have you back in my life. If I didn't have you, my life would be less."

Sunny drank some wine. "Stop saying such things. I may start believing them."

"I want you to believe them," I told her seriously.

Sunny licked her lips and smiled. “What do you want to do now if not journalism?”

“That’s the thing,” I replied, frustration evident in my voice. “I don’t know. I thought I’d write a book about Syria, but every time I sit down to type, I’m paralyzed.”

She nodded, taking a sip of her wine. “You’re still healing, River. PTSD isn’t something you just get over. It lingers, it haunts.”

“Like bullet wounds?”

“Exactly like that.”

“Have you had PTSD?”

“It comes and goes,” she admitted. “And...it’s never easy. But I’ve been running from op to op for years, I haven’t had time for that new age hobby called self-care.”

“If you had finished your bachelor’s degree in Columbia would—”

She raised a hand to silence me. “You are not the reason I’m where I am in my life. I could’ve chosen several professions, but I chose this. I love what I do. I save lives, I make a difference and I protect my country. These things are important to me. Even with a degree in forensic psychiatry I may have ended exactly here.”

But we would’ve been together and then...who knew what the course of our lives would have taken? Maybe I wouldn’t have been obsessed with traveling, having no home, no

relationships—just friends I partied with and women I had sex with.

“Are you tired of it?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Yes and no. This is all I know how to do, River. I spoke with Niyol...Chaos. He’s thinking about quitting Steel Rain, living in his cabin and fishing. I couldn’t do that, not for long. I can already feel my brain wanting to do more than physiotherapy. I want to push myself, my body, and my brain. But I also feel tremendously exhausted. Does that even make sense?”

“Yes,” I whispered, my throat tightening. “I’m tired of feeling lost. Every morning I wake up, waiting for that epiphany, that flash of inspiration, to guide me. But it never comes.”

Sunny leaned in. “Maybe we’re both putting too much pressure on ourselves. Life doesn’t always work on our schedule. Sometimes, we just have to let things unfold.”

Would she let things unfold? Would she allow herself to love and be loved?

The server came by, setting plates of steaming pasta in front of us. The aroma was inviting, and I took a moment to appreciate the simple pleasures of life.

The evening wore on, the atmosphere lightening as we shared stories and memories, teaching each other about ourselves. Sunny had a way of making everything seem brighter, more optimistic—except when we talked about *us*.

We left the bistro, the cool Providence air refreshing. We walked hand in hand like children who couldn't stand to be apart. Like lovers who craved each other's touch.

“Did I tell you today how beautiful you look?” I kissed her hand.

“Yes. But I enjoy hearing you say it.” There was joy in her voice. Since she'd told me she was leaving after Christmas, there was an ease in how she was with me, like there was a deadline and since there was one, she could enjoy me and us without restrictions.

For the past few months, Sunny's style had been all about comfort and flexibility to workout. But as she'd felt better, I was seeing a woman who had a distinct fashion sense, unique and elegant. Sunny the girl wore frilly dresses and skintight jeans. Sunny the woman wore wraparound dresses in dark colors that made her skin glow. She still wore skin tight jeans but with boots and not ballet flats as she used to. A part of it, I knew, was that she had more money now and could buy better clothes. Then she'd been a student on a scholarship, making do with whatever she could find on sale. I found her beautiful then as I did now.

For dinner she'd worn a wraparound burgundy dress that hugged her in all the right places. It had full sleeves and was cinched around her waist. She wore booties that had a heel, which was a recent development. Sunny was already building muscle and her movements were strong and still utterly feminine.

She had been excited to wear her own clothes after many months. “It feels like Christmas,” she’d said, opening her closet. “I haven’t seen my stuff for months so it’s like everything is new.”

She had worn earrings that dangled. She hadn’t worn earrings at all for the past months. They were delicate gold earrings with small zirconia gems. Nothing she had was expensive but everything she had was tasteful and all her.

How would she decorate our house? Where would we live? Would she want to live here in Providence? No, we could visit. The beach and California suited her much better. We could live in Venice. Forest would just give me his house.

I knew I was counting my chickens before the eggs had hatched...because as things stood, she was ready to bolt, looking as uncomfortable as Lucifer at Sunday Mass.

“You smell wonderful.” I trailed my nose under her ear as she unlocked her door.

She always smelled of soap and fresh air; but here she had her own things, her perfume, and her cosmetics. She’d worn mascara, some lipstick and she looked stunning. Whatever eye makeup she’d used made her blue-gray eyes wider and as dark as steel sapphires.

I pushed her coat off her shoulders and threw mine on the floor. “I’ve been wanting to do this all evening.” I pushed her against the door and kissed her, coaxing her mouth open and slid my tongue inside her, tasting her.

She moaned as she always did when I deepened a kiss. It was an erotic sound that shot straight through to my erection. She moved her hips against me, and I yanked her closer, ground myself against her.

“Sunshine, has it ever been like this with anyone?” I demanded, trailing my mouth across her jaw, opening her wraparound dress to reveal her body beneath. I stepped back and stared at her. She wore a bra and panties, a concoction of lace and dreams, erotic and sensuous, an antithesis of the fighter who’d looked like Rambo shooting insurgents in order to save my life.

She wore thigh-high stockings and the gap of golden flesh above them made me drool. She licked her lips, her eyes filled with desire. She took her dress off and stood in front of me, looking like a cross between a dominatrix and shy maiden.

I watched her without touching her. Wanting to enjoy this impromptu striptease.

She bent to unzip her booties, and I groaned at the picture she painted. She removed her booties and walked to me. She put a finger on my chest and pushed me until we were in her bedroom.

I put my hands on her, but she batted them away. “My turn.” She went on her knees, and I smiled. She was showing off that she was flexible enough to do this, that she wanted to pleasure me.

“Sweetheart, does it hurt?” I ran my hand through her silken blonde hair.

“No.” She looked up at me with eyes filled with anticipation. She first unlaced my shoes and took my socks off. I helped her, letting her control our lovemaking. It was exciting and sensual to watch her take charge.

She unbuckled my belt and then unhooked, unzipped, and pulled down my dress pants and underwear. I stepped out of them as I removed my cufflinks, throwing them on the floor without care. I watched as I unbuttoned my dress shirt and removed it, standing naked in front of her, aching for her.

She licked the precum off the tip of my erection and elicited a groan out of me. She took me in her mouth, and I closed my eyes, my hands clenched around her hair. She put her right hand at the base of my penis and pumped slowly as she moved her mouth over me. Her left hand cupped my balls, and I felt every thought dissipate from my mind. The world was just us, her mouth on me and my orgasm slowly stirring inside me.

“God, baby.” I held her head in place so I could push myself in and out of her, setting the pace. She let me. I looked into her eyes as I took her mouth. “I remember when you did this the first time. Do you remember?”

She nodded, her eyes filling with tears. I immediately stilled. “Too much?”

She shook her head. I smiled and pulled out of her. I held out a hand, and she took it, standing up.

“I wasn’t done,” she grinned.

“Yes, you were. Your right knee is hurting.”



She frowned. “How did you know?”

“I know you, Sunshine. I can see *you* no matter how much you hide how you feel.”

She hugged me then, and I felt her tears against my chest. My eyes prickled in response. This *thing* between us was big, large, massive and, no matter how many years had gone by, I still loved her, wanted her. If she left me, I would continue to love her and live without her, and be less because of it.

But tonight, I had her and would not let the fears of the future cloud the present. “And now it’s my turn.”

I pulled down first one stocking, kissing her leg and then the other. I lingered over the scar on her thigh.

“Do they bother you?” she asked.

“What?”

“The scars.”

I looked up at her. “Darling, it makes me proud of you and grateful for you. I wish you had not gotten hurt but...no, baby, every scar is evidence of the warrior that you are.”

She stepped out of the delicate silk. She unhooked her bra and stood naked except for her panties. “You look a vision.”

I pulled down her panties and cupped her ass with both hands. I nuzzled her pussy, intoxicated by her. Everything about Sunny drew me to her, possessed me. I tasted her and when her knees weakened, I let her lie down.

“Part your thighs for me, Sunshine.”

She did as I asked, and I felt the slight shiver that went through her as she waited for me to bring her release. She always did that. I felt like I was filling a memory box for the days when she'd not be with me.

“The first time I made you come, do you remember, Sunshine?” I tapped her clitoris with my tongue and her hips bucked.

“Yes.”

“It was so long ago, and you still remember?”

She looked at me, tears flowing down her cheeks. “I remember everything, River.”

“Me too, baby. Me too.” I licked her and slid a finger inside her, she clenched around me, moaning. I put two fingers inside her and curled my fingers and she cried out.

“River, please.”

I pumped in and out of her and feasted on her clitoris, suckling, licking, biting until she exploded, her body shaking, her pussy spasming.

I moved up her body and kissed her. “How do you taste, Sunshine?”

“Like you. I taste like you,” she whispered.

“And I taste like you,” I agreed. *Because we love each other. Because I love you.*

“Come inside, River.”

I went down her body and suckled her nipples, plumping her breasts. “You have the most gorgeous tits. I have a fantasy, baby.”

“Tell me.”

“I’ll show you.”

I straddled her and pushed my erection between her breasts, holding them like a vice around me. As I moved, letting her tits arouse me, she licked the top of my erection each time it came close enough.

“Is this your fantasy?” she asked.

“Yes,” I groaned. The word hoarse, I could barely talk, I was so turned on. Before I came all over her beautiful breasts, I pulled away. I wanted to be inside her. I wanted that homecoming I always felt with her.

I kissed her gently as I moved within her, slowly, softly. Sometimes we worked each other up fast but this time I wanted slow, in her bed, in her home where she’d be when she wasn’t with me, so she’d remember what it felt like to be loved by me. And the longer I took the more time I had with her. She’d given me an ultimatum and my heart was breaking because I didn’t believe I could keep her with me, stop her from leaving me, no matter how much I wanted.

If she couldn’t already see what she meant to me, what else could I do? What else could I give her? I’d given her everything I was, and I could be.

“I love you,” I whispered as I spilled within her.

*How am I going to live without her?*



# Chapter 35

## SUNNY

**W**hen we reached Sam's home, a wave of nostalgia washed over me. It was a modest house, a stark contrast to River's world. But it was the only home I had that had people in it...besides me. The lights were on, and I could see silhouettes moving inside.

As we walked to the door, it swung open, revealing Penny, now a young woman at eighteen. Her face lit up, and she launched herself at me. "Aunt Sunny!"

I hugged her tight, my eyes moistening. "Hey, kiddo."

She pulled back, her eyes darting to River. "And who's this?"

"River," I introduced. "River, this is my niece, Penny."

He extended his hand, smiling. "Hi. Nice to meet you."

