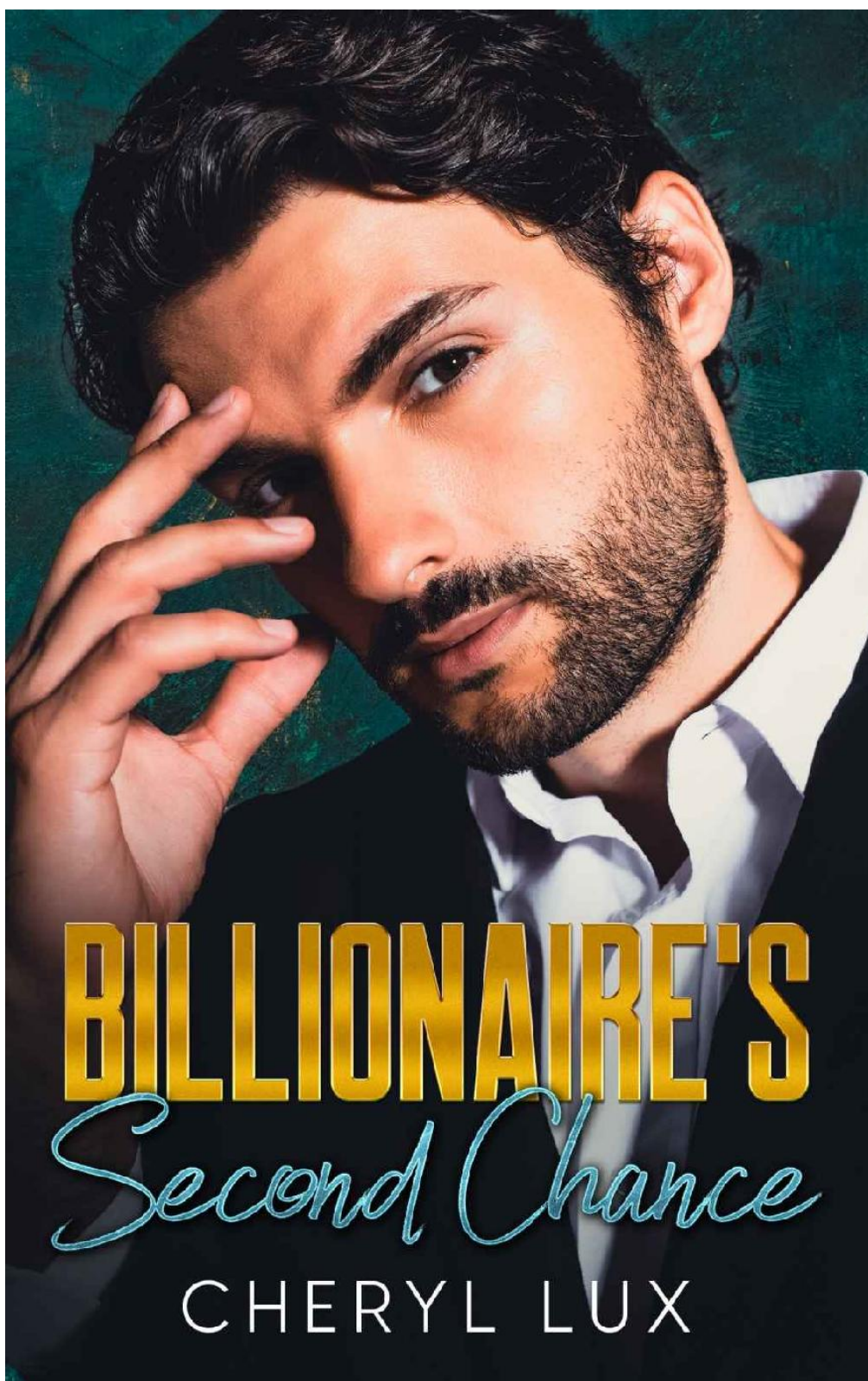




BILLIONAIRE'S
Second Chance
CHERYL LUX



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First edition 2023



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Chapter One

Nina

“THE LAST THING I want to do right now is get married to anyone, trust me.” The sharp voice behind me made me freeze for a second, and every nerve in my body tingled.