Victor appeared next, a hint of teenage rebellion in his eyes, but the same warmth. "Aunt Sunny," he hugged me, then nodded at River, his gaze assessing.

“Easy, tiger,” I teased. At fifteen, he was developing his protective instincts.

Sam came forward, his face etched with lines of age. “Sis,” he said simply, pulling me into a bear hug.

River stood back, allowing us our moment. When Sam finally released me, he turned to River, his gaze scrutinizing. “You’re the one who’s been keeping her...company.”

River smiled, extending his hand. “Guilty as charged.”

Sam considered my man, and I knew he wanted to punch him for what had happened a decade and a half ago, but he also knew that things had changed. I’d explained to him how much they had changed, and he respected my choices.

Sam’s wife Marge, short for Margret was impressed with River. She’d probably researched him when Sam told her he was a Knight. Marge and I had a difficult relationship. She never liked how close Sam and I were; and we’d worked hard to avoid conflict with her. The result had been that I didn’t see Sam, Penny, and Victor as much as I’d like to.

“Oh, River, what a delight to have you here.” Marge gave him a hug. I got a tight smile and a perfunctory hug. “Sam has been telling me all about you and your family.”

Sam knew nothing about River and his family. The gossip sites had been telling Marge about the Knights, I was sure.

River didn’t bat an eyelid. “And Sunny has been telling me all about you. I’m looking forward to the turkey, she said you have a special recipe.”

Marge flushed. “Oh, look at him, talking about my turkey. Well, you know, I do have a secret family recipe.”

River, who could charm the panties off a nun, gave Marge his arm, and she took it, walking him into the living room telling him all the secrets about her turkey.

“He’s smart, I’ll give you that.” Sam put an arm around me. “You warned him about her?”

I shook my head. “He’s a journalist. He has a way with people.”

“Is he your boyfriend, Aunt Sunny?” Penny asked, eyeing River’s ass. “Because if he is, good work. If he’s not—”

“He’s all mine.” I yanked her ponytail.

She laughed. “He’s hot. Blonde and beautiful.”

“He’s just rich,” Victor growled. “Doesn’t mean he’s a nice guy. Rich people suck.”

“Ah, and our young political scientist takes off.” Sam directed us into the dining room.

The evening was a whirlwind. We ate, laughed, and shared stories. Marge cooked a feast, and I felt the warmth of family enveloping me, even Marge, who was doing her best to impress her near-celebrity guest. River fit in well, his charm winning everyone over.

“I heard you were kidnapped,” Marge mentioned, and I froze. Sam had an idea about what I did but the others had no



clue. They only knew I traveled a lot for work. “It was all over the news. You were rescued.”

I put a hand on River’s thigh, and he patted my hand. “Yes, and I’m very thankful for that. I was thinking about that because it’s Thanksgiving and I’m so grateful to the people who risked their lives to save me. Sunny, what are you thankful for this Thanksgiving?”

He elegantly changed the topic, and everyone talked about what they were grateful for this holiday season.

After dinner, River insisted he would help Sam clean up as Marge had cooked. She gushed about a Knight washing up in her kitchen.

“What a wonderful man,” she told me, a smile on her face. “He’s quite handsome. I mean, I saw his pictures but he’s so much...more in real life. You know he dated Erin Stone? Can you believe it?”

“And now he’s dating Aunt Sunny,” Penny, ever the protector chimed in.

“Is he? Are you both serious? Sam said that you were friends because you went to university together.” Marge didn’t like the idea of us dating at all and I didn’t need the aggravation no matter how much I wanted to rub into Marge’s face that River was madly in love with me, and I was the one resisting him.

“We’re good friends,” I demurred.

“But why is here with you? Shouldn’t he be with his family? His brother is going to be the governor of California.” Marge

was already texting all her friends as she spoke. She'd taken some photos during dinner and River had not protested, though I knew he'd hate being on Marge's Facebook feed. But he was happy to sacrifice for me, he'd assured me when I warned him how the pictures Marge had taken would be used.

"Forest and Daisy are spending Thanksgiving with some friends," I simply said and then added, "and he wanted to have a traditional meal, which I said you'd deliver."

I went into the kitchen to check on River and stopped as I heard Sam and his conversation.

"How is she?" Sam asked as he washed and River wiped the dishes that didn't fit into the dishwasher or were to be hand washed, like Marge's best silverware, wine glasses and China.

"She's not limping anymore. She's not having nightmares either."

"Thanks for calling and updating me. She doesn't tell me half of what's going on." Sam held a washed wine glass and River took it.

I doubted River had ever had to wash a dish himself in his life. Even at our place in Venice, Hector had arranged for someone to come in every day to clean up. It had made sense in the beginning when we were both beat up but now it was just laziness. I guess I was getting a little spoiled.

"She knows I call you. She pretends she doesn't know, and I let her," River chuckled.

“You know when she told me about you, I wanted to...well, you were an asshole in Columbia. Dumping her was one thing but fucking her scholarship up? Man, that was low.”

“It was and I was,” River agreed, putting the now wiped wine glass on the counter. “I’m not anymore. I love her, Sam. The last thing I want to do is hurt her.”

“Does she know you love her?” Sam leaned against the sink to look at River.

“I tell her as often as I can...but she doesn’t believe me and...she’s leaving me, Sam.”

“What?” Sam shook his head. “That’s bullshit. She’s desperately in love with you. She never got over you.”

I folded my arms and walked into the kitchen, making noise so they’d know I was there and cease their conversation.

“Hey, Sunshine. We’re almost done.” River kissed my cheek.

I glared at Sam.

“What?” He went back to the washing.

I punched him on the shoulder. “Let’s get going. I want my pumpkin pie and coffee. And Penny is going to play the piano.”

After dinner, Penny played the piano, filling the room with haunting melodies. River and I sat on the couch, our fingers intertwined. He leaned in, his lips brushing my ear. “Stay with me, Sunshine,” he whispered.

Tears filled my eyes, and I pulled away, shaking my head. “I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I just can’t. Stop pushing me, River.”

He looked at me, his eyes filled with pain and understanding.

“Then let’s make the most of the time we have.”

“Yes.”



# Chapter 36

## RIVER

The Santos family knew how to throw a party. The ballroom at the Golden Valley Inn was filled with people. Friends who were family and family who were closer than friends.

The Golden Valley farm was one of the largest in California; and the Inn attached to it was a favored spot for a destination wedding with the backdrop of mountains and the lush landscape of the California central valley.

The Santos threw parties at the drop of a hat and this one was an annual celebration on the Saturday of the Thanksgiving weekend.

“Congratulations, Maria.” I picked up Maria Caruso’s hand and kissed it right above her engagement ring. She flushed, her cheeks going pink.

“Thank you.” Her eyes landed on her fiancé Alejandro Santos, the CEO of Golden Valley who was talking to his

twelve-year-old son Silvano who I'd been told had a very high IQ and could jive like no one's business.

"How are you?" She slid her hand into my arm, walking me toward the tall windows that showed off the snowy landscape of the Sierra National Forest. "We were all so worried about you and kept vigil with Daisy and Forest."

"I know. Thank you for taking care of them."

"Are you okay now?" she asked, her concern sincere.

"Yes." My eyes searched for Sunny who was talking to Raya and her husband Mateo Silva, the Chief Technology Officer for Knight Technologies. Raya and Mateo had gotten married a year ago in Forest's chambers and had had a wedding reception at Golden Valley.

"She's exquisite," Maria murmured.

"She is, isn't she." I couldn't look away from her. She hadn't cut her hair and now it hung around her shoulders. She was wearing one of those woolen wraparound dresses she favored with the same booties she'd worn in Providence, the ones she'd removed while she did that delectable striptease for me.

Alejandro came up to us and slid his arm around his fiancée, kissing her on the side of her forehead. "Stop interrogating the poor man."

"I'm not," Maria protested. "I just wanted to ask him how he was doing."

"And gather gossip about the status of your relationship with Sunny," he grinned. "You'll have to excuse us, but the entire

Santos family is very curious about Sunny *and* you.”

I laughed. “Why?”

“What do you mean, why?” Isadora, the youngest Santos sibling, a perky brunette who looked like she’d swallowed the sun because she shone so bright exclaimed. “You won a Pulitzer prize and we’re so thrilled you’re part of our extended family. *And*, did Sunny really rescue you? Daisy told me she shot a really bad guy and almost died saving you. It’s so romantic.”

“Bullet wounds are not romantic, Isa,” her brother mocked.

Isadora turned to look at Sunny who gave me a quizzical look. I winked at her, and she beamed at me.

“She’s like Lara Croft,” Isadora chortled, her eyes narrowed. “And, man, she must work out. Did you see those arms? If only I had the discipline.”

“I thought she looked like a female Rambo,” I offered, “But I was concussed and groggy and very confused to find her in Nigeria.”

Paloma, the matriarch of the family joined us, sighing dramatically. “Aurelio is being difficult. He won’t come and he won’t bring that lawyer with him either. I don’t understand. What does he think we’ll do to her? Eat her alive?”

Aurelio was Alejandro’s younger brother and was in an off-again, on-again relationship with Carolina Vega, the Knight Tech lawyer. The whole group was one incestuous bunch, which delighted me. This was a family. Not a traditional one



by any rights but a found family with strong bonds. In fact, Paloma had married Arsenio, the patriarch of the family when Alejandro was fifteen and his brother ten. They called her Mama. I'd not seen a hint of them not treating her like their own mother. Isadora, the baby of the family, was coddled and spoiled, and had a habit of spying on her brothers.

Esme came up to me and went on tiptoe to give me a kiss. "I'm so glad you made it. And we love Sunny."

"Thank you for keeping her company."

I gave Declan a hug. "You look good, Riv," he said.

"You seem to be doing well." I playfully jabbed at his rock-hard stomach. "Forest says marriage has mellowed you out a bit."

"What can I say, Esme is a great cook."

I loved seeing Declan and Esme, considering when they married it had been an arranged affair and now they were the most loving couple I knew.

After greeting everyone, people I knew and people I didn't, I got my hands on Sunny.

"So many people," she exclaimed. "I love the Santos. And I think I'm in love with Silvano. That kid talks about particle physics like most kids his age talk about baseball."

"I hear he's got a high IQ. He gets along well with Mateo who also has a very high IQ. Got him off the streets and into Harvard."

“They’re all lovely people.” Sunny leaned against me.

“Your leg okay?”

“Perfect, actually. I was hoping you’d dance with me.”

“Just like the old days,” I grinned.

“Just like that.”

In New York, we used to go dancing every chance we could. It was one of the things we loved doing together and hadn’t been able to because of our various injuries.