I didn't need to turn around to know who it was.

Jack Muller!

Seeing those dark, intense eyes again and his charming smile as I turned around made my throat dry. *Why is he here? How is he here?*

Different frenzied thoughts spiraled through my mind as his smooth baritone spilt more words, making my nerves rise to high alert and sending a wave of panic. A familiar memory of Jack's gaze on mine, and his slender fingers wrapping around my throat entered my mind.

I remembered that image far too frequently over the past six years, and every time, it left my pulse skittering across the place.

Heated words flashed in my mind ... *I want more of you ... Open your eyes for me, Nina.*

The words mingled with moans and groans of dangerous pleasure. The mixture made my cheeks burn, and all of this happened in the split second that passed before Jack spoke behind me again.

“It’s an absurd plan that would never work, Ryan ... you know that,” he continued, and I squeezed my eyes shut for a second before releasing a deep breath from my lips and nibbling on my lower lip.

“It’s worth a shot,” my brother replied before they reached my front. Ryan instantly beamed once he saw me. “Look who we have here,” Ryan cheered as they walked around the table and sat in front of me. “Nina,” Ryan continued.

“Nina?” Jack asked as he lowered himself to the chair opposite mine, and then his gaze landed on me. Ryan had mentioned having drinks with his friend tonight since it was my first night back in Denver, Colorado in six years, but he said nothing about that friend being Jack.

Dang it, Ryan. I should have known anyway—who else would Ryan hang out with besides his best friend, Jack?

I mustered up a smile and plastered it on my face. “Jack,” I answered, then released a short laugh. “What a pleasant surprise running into you here tonight.”

“I own the bar,” Jack answered, reminding me of his amassed wealth. “It’s been such a long time, Nina,” he added, then his gaze casually swept over my face, lingered on my lips then down my body. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been better,” I answered, not wanting to show my nervousness as my heart continued its pitter-patter against my ribs.

“Nina’s in town for a shoot,” Ryan said as he motioned for a bartender to come to our table. “I invited her for drinks tonight, and I said nothing about it because I wanted to surprise you both.” Ryan stopped, then laughed again and clapped his hands. “From the look on your faces, I’d say I got you both good,” he joked.

I rolled my eyes and gulped down the whisky in my glass. “Good thing you’ve ruined my night, Ryan,” I said to him.

“Ruined? The night’s just getting started, love,” Jack said on his end, and I whipped my eyes back to his to find him looking at me, a languid smile on his lips. “We’ve missed having you around.”

I scoffed at his statement and laughed. *Missed indeed.* The thing was, Jack and I could never stand each other. Not when he saved my brother’s life back in college, and not when they had become best friends over the course of the long summer.

“You have?” Ryan asked. “You two hate each other.”

“I know, right,” Jack answered. “My charm could never work on her.”

They both laughed, and I downed the second glass of whisky in front of me before adjusting the hem of my short, black dress.

Jack was a charmer to everyone, and I could understand why women flocked around him. He had an easy charm, a very dashing smile, and a body hot enough to make every woman crave, but not me. *But those dark eyes though ...* my thoughts wandered for a second before I snapped back to reality.

Yes, he didn't make me fawn or lose my mind at first, so why did it happen that one night? How the hell did I let Jack Muller make passionate love to me that one night six years ago? And worse, why did he choose to pretend like it never happened?

We've been over this, Nina, you had too many martinis for your own good, and a double malted scotch to crown it. You were tipsy, and things got out of control.

I didn't realize my brother was speaking to me as I went over the details of the explanation I gave myself each time I remembered Jack or that night.

"Huh?" I asked, and blinked back to reality.

"How are the plans for the shoot tomorrow? Need any help with it?" Ryan interrupted.

"Aren't you on a honeymoon?" I asked him, slanting him a heated look that screamed, *"Why are you even here?"*

"I am ... but hey, I'm allowed to get a break, am I not?" Ryan asked.

"You just got married," Jack and I chorused as we both looked at Ryan.

“Why would you need a break?” I queried, wondering what my brother was up to with his hotshot model wife. Their wedding secret was the talk of the town a month ago, and I had attended but still managed not to run into Jack, surprisingly, since he was away for a trip in Jeddah and couldn’t make it.