The ballroom had an expansive dance floor. Apparently, the Santos loved to dance as well, and it was a must for any party of theirs. The infectious strains of *Runaround Sue* by Dion filtered through the ballroom. It was one of those songs that had an inherent rhythm that made you want to move, regardless of age or dance proficiency.

Maria, dressed in a flowing crimson dress, took to the floor with young Silvano. Alejandro’s son had confidence in his stride. They locked hands, and with a gleam in their eyes, began their jive.

Maria’s skirt flared with every spin, and Silvano, despite his age, showed incredible skill and precision. Their feet moved with rapid synchronicity, kicking and flicking, jumping, and twirling. It was a dance of joy, of exuberance, and it was contagious. Maria swung under Silvano’s arm, and he confidently guided her into a series of spins, before pulling her back into a close embrace, their feet tapping out the rhythm with expertise.

Sunny, feeling the beat and the excitement, turned to me with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “What do you say, shall we give them a run for their money?”

I laughed, not one to back down from a challenge, especially with Sunny by my side. “Let’s do it.”

Hand in hand, we joined Maria and Silvano on the dance floor. We might not have been professional dancers, but our time together, the trust we’d built, the adventures we’d shared, all translated into a palpable chemistry as we moved.

Sunny’s dress, a shimmering copper dress, caught the light as she twirled, her movements both sharp and fluid. My heart raced, both from the pace of the dance and the electricity between us. We mirrored Maria and Silvano’s moves, adding our flair. I led Sunny into a series of rock steps, before pulling her into a spin. We then transitioned into a toe-heel swivel, playing with the rhythm, and pushing the boundaries of the dance.

The room filled with applause and cheering, the spectators feeding off the infectious energy. The four of us danced, facing off, challenging, and teasing each other with intricate footwork and playful gestures. Sunny threw in a surprise move, jumping up and wrapping her legs around my waist for a moment, before I swung her back down, our feet never missing a beat.

The song’s tempo increased, and the four of us pushed harder. The jive, with its lively steps and vivacious spirit, was the perfect dance to showcase our personalities. Silvano, with youthful exuberance, executed a flawless series of kicks, while

Maria, with her years of experience, slid and spun with grace. Sunny and I, fueled by our unique bond, intertwined, and separated, our movements telling a story of passion, joy, and camaraderie.

As the final notes of the song played out, all four of us converged into one last spin, ending with a dramatic pose. The room erupted in cheers, the joy of the dance spreading through everyone present.

Breathing heavily, and with adrenaline pumping through our veins, Sunny and I shared a triumphant high-five.

The lively jive had set the room on fire, laughter, and applause filling every corner. But as the last note faded away, the atmosphere shifted. The DJ, sensing the need for something mellower, put on a soft, haunting waltz. The gentle melody of *Moon River* floated in the air, its timeless strains casting a spell over the room.

Without a word, Sunny and I gravitated towards each other. The playful competitiveness from our jive melted away, replaced by a poignant awareness of the fleeting nature of our time together. Our hands met, fingers intertwining, and we moved in unison.

The waltz's steady rhythm enveloped us, three beats to a bar, our steps aligning perfectly. The world seemed to blur and fade, as though we were dancing in our bubble, separated from the realities of life. The guests, the music, the lights, everything became distant, as if they existed in another realm.

Every glance we exchanged spoke volumes. I saw the turmoil in Sunny's eyes, the conflict between her love for me and her fear of commitment. I wanted to tell her to stay, to ask her not to leave, but the words remained lodged in my throat. The intensity of the moment held me captive.

I pulled her closer, wrapping my arm around her waist, and felt her head rest on my shoulder. The weight of her body against mine was both comforting and heart-wrenching. It felt as though we were clinging to each other, trying to capture and store every sensation, every touch, for the uncertain future.

The dance floor, teeming with guests just moments ago, felt empty to me. It was just Sunny, and me, lost in our world. Each step, each twirl was a silent plea, a whispered promise. I could feel the beat of her heart, racing, echoing my own. As the music began its crescendo, I tightened my grip on her, fearing this might be our last dance together.

As the final chords played out, we stood still, wrapped in each other, unwilling to let go. The room erupted in applause once again, but it felt distant, irrelevant.

Finally, Sunny pulled back, her eyes glossy. Without a word, she pressed her lips to mine. It was a dance I'd never forget, a dance that encapsulated the complexity of our relationship. A dance of love, of longing, and of painful goodbyes.



# Chapter 37

## SUNNY

**T**he weight of the metal bar bore down on my palms as I took a deep breath, steadying myself. The mirrored walls of Forest and Daisy's gym reflected a determined woman, but beneath my fierce gaze, the scars from my injuries pulsed with a muted memory of pain.

Pushing up, I completed another set of bench presses. The once sharp pain in my abdomen and thigh had dulled over the months, thanks to relentless physiotherapy. Still, the slight twinge served as a reminder of the bullet's invasion. As I moved to the leg press machine, I glanced at my right thigh. Beneath the now healed scar was my new metal femur, a permanent reminder of that fateful day.

"Looking good," Forest remarked when I first entered the gym. But behind his words, I could sense the shared concern he had with River. The two of them didn't want me to rush back to the field, but they couldn't understand the need, the pull it had on me. Forest was also worried about his brother, about what I was doing to him, how I was hurting him.

As I tackled each set, I felt stronger, more in control. The rigorous routine was not just about regaining my physical strength; it was a proof of my resilience. With every rep, I whispered to myself, *I'm ready. Ready to lead again, ready to jump back into the world of Steel Rain.*

I finished with an intense round on the punching bag. My fists made solid contact, each jab and cross precise. Drenched in sweat, muscles screaming, I finally stopped, taking a moment to catch my breath. Every movement, every drop of sweat was a step away from River and our shared cocoon. *But it was time, wasn't it?*

River stood in the doorway, watching silently. We both knew the clock was ticking. My departure loomed large, casting a shadow over our shared moments.

"You're pushing yourself too hard," he finally said, his voice soft.

"I have to," I replied, wiping my brow. "I need to know I'm ready."

He approached, wrapping his arms around me. "I know you're strong, Sunny. I've always known."

Pulling away, I looked into his eyes. "This isn't just about getting back to work, River. It's about proving to myself that I'm not broken. That I can still lead, still be who I was before Nigeria."

"I know," he whispered, drawing me close. "I wish we had more time."



Tears threatened, but I pushed them back. Being with River had been a sanctuary, a healing balm. But the same sanctuary had begun to feel like a cage. I felt too dependent, and the realization that I was hurting him by leaving only added to the weight of guilt.

“I need to do this. For myself.”

He nodded, his eyes wet. “I love you.”

“Stop saying these things to me,” I begged. “Please.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry.”

We stood there, holding each other, lost in the moment. The future was uncertain, but in that gym, amidst the weight and mirrors, two hearts acknowledged a painful truth. I was leaving.

The days moved quickly.

River stopped asking me to stay. He also stopped telling me he loved me. He kept his demeanor light, happy, grabbing each moment he could with me. I was doing the same. We made love every night, every morning. We spent time alone, just the two of us. Hector came by, but he left quickly, delivering food for us. He could see that we wanted to be alone.

We stayed at the beach house for Christmas, declining all invitations.

“Do you know where you’re going after your evaluation at the Steel Rain HQ in Aspen?” River asked me the day before I was leaving. We were sitting out on the patio as we had done for months. He held me close, my back against his chest. I

didn't want to go, but I felt like I had no choice. This was adrenaline. It would pass. He'd move on. And I'd go back to what I knew, what I understood.

Was I being foolish? Perhaps. But better to be foolish than get hurt. I couldn't go back to being the girl whose world River had destroyed. What if he turned on me again? I felt like a fool because I was blaming a man for the acts of a boy when the man had given me no reason to doubt him. And, yet, I couldn't stay. I wanted to desperately hold on to him, but it would end anyway, the sooner the better.

The push and pull of it. The feeling of freedom and of being trapped...all of it was tremendously stressful.

"There are a few ops on the docket. I'll see what works for me based on my team." Chaos had resigned, and I understood why he did what he did. I was even a little jealous of him. I wish I could be that decisive. But Steel Rain was solace. This was all I knew. What else would I do? Work some boring security job? I'd seen others do that and wither away. I was only thirty-three years old. I had at least another ten years or more on the field. After that...well, that was a long time away and I could figure it out then.

"You'll stay safe."

I could feel his fear, his hunger for me, his love. I wish I could believe it would last. God damn it! Why couldn't I be like all those other women who wanted a man to offer them what River was ready to give to me? Why couldn't I trust...  
*anyone?*

“I’ll do my best.” I looked at the ocean and turned slightly.  
“Let’s go for a walk.”

The orange-pink hues of the setting sun painted the sky as we walked hand-in-hand towards the crashing waves of the Pacific. The beach was empty. This late in December it was too cold for anyone to be wandering around. I dropped my coat on the sand.

“What are you doing?” River looked at me amused.

“Let’s go for a swim?”

“What?” River glanced at the rolling waves, “The water’s freezing.”

I looked at him, my heart heavy. “I need to feel something, River. I need this memory to be sharp, intense. Something to hold on to.”

Without another word, we began shedding our clothes, leaving them in a haphazard pile on the sand. The cold wind whipped my hair as we ventured deeper into the water, bracing ourselves for the icy embrace of the Pacific.

The first touch of the waves sent shivers up my spine. But as we went deeper, the cold seeped into my very being, numbing the pain, if only momentarily. River held me close, his warmth a stark contrast against the chilled water. I wrapped my arms around him, holding on tightly, as if he was my lifeline.

We didn’t speak. The pounding of the waves and the rhythm of our breathing filled the silence. now and then, a wave would

crash into us, jolting me back to the present. But amidst the icy waters, River's warmth remained constant.

"I wish you'd stay," he whispered into my ear, his voice breaking.

My eyes filled with tears, the salty water of the ocean blending with my own. "I wish it were that simple," I replied, my voice barely audible against the roar of the waves.

We swayed in the water for what seemed like hours, lost in each other, trying to imprint the feel, the taste, the very essence of the moment into our memories.

Finally, as darkness settled, and the stars peppered the sky, we made our way back to the shore.

Standing on the shore, our clothes clinging to our wet bodies, I turned to face him. "Thank you for everything," I whispered.

He cupped my face, his fingers tracing my wet cheeks. "Promise me you'll stay alive, Sunny."

I nodded, tears streaming down my face. "I promise."

We left the beach that evening, the coldness of the ocean a testament to the emptiness that was about to engulf our lives.



# Chapter 38

## RIVER

**I**t took me two months after Sunny left to find my way back to Dr. Marcus Adams. I spent a week drinking. Then I found my camera and went back to work with a vengeance. I went through all the Nigeria footage, edited it, and sent it to Gabby, my editor, who was relieved I wasn't continuing to ghost her.

I avoided Forest and Daisy.

I'd even told Hector to stop coming over.

They all left me alone, albeit grudgingly.

Daisy was probably chomping to come and cuddle me, but I knew Forest was holding her and everyone else off. If anyone understood heartbreak, it was Forest. He'd been heartbroken more than once during his long relationship with Daisy. But they'd found their fucking fairytale ending, and I didn't need to see them happy and cheery. It grated on my nerves.

The great thing about being a workaholic was that it was easy to not think and feel. I worked on the book I'd always

wanted to write about the Syrian war. I went through my footage and photos, notes I had written, and also recordings on my phone.

The words flew from me—what seemed impossible weeks ago was consuming me. And then I hit a wall. Exhausted. You could only avoid yourself for this long.

So, I returned to Dr. Adams' subtly lit office, where ambient light filtered through the blinds. Dr. Marcus Adams' office always had a calming aura, a quiet space where thoughts found a voice. The soft hum of the air conditioner in the background was the only sound as I settled into the plush chair.

“River,” Dr. Adams began, his deep voice steady and comforting, “how are you doing?”

“Like shit,” I told him.

“Tell me about it.”

I hesitated, trying to find the right words. “It’s Sunny,” I finally admitted. “I can’t understand why she left. She wanted to return to danger and uncertainty rather than stay with me. And why did going back mean ending what we had?”

Dr. Adams leaned back, fingers steepled. “It sounds like you’re grappling with a sense of helplessness.”

I nodded, biting my lip. “Tell me something I don’t know. I wanted to be her anchor, her refuge. Instead, she saw me as something weighing her down, caging her.”

There was a brief silence, and then Dr. Adams said, “River, it’s essential to understand that everyone has their own battles

and ways of coping. While Sunny's decisions might be confusing and painful for you, they stem from her need to assert control over her life."

"But why can't she do that with me by her side?" I countered, frustration clear in my voice.

"Sometimes," he responded thoughtfully, "being alone is the only way we truly find ourselves. Sunny might feel the need to confront her demons alone."

I took a deep breath, my hands clenched. "I wish I could've stopped her."

Dr. Adams met my gaze evenly. "But would that be for her or for you? One of the hardest things in life is accepting that we can't control everything, especially the choices of those we love. We can only control our reactions."

"There's one good thing that came out of all this," I said sardonically. "I'm working again."

I told him about the book I was writing and how I was using it as a crutch to distract myself from the bed where we slept together, the house that had become ours. A part of me wanted to leave, but another didn't want to let go of the remnants of her.

"Distractions are not bad," Dr. Adams said, smiling gently. "But, if you're not careful, you'll hit writer's block, and where will that leave you?"

"In deep shit like now," I mused.



Dr. Adams leaned back and looked at me. “Come to terms with your feelings,” he advised gently. “It’s okay to grieve, to feel the loss. But you also need to respect her choices. You can’t, and you shouldn’t, control Sunny. Focus on understanding and managing your emotions.”

It wasn’t what I wanted to hear, but deep down, I knew Dr. Adams was right. Sunny had her journey, and I had mine. As much as I wished they were the same, love meant respecting the other’s path, no matter how painful.

“This is hurting like a motherfucker,” I ground out. “Last time, I had anger to fuel me, and that’s how I kept the grief at bay. This time...damn her.”

“You’re also not a twenty-one-year-old boy, River. You’re a grown man who knows your mind. You’re self-aware and conscious about what’s happening inside you.”

“I’d rather be that guy who didn’t get hurt. It’s been two months, and I wake up every morning looking for her.” I shook my head. “I’m a sappy fucking Romeo. I disgust myself.”

Dr. Adams laughed. “Humor is a great bandage over pain and sorrow. This too shall pass.”

“Words from the wise.” I grinned and then felt sorrow slam into me again. “She won’t come back, will she?”

Dr. Adams shrugged. “This is not about what she does. You can’t live your life like that. This is about how you want to live your life. How you want to build your future.”

“I don’t want to build a fucking future without her.” I resisted the urge to cross my arms and pout like a toddler. Maybe I could stomp my feet as well and end the whole fucking façade of adulthood.

“Yeah. I know.”

“This sucks.”

“Yeah.”

“What do I do?”

“What you’re doing seems to work,” he grinned at me. “Keep working. Creating something is healing. Depressed people don’t create. So, even though it feels like a clusterfuck, it’s not. You’re resilient; you’ll heal.”

“Without her?”

“You have to heal with or without her. This isn’t about Sunny. This is about you.”

“Right,” I murmured. “Aren’t you guys supposed to...you know, help me feel better?”

“It’s a myth. We do fuck all to make anyone feel better.” He gave me an encouraging smile. “You’re stronger than you think, River. And remember, every ending is a new beginning.”

“That sounds like a corny meme.”

“It is,” Dr. Adams agreed. “I saw it on my Insta feed today.”

After I came home, feeling more human than I had for a long while, I called Forest. “Want to take me out for a drink?”

“Why do I have to take you out? I think you owe me a fucking drink. You live in my house. Drive my Stingray. Mope around until my wife is driving me up the wall worrying about you.”

“I’m unemployed.”

“Fuck you, River. Just access your trust fund.”

Neither Forest nor I had dug into our trust funds except to put ourselves through school. We wanted to work for a living and live within our means. Sunny would say that was a luxury for people with money.

“Hey, you have a Hollywood producer wife. I’m a heartbroken dumped man.”

Forest laughed. “Let’s meet at The Brig on Abbot Kinney. It’s walking distance for you.”

“I can come down to you.”

“Nah, you’re probably going to get drunk, so it’s better for you to be within walking distance to your own toilet to puke into.”

The Brig was Abbot Kinney’s last true dive bar that had been around for nearly seven decades, making it a historical landmark in LA. It exuded authentic dive energy but with a retro feel and without the grunge.

Forest brought reinforcements. Mateo, Dec, and Maria’s brother Mark came along to help me deal with my heartbreak. I had met Mark a few times before. He was doing a residency in neurosurgery at UCLA and was a tall, blonde man who

looked more GQ Mimbo than a future neurosurgeon. Dec had once suspected him of having an affair with Esme, and I could see why. Any woman in her right mind would want to hit that.

“Relationships are hard,” Mateo announced as he lifted his glass of Macallan 12.

Dec drank a Mojito because The Brig made excellent ones, while Mark was a Mezcal man. Forest went straight for the IPA on draft. I’d stuck to an oldie but a goodie, Basil Hayden. There is nothing like drowning your sorrows in honest-to-god American whiskey.

“You don’t know from hard,” Dec smirked. “Raya adores you and put up with your crap for a fucking decade.”

“She still puts up with his crap,” Mark pointed out.

“Hey, I’ve mended my ways. I married her and...all that,” Mateo said defensively.

A group of women looking for a good time came up to us. “Hello, gentlemen,” one of them, who looked like a fucking supermodel, said.

“Sorry, honey, I’m married.” Dec showed her his ring.

Mateo and Forest did the same.

“I’m gay,” Mark said. “But if I was not, I’d go for you.”

“I’m too fucked up,” I said.

The supermodel laughed. “You’re funny.”

“Come on, Cilla, let’s go,” another girl pulled her away.

“I’d have hit that in another life,” I said sincerely. “She looks good. She’s hot. She’s looking for a good time. And I’m fucking single.”

“Broken hearts suck,” Forest agreed. “Doesn’t matter, does it? You’re single; you can’t make do with just any woman.”

“I tried.” Mateo raised his hand.

“This asshole tried in front of Raya.” Declan punched his friend on his shoulder. “Remember Natalia?”

Mateo sighed. “That was stupid. Speaking of stupid, Maria mentioned that you’re on a break because you’re stupid, Mark.”

Mark looked at him and groaned. “Why is it that these women talk about everything to everyone?”

“It’s not just the women.” Forest pointed at all of us with his glass. “It’s a myth that women gossip. Take it from someone who sits on the bench. Men cannot shut up.”

Case in point, we all looked at Mark, waiting for him to tell us about his love life.

“I saw his photo,” Mateo prompted. “If I swung that way, I’d go for him. He’s got a bit of Blair Underwood crossed with Idris Elba going for him...according to Raya.”

Mark sighed. “His name is Xavier. He’s a cardio in Seattle. And long-distance is hard, alright?”

“Maria said—”

“Fine. I wanted to break up. It’s confusing to have him far away. And it wasn’t working. Can we talk about Sunny and River? That’s why we’re here, right?”

“Wow,” Declan marveled. “You broke up with a hot doctor because you’re insecure.”

“I am not insecure,” Mark said emphatically. He waved a hand at one of the servers, who came by immediately. “One more.”

We all asked for one more, and the server went their way.

“Come on, Mark, come clean,” I suggested. “It’ll be cathartic and listening to other people’s damaged love lives makes me feel better.”

Mark laughed. “Sure, why don’t I bare my heart in your service. I think he’s the one, but...he’s still hung up on his ex. He’s been honest about that.”

“That is a no-go. I got dumped because I was not over Daisy.” Forest patted Mark’s shoulder. “Sorry about that.”

“How would he prove to you he’s no longer into his ex?” Mateo wanted to know.

Mark shrugged. “I’d believe him if he told me. He’s not the kind of guy who lies and he’s pretty self-aware.”

I raised my glass and sloshed some whiskey on myself. “See, see.”

“What are we seeing?” Dec looked around.

“Sunny doesn’t believe me when I tell her I love her. She thinks it is adrenaline. She thinks I’m going to revert to being twenty-one and stupid. She thinks...I don’t know what the fuck she thinks.”

The server came with our drinks, and we cheered the men and women who broke our hearts.

“What will you do if Xavier comes back and says he’s all yours now?” I asked Mark.

“Take him back in a heartbeat,” Mark replied without hesitation.

“Same.” I clinked my glass with his.

“Me too,” Forest agreed. “I mean, if Daisy said crawl on glass, I’ll fucking do it.”

“You sort of did it,” Dec pointed out. “But then you needed to after the shit you pulled.”

“Hey, my shit was far more decent than Mateo’s.”

I looked at them and said, “You know, I’ve not fucked up the way you guys did. I’ve been good to Sunny. I’ve been—”

“Oh please, you called her a gold digger,” Forest reminded me.

“That was fifteen years ago,” I protested.

The evening turned into night. And I felt better, even if I’d pay for it with the mother of all hangovers the next morning. But it was worth it.

For the first time since Sunny left, my heart felt a little lighter, not because I didn't miss her—but because I felt there was hope that she may return. Maybe not all was lost. Just maybe...she'd find her way back to me.





# Chapter 39

## SUNNY

**I**t was like it had always been. The team, me, and the work. Except...everything inside me hurt. No matter where I slept, a tent, my bed in Providence, a hotel room somewhere, I reached for River.

I wanted to call him every day, and every day I didn't. I deleted his contact information from my phone so I wouldn't be tempted to contact him. He couldn't contact me when I was on an op—I didn't carry my phone. But as soon as I was off, I'd check my phone to see if there was a missed call from his number or a text message from him. I may have deleted his contact information, but I remembered his digits by heart.

We kept the team small because it was a simple op, just Phantom, Glitch, and me. Well as simple as an op in the Hindu Kush mountain range, stretching between central Afghanistan and northern Pakistan.

Our recon mission was to identify the base and activities of a Russian arms dealer, Mikhail Ivanovitch Petrov, the leader of the Zolotoy Orel Golden Eagle Syndicate. Often referred to as

Misha the Merciless, Petrov rose in the underground arms trade during the tumultuous years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Capitalizing on the chaos, Petrov established the Zolotoy Orel, which quickly grew into one of the world's most formidable and shadowy arms networks. With its connections deep within the corrupt elements of the Russian military and bureaucracy, Zolotoy Orel got its hands on a wide range of weapons, from old Soviet-era arms to modern innovative weaponry. Their operations spanned from Eastern Europe to Central Asia and even parts of the Middle East.

“Petrov and the Golden Eagle Syndicate are known for their ruthlessness and efficiency,” Steel Rain continued his briefing in the Steel Rain offices in Prague. “As you know, Phoenix, they operate from various locations, often choosing remote, challenging terrains, making it hard for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to track them down.”

I nodded. I had tangled with Zolotoy Orel before. I had shrapnel removed from my left shoulder blade that left a substantial scar, which pricked as I went through the intel before me.

Steel Rain's right-hand woman, Cindy Justice, that's her real name, pulled up a satellite image on the screen in front of us. “This region is notorious for its challenging terrains and has historically been a hotspot for various clandestine activities. The extreme cold and its rugged and remote landscape make it both a strategic hideout for adversaries and a challenging arena for operations.”

Unlike other ops like the one where we had to rescue River, there usually wasn't a time urgency for recon, but not this time. With the war blazing in Ukraine, the DOJ wanted us to expand the intel on Petrov and use that to develop a few scenarios of capturing the arms dealer, preferably alive.

After the briefing, I went to my room in the Steel Rain facility, which operated like a fort, office, and five-star hotel.

I wished Chaos was there with us, but I was happy he'd found his way out of this job. Did I want to do the same? I didn't know. What I knew was that I missed River.

I picked up my phone and looked at the pictures I'd taken that last week with him. Selfies. Photos of him sleeping, running, working out, holding my hand.... *Fuck! I missed the son of a bitch.*

I got ready as we would leave at ten hundred hours. For a reconnaissance mission in the snowy, mountainous terrains of the Hindu Kush, I was provided with specialized equipment. All my gear needed to be designed for quick, efficient movement so I wouldn't be hindered by my equipment while navigating treacherous terrains or engaging in potential combat situations.

I put on my base layer of clothing a hi-tech material made of moisture-wicking to keep sweat away from the skin, preventing chill, and regulating body temperature by moving perspiration away. Layer upon layer protected against the elements. On top of my GORE-TEX shell jacket, I put on my

tactical vest with multiple pockets to hold essential gear, ammo, and other quick-access items.

I strapped on insulated waterproof tactical boots that offered good ankle support and were suitable for trekking in snowy conditions. They came with gaiters to keep out the snow. I pocketed my gloves, insulated beanie, and polarized sunglasses in my tactical vest. I made sure my tactical belt had my handgun, knife, and ammo.

Glitch would give me my earpiece, GPS device, and radio unit en route. I packed my tactical backpack with the MOLLE (Modular Lightweight Load-carrying Equipment) system, which had various pouches for extra gear and tools, rations, additional clothing, and medical kit.

Ready for recon and battle, I looked at myself in the mirror. My hair was tied away from my face. I hadn't cut it short. River had said nothing, but I knew he liked my hair long and enjoyed running his fingers through it when he thought I was asleep or not paying attention.

Now was not the time to think about River and get distracted. But the heart wanted what it wanted, and mine wanted River Knight. *Fucking hell!*

Phantom listened to music while Glitch was glued to his screen as we were flown close to the operation zone on a stealth-equipped MH-60 Black Hawk helicopter designed for covert ops. We flew at night and at a low altitude to avoid radar detection.

Once we were at the drop point, given the remote and treacherous terrain, a High Altitude-Low Opening (HALO) parachute jump was the most efficient method to insert the team without drawing attention. We'd be jumping from a significant height and opening the parachute at a much lower altitude to reduce the time spent in the air to minimize detection.

We'd done this before, many times. This was old hat. None of us was worried or even concerned about the basics. But we were all going through the steps as I was in my mind. No matter how much of an expert you were, you had to prepare for every operation mentally and physically.

We came to the drop zone, and Phantom and I lined up to jump. The mountains stretched endlessly, their jagged peaks cutting into the midnight-blue sky. I took the leap first, and Phantom followed. Glitch would remain in the Black Hawk. He would land at a safe distance, and he'd establish a secure and encrypted line of communication back to the Steel Rain command center. This would ensure that we were continuously updated, and that he could also send back real-time information.

We hid the parachutes by piling snow on top of them. White on white, they wouldn't be easy to spot unless someone specifically came looking.

The snow under my boots was powdery, each step an effort to keep from sinking too deep. My breath formed small clouds, dissipating almost immediately in the frigid air.

“We’re getting close,” Phantom murmured, his voice barely audible over the rustling of the wind.

“Glitch to team, comms check. Do you copy?” Glitch’s voice transmitted over the earpiece.

“Roger that, Glitch. Five by five,” Phantom responded.

“You think Petrov’s here, Phoenix?” Phantom asked, his blue eyes scanning the horizon.

“I think so,” I replied.

The raw memory of the bullet wounds I’d taken in Nigeria tightened in my thigh. That physical and emotional pain was still fresh, just like the memory of River. His words, “I love you,” echoed, but I’d left without looking back, trying to find redemption in this frozen wasteland. I was a moron.

I shook the thought and focused on the recon mission. “Glitch, any updates?”

“Satellite shows movement half a klick east. It’s likely our guy. Be careful,” Glitch’s voice crackled in my earpiece.

Suddenly, the ground beneath us shifted, and before I could register it, I felt my feet give away. The earth seemed to swallow us whole. Phantom and I plunged downwards, snow and debris clouding my vision. The sheer drop and velocity stole my breath.

We landed with a thud, snow cushioning our fall somewhat. Groaning, I pushed myself up, feeling the cold sting on my skin. “Phantom?” I rasped, trying to clear the snow from my eyes.

He didn't answer immediately. Scanning the dimness of the crevice, I finally spotted him. He lay on his back, grimacing in pain. "My leg," he murmured, "I think it's broken."

Quickly, I crawled to his side. His leg was bent at an odd angle. The reality hit hard—we were trapped, marooned in this snowy tomb, and one of us was injured.

"Glitch?" I tried the comms, but all I got was static. The fall must have damaged the connection, or even worse, we were too deep for any signal to penetrate.

My heart raced as I tried to take in our surroundings. The walls of the crevice were steep, glistening with ice. Our escape wouldn't be easy.

"We need to find a way out and establish comms," I said, more to myself than Phantom.

Phantom grabbed my wrist, his grip firm despite his pain. "Go. I'm a liability right now."

"Fuck, no."

Determination welled up inside me. We had faced impossible situations before, and this was just another challenge. I nodded, taking a deep breath, ready to find our way out of this icy prison.





# Chapter 40

## RIVER

I had stopped counting the days since she left. Spring was in full bloom, and I was halfway through my book about the Syrian conflict. My editor loved the title of the book, *Syria's Silent Screams: Snapshots of a Civil Strife*.

I kept waiting for the morning when, between dream and wakefulness, I did not think she was with me. I ached for her. I tried a week ago to see if I could find an available body to take home and drown myself in sex, but no other woman would do. I wanted only Sunny, and she had left me.

Hector had returned to make sure I didn't live in my own filth, had food to eat and my laundry got done. He told me not to drink too much, which I ignored. He didn't push me. He understood that grief would take the time it took. I regularly saw Dr. Adams, who told me there was no shortcut to feeling better.

*Yeah, even my therapist couldn't see the end of this shitshow.*

I had worked for three hours when I finally rose from the dining table, which I used as my office.

The Californian sun streamed through the windows of Forest's Venice Beach home, casting patterns of light and shadow on the hardwood floor. The ocean's rhythm outside, usually a source of calm for me, seemed distant that day as if it was holding its breath, waiting for something. And in that moment, a knock on the door broke the stillness.

I opened the door and saw Forest, his usually vibrant blue eyes clouded with concern. He looked worn out like he'd been traveling for days without a break. The weight of some unspoken burden pressed down on him.

"Forest?" I asked, motioning for him to come in. "Daisy, okay? Kai?"

"Yeah, yeah," he replied, hesitating for a split second, taking a deep breath as if bracing himself, and continued shakily, "It's Sunny."

A cold grip seized my heart. *Sunny*. Just her name brought a flood of memories—her laughter, her nose crinkled when she was thinking hard, the feel of her hand in mine.

Forest continued, "She and Phantom were on a recon in the Hindu Kush. Their team lost contact with them after some unexpected movement in the terrain. They think... they think they might be..." His voice trailed off, the gravity of his words hanging in the air.

*Gone*. The word echoed in my mind, but I couldn't, or wouldn't, voice it. The room suddenly felt too small, the weight of the news pressing down on me.

I stumbled back, plopping on the sofa, my thoughts racing. Not Sunny. Not like this. How many times had she gone into danger and come back? She was invincible, or so I'd wanted to believe. Since she'd left, there had been a fear that this moment would come.

Forest sat beside me, his hand resting on my shoulder, offering silent comfort. The brothers, bound by blood and shared grief, united in a moment that changed everything.

"We'll find her," Forest whispered, determination evident in his voice. "If there's even the slightest chance she's out there, they'll find her. Max Steele is on it."

Max Steele, I had learned, was the leader and owner of Steel Rain, a former operative himself.

I nodded, the pain in my chest sharp and unyielding. "You think she's alive?" My voice was hoarse. "Or are you saying they'll find her body?"

He didn't reply. There wasn't anything to say. We sat there for a while, quiet, my heart hammering so loudly that I couldn't hear anything but the pain of loss inside me.

"Daisy—" Forest began.

I interrupted him, shaking my head. I couldn't handle her right now. I couldn't handle anyone who would try to make me

feel better. I didn't want to fucking feel better. If Sunny was dead...*fuck*...dead?... then nothing would make it better.

The moment Forest left because I kicked him out, a burning need to act surged within me. I needed answers and knew just the person who might have them. With shaky hands, I dialed Dom. He had a network that spanned continents, and Dom would know if there were whispers about Sunny in any corridor.

The phone seemed to ring forever, each tone gnawing at my frayed nerves. Finally, a voice on the other end answered, "Delacour."

"Dom," I began, trying to maintain composure. "It's River. I need your help."

There was a pause, a weighty silence. "I heard about Sunny. I'm sorry, River."

How the fuck did he already know? Well, this was Dom. He knew everything.

"Sorry doesn't help me right now," I snapped, my emotions raw. "I need information. Anything. Anyone who saw them last, anyone who might know something."

Dom exhaled, his sigh audibly heavy. "You know how these things work. The Hindu Kush isn't exactly friendly territory, and intel from that region is... spotty, at best."

"What the fuck were they doing there?"

"Damn it, Riv, you know this shit is classified up the—"

“Dom,” I warned.

“Fine, get me fired. They were on a recon mission to identify the base of Russian arms dealer Mikhail Ivanovitch Petrov.”

“They were after *Misha the Merciless*?” I’d heard about the leader of the Golden Eagle Syndicate. *Fuck!* Were they jobs she could take that were not so fucking dangerous?

“Not after, just recon. Small team. Look, I don’t know a lot. I’m in the fucking Middle East, so....”

I clenched my jaw, frustration mounting. “Damn it, Dom. I need something, anything!”

Dom remained silent for a moment, and then his voice lowered, taking on a tone of quiet determination. “Okay. Give me twenty-four hours. I’ll dig into it and see what I can find out. But, River,” he cautioned, “whatever we find or don’t find, promise me you won’t do anything rash.”

*Like what? Take my camera and run to the Hindu Kush?*

Yeah. I could do that. I could go. I could tell Gabby that I wanted to do a story on *Misha the Merciless*.

I looked out at the waves crashing on the shore, the ocean’s vastness before me, and felt the weight of the unknown. “I can’t make promises when it comes to her, Dom. Just... get me what you can.”

“I’ll do my best,” he replied, and the call ended.

Leaning against the wall, I tried to steady myself, taking deep breaths. The waiting game had begun. Every second

without answers was agony.

As the sun descended, casting long shadows across the room, there was another knock on my door. It was a rhythm I was becoming all too familiar with, each one bringing more heartache and dread. Opening it, I was met by a tall, white-haired man. A large, muscled and scary-looking man.

“Hi, River, I’m Max Steele.” He held out his hand, and I shook it, my heart pounding in anticipation of what he might say.

*She’s gone. He’s here to tell me she’s gone.*

We moved inside, the setting sun casting a melancholy glow across the room. He took a deep breath, clearly bracing himself. “I wanted to come personally and assure you we’re doing everything possible to bring Sunny and Phantom back.”

I stared at him, my patience wearing thin. “Is she dead?”

Max hesitated, his gaze dropping to the floor momentarily before he met my eyes. “We don’t know. The recon, as you know, was to track an arms dealer in the Hindu Kush. We believe they were near an old trading route when an unexpected avalanche or a landslide might’ve occurred. We’ve recovered some equipment... but no sign of them.”

An icy grip took hold of my chest. “What are you telling me?”

Max looked pained. “River, I’ve been in this business for a long time. I’ve seen situations like this... the odds of them surviving something like that in that terrain...”

“I don’t give a damn about odds!” I shouted, my voice echoing with raw anguish.

Max looked at me, his eyes searching mine, filled with empathy. “I know how much she means to you. If it were up to me, I’d move mountains to bring them back. But the reality is —”

“I don’t want to hear about reality,” I interjected, my voice breaking. It was crushing: the weight of it all, the uncertainty, the not knowing.

*I wanted her back.*

Max put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “We’ll keep looking. I promise you that. We owe it to both of them.”

But as he spoke, the glimmer of hope that had sustained me dimmed. The walls seemed to close in, and a hollow emptiness settled in my chest. Sunny, my guiding light, my anchor, was lost, and the darkness threatened to consume me.





# Chapter 41

## SUNNY

**T**he weight of the cold pressed down on us, each breath stinging in the thin mountain air. We'd now been down here for over ten hours. I had tried several ways to get up and finally found one that could work.

The shadows grew long in the crevice as Phantom, with his broken leg, and I tried to figure out a way out of the cold, dark trap.

“Go up without me,” he suggested.

“No.” If I went up and something happened to me, then Phantom would be here on his own, no way out, no help coming. “We do this together.”

“Sunny—”

“Shut up, Eli, and do as you're told. It's a fucking order.”

I needed to get out of here. I felt desperation settle inside me. I needed to get out of here and get back to River.

What the fuck was wrong with me? Why did I think proving to myself that I could go back to work was more important than accepting he loved me?

With a grunt, I wedged between the two icy walls, using my arms and legs to climb slowly, creating footholds and handholds for Phantom to use below me. His pain was evident in every move, every pained breath, but determination lit his eyes. He wasn't giving up, and neither was I.

The cold was biting, our breaths visible in the chilly air as we made our way up the crevice. Each movement was deliberate, the slick ice under our gloves making it a treacherous climb.

Phantom grunted as he secured his grip, "This might just top the list of our worst ops."

I laughed breathlessly, "Really? Worse than when we parachuted into the Amazon, you got stuck in that tree?"

He smirked, "That was one time, and there was an aggressive parrot that had it out for me."

"Or what about Morocco? When that shortcut you took led us straight into that camel market?"

Phantom winced. "That camel had no right to be so territorial. And let's not even start on the sounds it made."

I couldn't help but giggle; the memory vivid. "I've never seen you move that fast. Though, for the sheer surprise factor, nothing beats our drop-in Mongolia. I still can't believe we landed in the middle of a wedding ceremony."

He chuckled, “Oh, the look on that bride’s face was priceless. But if we’re talking about surprises, what about our mission in Prague? I still have nightmares about those mimes.”

I shuddered, “That was surreal. Who knew a mime convention would be so... aggressive?”

As we inched upwards, our laughter and shared memories created a warmth contrasting with the icy surroundings. These moments and shared memories of past disasters turned into funny stories, making the hard times bearable.

“So, where does this op rank?” Phantom’s words were strained; I knew that he was biting back pain. A broken bone was a beast.

“It’s definitely going to make the top five. But let’s get out of here before it takes the number one spot.”

It felt like hours before we reached the top, muscles screaming, fingers nearly frostbitten. But the sight that greeted us was anything but welcoming. A group of heavily armed men was spread out across the snowy plateau. One of them pointed in our direction, shouting something in Russian.

“Down!” I yelled, pulling Phantom to the ground as bullets sprayed around us.

We returned fire, the stark echo of our weapons loud in the icy wilderness. But with Phantom’s injury and our limited ammunition, we were clearly at a disadvantage.

Then, just when it seemed our odds couldn’t get worse, I caught a familiar sound cutting through the gunfire, the distant

whir of a drone.

Glitch had found us.

“Welcome back, Phoenix and Phantom.” His nerdy voice had never sounded this good.

“Fucking A, Glitch. Phantom is hurt and—” The surrounding gunfire went nuts. Phantom and I stayed down; it was not an easy task when you didn’t want to slide back into an icy crevice in a treacherous mountain.

We continued to engage the arms dealer’s men, trying to keep their attention focused on us. With each burst of gunfire, I hoped and prayed that Glitch would pinpoint our location and send backup.

Suddenly, an explosion erupted from the side, sending a couple of the arms dealer’s men flying. Glitch’s drone had delivered a precise strike, evening the odds.

A hail of bullets came from our side as a backup team, having traced the drone’s path, swooped down, guns blazing. The arms dealer’s men, surprised and outflanked, were quickly neutralized.

Phantom and I, bruised and battered but alive, were quickly surrounded by Steel Rain fighters.

Rebound, his face smeared with camouflage paint and worry, clapped me on the back. “Thought we’d lost you,” he said, relief evident in his voice.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Phantom asked.

“You’ve been missing for twenty hours. You really think I’d continue to stay in Paris on vacay?”

As we were airlifted out of the treacherous mountain terrain, I leaned back, exhausted but alive. We’d survived. And in our line of work, survival was a victory.

“Glitch, I need a favor,” I said into my earpiece.

“Name it.”

“I need transpo ASAP to California.”

“What?”

“ASAP,” I enunciated.

Phantom smiled at me as the medics worked on stabilizing his leg and shooting him up with painkillers.

“Where in California?” Glitch asked.

“Venice Beach. *Home.*”



# Chapter 42

## RIVER

**F**orest hugged me. I leaned into him and let go. It had been a long time since I'd cried. But the relief of knowing Sunny was alive and not hurt. That her friend and teammate Phantom had only a broken leg, which made him ornery but was not life-threatening, was such a relief that I felt all the dams break.

After the storm subsided, Daisy held a champagne bottle in one hand as she came up to us. "We must celebrate."

I didn't really feel like it. She was alive, yes, but she wasn't with me, was she? But right now, that didn't matter. She was breathing somewhere in the world, and my heart was whole for a moment.

Hector took the champagne bottle from Daisy and opened it. He filled our glasses, and we drank, cheering, "For Sunny."

Kai, who was playing on a blanket, gurgled with laughter. I set my glass down and picked him up. There was nothing as comforting as holding my nephew. He pulled my nose with his



pudgy hands. I kissed his plump cheek. He had crossed the one year mark and was getting stronger. He could crawl with the best of them and was probably days away from starting to walk. I couldn't wait.

“Where is she?” I asked, letting Kai yank my hair.

“In Prague,” Forest informed me and looked at Hector, who serenely smiled as he drank his champagne.

“Hector, can you charter a plane for me? I need to see her.” I decided on the fly. *Fuck it.* I would not sit on the sidelines. She was going to have to deal with me. I loved her, and I wasn't letting her go. She could continue her life-threatening job, but we would be together.

What I was doing right now was not living. It was barely surviving. I wanted her with me where she fucking belonged. Enough was enough.

“Ah, Master River, maybe you should wait a little,” Hector suggested.

I stared at him like he was nuts. “Wait for what? Look, I'll fly commercial. I'm not Dec, I can fly fucking commercial.”

Kai made a face when I raised my voice. I smiled and kissed his nose. “Not angry with you, little man.”

“Give her time to recover,” Daisy offered.

“Is she hurt?” My chest felt too small to hold my breath.

“She's probably tired,” Forest said.

“What's going on?” I demanded.

Daisy took a deep breath and put a hand on my shoulder. “Max told us she’s specifically said that she won’t see you.”

I felt my heart plummet. Here I was, dying inch by inch, and she was....

Hector looked at me with pity when I handed Kai to him.

“Fine. Fine. She doesn’t want me anymore.”

“Just give her time,” Daisy whispered.

I shook my head. “Thank you for coming over. But I’m fine. Actually, I think I’m going to go for a swim.”

“Ah...” Daisy looked at Forest. “I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Why?” I asked, confused.

“Just in case you’re thinking of drowning yourself or something,” she said, her eyes wide.

Hysteria bubbled out of me. “Daisy, I just need to clear my head. I will not kill myself because a woman dumped my ass.”

“Master River, I think a swim is a good idea.”

They were all behaving strangely, but I chalked it up to concern for me.

“I’m fine,” I yelled, startling Kai, whose face devolved into a sad puppy dog and big fat tears.

“Fuck,” I muttered and took him from Hector. “Let’s go for a walk, little man. You and me.”

Kai grinned and licked my face sloppily. It was his way of kissing these days. I adored the kid. And no, he didn’t make

me wonder what Sunny and my baby would be like. Didn't make me think about that at all.



# Chapter 43

## SUNNY

I watched him from the beach, from a distance. Hector had told me they'd kept him from coming to Prague, knowing I was coming to California by telling him I didn't want to see him. Apparently, Daisy had choked and said the first thing that came to her mind, worried River would get on a plane.

He hadn't shaved. He looked grim. He was reading a book while he drank something, probably American whiskey. He favored Basil Hayden.

The sea breeze rustled the palm trees and carried the familiar scent of the ocean as I stepped onto the sandy stretch of Venice Beach. There he was, River, sitting on the patio of our favorite spot, lost in thought. The same patio where we had shared countless sunsets, dreams, and whispered secrets.

Taking a deep breath, I walked onto the patio, my heart pounding in my chest. It had been months and seeing him up close filled me with both yearning and dread. "River," I whispered.

His head jerked up from the book he was reading, eyes widening in shock and then narrowing with an anger I had never seen in him before. “Sunny?”

“I—”

“I was told you didn’t want to see me.”

I licked my lips and crouched in front of him. “Hector knew I was coming to you so...Daisy...I...” My words got lost inside me. It was so good to see him again. I put my hands on his thighs and touching him settled everything inside me. I was home. I was with River.

“Why the fuck are you here, Sunny?” His voice was crisp. Anger dripped from every word.

“I came back for you...for us.” I felt the weight of every word.

He eyed me skeptically, the hurt evident. “Why? And why now?”

Tears welled in my eyes. “I was scared,” I admitted. “Scared of how much I needed you. Scared of losing myself. But I’ve realized something. Without you, there’s no me.”

He said nothing for a long time, and my courage flagged. *Had I misread him, us?* Was he already over me? No, he couldn’t be. He was going to come to Prague to see me. Hector told me he was devastated, thinking I was dead.

“What has changed? I’m still the same man. I love you. I haven’t changed.”

Desperation laced my voice. “I have. I’m not the same person, River. I’m stronger now, stronger with you. I believe in us. I believe in you.”

He stood up and took a step away from me, looking torn. “I can’t go through this again, Sunny.”

Heartbreaking, I stood up and sank onto the patio chair, feeling defeated. “I know,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

“Hurt me? You fucking destroyed me. And while I’ve been here, where the fuck have you been, Sunny? Killing yourself?”

I’d never seen him this angry. Scratch that. I had that time fifteen years ago when he’d thought I had used him. I was going to lose him again; and this time, it would be my fault. He’d given himself on a platter to me, and I’d pushed him away.

“I told Max that I would not be on the field anymore,” I whispered, unsure if it mattered.

“Explain why you’re giving up this career you left me for?”

I looked up at him. “I didn’t leave because of my career. I...I wanted to feel like me. It was so difficult to be out of commission. But now...I want us. I want to sit here on this patio and read a book with you. I want us to sleep together and make love. I want us to build a life. Have babies.” A sob tore through me because he was rigid, unmoving.

River turned and walked inside the house, leaving me with the crashing waves and the memories of what we once had.

Tears streamed down my face, mourning the love that seemed lost forever.

After what felt like hours, the patio door slid open again. I didn't dare to look up, fearing another rejection. But then, River's familiar, gentle hand cradled mine. When I raised my eyes, they met his, filled with raw vulnerability. Without a word, he slid a ring onto my finger.

"This time," he said, voice hoarse, "I want forever."

Joy bubbled up inside me, as brilliant as the California sun. The pain and uncertainty seemed to melt away in the face of the undeniable love that bound us.

"What?" I stared at the ring. "Is there a jewelry shop inside the house that I didn't know about?"

He grinned. "I bought it before we went to Providence. I wanted to give it to you there, but...."

"But I was adamant about ending us," I finished for him.

He nodded. "Do you like it?"

The engagement ring was as unique and radiant as he was. At its heart lay a brilliant round-cut diamond, clear and flawless, nestled within an intricate setting resembling intertwined vines, symbolizing interwoven lives and challenges.

"It's stunning." *I don't deserve it.*

"Yes, you do," he whispered as if he could see within me. He probably could. "You know why I picked this ring?"



I shook my head.

“The ring has a rugged finish to pay homage to your adventurous spirit and the paths less traveled.” He kissed me then, softly, letting his lips brush against mine. “The sapphires are as blue as the Pacific that kept us company while we healed.” The little gems adorned the white gold band at irregular intervals.

He kissed my cheeks. “I wanted to give you something that showed you how much I appreciate your courage, depth, and the mysteries that make you the incredible woman you are.”

He kissed my tears as they rolled down my face.

“This ring is you, Sunshine, the perfect balance between elegance and individuality. You are both a force of nature and a beacon of grace.”

He kissed my eyes closed. “This ring is not just a symbol of my commitment to you, your commitment to me, to us, but a testament to our past and future journey. I love you, Sunny French.”

I opened my eyes, and a laugh slipped through my tears. “You didn’t ask me to marry you, River.”

“No,” he agreed. “If I ask, you’ll overthink it and say no. So, hell no. I’m not asking you. I’m telling you we’re getting married. I don’t care where and how. Forest can probably marry us tomorrow in his chambers.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday,” I whispered, the joy inside me feeling like it would burst out. “But we can go on Monday.”

“Yeah?” River’s eyes became moist.

“Yeah.”

“Where do you want to live?”

“For now, can we live here?” I looked around the house that had been our home, our cocoon.

“Yes.”

“But Forest probably wants us to find our own—”

“It’s ours,” he interrupted me. “Forest doesn’t care, baby. It’s just a house; we make it a home. He’d never want us out of our home.”

I nodded. “But I need to go back to work and...I don’t know what I can do. I have money, but...River, it’s all a mess right now.”

“Why don’t we figure it out together?” he suggested.

“I’d like that and—whoa,” I cried as he picked me up. “What?”

“Woman, you’re back. I haven’t had sex in months. I want to get laid.”

I rolled my eyes, happiness bubbling through me like fine champagne. “You’re such a romantic, River Knight.”

“Is that what you want, Sunny French? Romance?”

“No,” I shook my head, tightening my hold on him. “I want you. Just you.”



# Chapter 44

## RIVER

“Hey, we never agreed on spanking,” she yelped when I planted one on her ass.

“You want me to stop?” I gently bit her bare tight ass and kissed the bite to soothe it.

“No.” She spread her legs as she lay on her stomach on our bed. “If it makes you feel better, I’ll sacrifice.”

I grinned. “Never thought you’d be into recreational spanking, Sunshine.” I slipped a finger inside her wet heat. I couldn’t believe this was real. She was real. A minute ago, I thought she was dead, not just gone from me but gone from the universe, and now she was here, this flesh and blood love of my life. The woman who made everything right.

“River,” she whispered.

“Yeah, baby.” I lifted her hips and slid over her, inside her, at the same time.

“Oh god,” she moaned.

I was home. I was inside her again.

“Baby. Never leave me again. God, don’t leave me again.”

I moved inside her, and she whimpered. “Never again.”

“You promise.”

“As soon as you give me an orgasm,” she said cheekily.

I pulled out of her and turned her around. I wanted to look into her eyes, see her face, see my home in her eyes. I lifted her thighs, put them over my shoulder, and slammed into her. Her eyes closed, and she came.

“Baby, look at me,” I pleaded, and she did, her eyes glazed with pleasure.

“Come for me, River.”

“Yes, baby. I will.” I slammed again and again inside her; the pleasure was unbelievable. I was almost afraid that this was a dream and I’d wake up without her.

“I love you,” she cried as she clenched around me, and I followed, replete, happy, unbearably content.

We lay together in the way that had become ours. Her head on my shoulder, one thigh between mine, against my wet and semi-hard erection. I held her as if she were precious because she was. She put her left hand on my chest and looked at the ring.

“Was it very expensive?” she asked guiltily.

“Tremendously.”

She looked stricken. “River,” she protested.

“I’m a fucking Knight; I have more money than I know what to do with. But if it makes you feel better, I bought this as a salaried photojournalist and didn’t dip into the family money. Happy?”

“I don’t need such an expensive ring,” she was flustered. “How much was it?”

“Don’t be rude, Sunny.”

“No, really. Look, I’m working class and—”

“Shut up.” I kissed her in her mouth. “I don’t want to hear the whole working masses shit. I know all about it. But you’re marrying into a shit ton of money, get used to it.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“Fine. Then we’ll live without the money.”

“Really?” She looked shocked. “You’d do that for me.”

I smiled at her. “Baby, I’ve been doing *it*. Forest has been. I don’t even have a place. This is Forest’s house, and he lives in Daisy’s house. Now, she has money because she earns it hand over fist.”

“I do okay, but I don’t know how my finances will—”

I kissed her again. “Sunshine, please. I promise you we’re good.”

“So, you don’t mind flying monkey class?” she teased.

“Not at all. My cousin Dec is the one who has a plane. But he’s very spoiled.”

She relaxed against me. “What are you planning to do now that you quit the *Times*?”

I told her about my book, how not having her around meant that I could drown myself in work, and I had.

“Can I read it?” she asked.

“Absolutely. You can probably enhance it. I’m assuming you’ve worked in Syria.”

She shrugged. “I don’t think you have the security clearance for what I know.”

“I have friends in high places,” I informed her. “I know all about your Golden Syndicate recon mission.”

She was surprised. “Who told you?”

“Max may have said something to Forest and...I talked to Dom. He told me even though he was worried he’d get fired.”

Sunny sat up then. “You can’t ask questions like this. Damn it, River. This is national fucking security.”

She swore, so I knew it was serious when she did.

“Dom may have said so under duress because I thought you were dead.” The remembered pain flashed in my eyes, and she softened immediately.

“I’m so sorry, baby.” She kissed my lips. “I’m never going to make you worry like that again. And you have to promise me that you’ll not go to some war zone to take photos either.”

“Maybe we can go together,” I suggested.

She rolled her eyes. “Did we or did we not just talk about security clearances?”

I sighed. “You spooks are so serious.”

She sat cross-legged next to me, and I stuffed pillows under my head so I could watch her. “Will we be fine?”

“We are fine,” I replied, trailing a finger down her arm.

“But...what if you...or I...or...”

“Baby, I love you, and you love me. We’ll get through the what-ifs.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

She laughed then, a big happy laugh. She held up her hand, and the diamonds flashed as the light from the bedside lamp sprinkled on it. “This is for real.”

“Considering how much that ring cost me, yeah, I’d say it’s for real.”

“You know, it’s a fantastic ring. So...I’m okay with you spending the money.”

“I’m relieved,” I said sarcastically.

“We need to go shopping.”

I quirked an eyebrow. Sunny hated shopping. “Who are you, and what have you done with Sunshine?”

“I need to buy a ring for you. We need wedding bands if we’re getting married. Are we getting married tomorrow?”



I grinned. “I have wedding bands. Do you think I’d not get those when I got the ring? And, yes, we’re getting married. I texted Forest, and he made some noise because he’s not *that kind of* judge, according to him. But he married Dec and Esme and Mateo and Raya.”

“And now he’ll marry us,” she looked at her ring reverently.

“Yeah,” I breathed.

She launched herself on me, laughing. “Thank you.”

“For?”

“For not giving up on me,”

“And thank you for coming back, baby. I promise I’ll make it worth your while. But before we continue this, I’d like to remind you that you haven’t said the three little words to me.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “I come here straight from the Hindu Kush where I almost died and you’re complaining that I didn’t say the three little words?”

“Well, yeah.”

She laughed. “I love you, River Knight. Happy?”

“Incandescently.”

## **THE END**

Thank you so much for reading *Twisted Hearts*. Keep the story going and find out how River and Sunny spend their honeymoon in Istanbul on my website at [www.MayaAlden.com](http://www.MayaAlden.com).

# Golden Promises: Excerpt

## ALEJANDRO

It had been six months since I'd had sex and celibacy did not suit me.

It wasn't because I was busy at work or life or anything else that caused this sexual deprivation; it was a *woman* I couldn't shake off. Her taste was in my mouth—sweet and spicy, like chocolate and cinnamon. I could hear her husky voice when she was aroused, especially when I put my hands on her. *Alejandro*, she'd whimpered when I cupped her breast through her clothes.

I'd kissed her and touched *one* of her breasts like I was in fucking high school, and she had me so hot that six months later, I wanted no one but her.

I'd seen her for dinner two months ago in Fresno, but that was too close to where I lived. I didn't bring a woman home or close to home. I didn't mix sex and family. My priorities were simple. My son Silvano, who was eleven, came first, *always*; my family came next, and my business came last. There was no room for a woman. And what did I need a woman for?

Sex? Well, that I could get hassle-free. I was Alejandro Santos, the CEO of one of the largest farms in the United States West Coast—and I'd been told I wasn't hard on the eyes.

I traveled a lot for work, and it was easy to find another road warrior who wanted sexual relief without complications because if they seemed *the type* who tried to complicate matters, they weren't *my type*.

Now, *this* woman, chocolate, and cinnamon was complicated up the wazoo. *Dios mío*, she was driving me crazy.

It wasn't like I hadn't tried to get rid of her. I had.

I tried to sleep with other women, but I couldn't close the deal. It was almost like if I kissed another woman, I'd lose her taste, and I was addicted to the memory of it. Is this how a forty-two-year-old man behaved? *No*. But I couldn't help myself. This had never happened before.

Since I practiced Ashtanga yoga, I tried to meditate her the hell out of my head. It hadn't worked.

I buried myself in work. That became a more significant problem because whenever I was in a hotel room for the night, I was tempted to call her and see if maybe she'd open to at least phone sex, anything at all, to hear her voice again calling my name.

I volunteered to help during my son's school trip to the Downing Planetarium in Fresno. The other parent was a devoted mother who gave me a stern look whenever I checked

my email on my phone. I wished Maria had been with me because it would have been tolerable.

I went camping with Silvano to Mono Lake and at night wondered if she'd like to lie with me and watch the stars.

So, yeah, I was fucked because it looked like I didn't just want to have sex with Maria Caruso. I wanted a relationship with her, and I didn't have time for that.

However, I was getting desperate, so I asked her to have dinner with me when I was in Los Angeles for a meeting. I'd hoped she'd invite me to her place or come to my hotel—but she suggested a restaurant *close* to her house in Silver Lake.

I met Mateo for a drink at the Intercontinental Hotel's lobby bar on the seventy-first floor. Mateo and Raya Silva had become family since my mother, Paloma, had introduced us to the woman she'd helped in Boston when she was a young girl. My mother used to work at a women's shelter. It was at Mateo and Raya's wedding reception that I'd fucked my life up by dancing with the elegant woman who made my cock hard by just taking a sip of champagne and laughing that made me think of fairies and fucking pixies, books I'd read to my baby sister Isadora when she was little.

There was something about Maria that made me want to muss her up. I wanted to run my hands through her soft and silky straight hair. I wanted her lipstick to be smudged. I wanted to see a beard burn on her cheek, a hickey on her neck...I wanted to brand. *Yeah*, so she brought out the alpha male in me, someone I hadn't seen in a long time.

“Raya and I are thinking of getting a place close to you guys,” Mateo told me.

I smiled. “Why not use one of the cottages on the farm? Or we can give you a piece of land if you want to build a place.”

Mateo stared at me like I’d grown a second head.

“What?” I asked.

“Are you saying we could build a home in Golden Valley?”

Golden Valley was our family estate, where we built homes for the family over our acres of land. The rest was used for farming and raising some cattle for personal use.

I nodded. “You’re family. Isadora has reserved her piece of land by the lake—if you want that, you need to discuss that with her. Currently, she’s living at the main house more because Mama and Papa want her to than her need for privacy. Aurelio has a place, it’s closer to the forest. He likes his privacy. I’m sure we can find something that could work for you.”

Mateo closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes, I was surprised to see them bright with emotion. “I can’t tell you how much your offer means.”

I put a hand on Mateo’s shoulder. “*Mi hermano*, you’re family.”

He nodded and smiled widely. “Raya is going to flip.”

Mateo and Raya had not grown up with parents or any semblance of a family. I could not imagine how barren that life

could be. My family was vital to me—I'd do anything for them. I was fifteen and Aurelio had been ten when Papa met Paloma—and our lives changed. We'd immediately become a family.

Paloma became Mama, and now I thought of her as my mother. I couldn't remember my own, who died a year after Aurelio was born, but it wouldn't have mattered. Paloma's big heart was impossible to resist. Isadora was born three years after they met; I'm sure if you counted the months, Mama was pregnant before the wedding. Isa was our adored baby sister. I changed her diapers, bathed her, and held her when she cried like a baby. She was almost like my child. We couldn't be closer.

My son Silvano might not have a mother, but he had the most loving family around him. He spent more time in the main house than in our place, which was a ten-minute bike ride.

I was fortunate. And I was happy that Mateo and Raya were now family as well—and we could share our good fortune with them. Through Mateo and Raya, we'd also become close to Declan and Esme Knight, their beautiful baby girl, Mireya, and Dec's cousin, Judge Forest Knight and his beautiful wife, Daisy. As well as Maria and her brother Mark, a neurosurgery resident at UCLA.

“Just call my office. My assistant, Mercedes, can set you up with a walk-through and introduce you to our architect. We'd love to have you live close by. You won't mind leaving the

big, bad city?” I waved a hand at the view of Los Angeles, sparkling lights, and high rises.

“No. Raya and I want to...well, keep an apartment here, but we want a quieter life. Dec and Esme couldn’t leave the city, and I get it. There’s energy here.”

I waved a hand at the bartender, watching the clock. I was meeting Maria in forty-five minutes at Silver Lake.

“Can I get an espresso?” I requested.

“Isn’t it early for coffee?” Mateo wondered.

“I have a dinner thing, and I’d like to stay awake. I left Golden Valley at four in the morning, so it’s been a long day,” I explained.

Mateo narrowed his eyes. “Who are you having dinner with?”

“None of your business.”

“And here I thought we were family.”

I sighed. “I have Mama and Papa, and let’s not forget Isadora, who I believe spies on all of us.”

“I noticed you were dancing with Maria Caruso at the reception.”

“That was six months ago and weren’t you busy that night? It was *your* wedding reception,” I remarked and looked at my watch again as the server brought me my espresso.

“You need a ride to Silver Lake, *mi hermano*,” Mateo teased.

I took a sip of the dark coffee. “I have a son, Mat. I can’t do relationships.”

“I don’t agree, but it’s not my place to tell you how to live your life—and I have learned that this is a journey every man must take on his own.” Mateo drained his beer and stood up. “Just so you know, Maria wants a relationship. She wants the picket fence, the two and a half kids and the dog. And she fucking deserves it. That girl has a big heart and brains to match.”

“You warning me off her, Mat?” My tone was tighter than I’d expected it to be.

Mateo shook his head. “No. That’s not part of my job description. I just wanted you to know a little about my friend Maria.”

“I appreciate it,” I thanked him sincerely, but didn’t add that I didn’t want to marry the girl. I just wanted to fuck her brains out. But considering Mateo’s “friend” comment, I didn’t think it would be appropriate to mention that.

**Continue the story on Amazon.**



# Author's Request

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Twisted Hearts*. I hope you enjoyed River and Sunny's journey to find love as much as I enjoyed writing it. I'd love to keep in touch with you beyond this last page.

Interested? I have a newsletter and am on social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) where I share updates, sneak peeks of upcoming work, and occasional giveaways. It's a great way to stay updated.

I appreciate your support and would love to continue this journey with you. Hope to see you around.

Happy reading!

Maya

P.s. Please do not forget to rate and review *Twisted Hearts* because that is how other readers can find my books.

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# About the Author

MAYA ALDEN HAS A PASSION FOR WEAVING  
TALES OF LOVE AND DESIRE.

With a background in literature and a heart filled with hope, Maya pours her emotions onto the pages of her novels, capturing the essence of true love and the power it holds to transform lives. Combining unforgettable characters, sizzling chemistry, and heartfelt emotions, Maya's stories will whisk you into a world of passion and enchantment.

Maya invites you to join her on a journey of love, laughter, and happily-ever-afters that will leave you with a sigh and a smile.

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