What kind of person misses his best friend’s wedding because of a vacation?

Ryan and Jack probably had an understanding that I wasn’t aware of, because Ryan wasn’t pissed he didn’t make it. *What a bond*, I thought as I listened to my brother talk about him and his wife some more before Ryan got on his feet and walked away to get himself a cigar.

“I didn’t expect to see you tonight,” Jack said the second Ryan left us to ourselves.

“Neither did I,” I said, meeting his gaze squarely for a second before diverting my eyes and running the tip of my tongue over my lower lip.

Jack leaned back on his chair and rubbed a finger over his lower lip for a bit before he smiled again. “What’s funny?” I asked, suspecting he was thinking about something mischievous.

Jack shook his head slowly and lifted his right shoulder in a shrug. I noticed his shirt was unbuttoned at the top, and I caught a glimpse of his smooth, pale skin. “Nothing,” he answered. “I just realize you’ve changed a lot, and it’s not a bad sight to look at.”

I rolled my eyes and picked up the glass the bartender had refilled for me. “Don’t even think about it, Jack Muller,” I said as I swung its contents down my throat and leveled him a stern look, even though my insides were tingling and burning just from his looks.

It’s the whisky, I told myself as I continued. “Don’t even think about flirting with me.”

“Flirting?” he laughed, then dropped his tone a notch. “We both know we’ve gone past the flirting stage, Nina Pierce ... we go way further back than that.” The right corner of his lips tipped in an outward smile again, and his gaze landed on my lips for a second, but I pulled my head on straight, ignored him, and rose to my feet.

No way, Nina. I cautioned my nerves before they could start a spiral and make me shiver for Jack Muller all over again.



THE NEXT MORNING, I was certain I had Jack Muller out of my system after I spent the night remembering the last time I saw him. Our relationship could be best described as a strange one. Jack and I could never get along, even though he was my brother’s best friend, and I liked to think that it was best that way.

I couldn’t tolerate his smug smile anyway, so what was the point?

The only problem was that same smile replayed itself every second in my head since I saw him last night.

“Hey, Nina, you ready for the shoot?” I turned to see Lisa Stanley, the director at the photoshoot today, standing behind me.

I smiled at Lisa and nodded. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“Good, because our star has arrived.” She squealed a little before leaving me in the studio again, and I lifted my camera from my neck, stared at my lens, and adjusted my focus to get a shot of the background we were about to use.

Our shoot today was for the cover of my company’s magazine, Page Six, and I was told it was an exclusive shoot with a billionaire here in Denver they were interviewing. I didn’t know who it was yet, but I was expecting this client to show up anytime from ...

“Nina?”

I froze when I heard Jack’s voice behind me. *It can’t be him, right? What’s he doing here? Why is he everywhere?*

I squeezed my eyes shut and held my breath as he called again. “It’s you, Nina. I recognized you from the entrance. What are you doing here?”

His question went unanswered because I couldn’t stop myself from taking in his full looks. I always thought Jack looked good in suits, but today, he looked even better. His dark, sleek hair was styled to perfection, and the thick, spicy tobacco aroma of his cologne already tickled my senses just like it did that night.

The black, three-piece designer suit he wore was custom tailored for him. The look reminded me of a photo of him in the gossip columns I followed over the last year.

Everyone always wanted to have a piece of Jack Muller. They either wanted to pick his brain about his successful business rules or go to dinner with him. The latter always seemed to work out well for him, as I didn't think there was any woman Jack had never been able to get.

I heard the thuds of his footsteps as he walked around me, then bent forward a little bit so he was on the same height level as me.

“You're in charge of the shoot?” he questioned with a cute smile.

“Why are you everywhere?” I asked through clenched teeth as I opened my eyes and looked at him.

Jack shrugged as the corner of his lips curved into that smile again. “I'm not,” he answered, then chuckled. “Maybe you're just fated to be around me?”

“An ill fate,” I muttered and rolled my eyes.

“What was that?”

I gave Jack a tight smile and was about to walk away when he took my arm and stopped me. “Nina,” he began in a low voice, then stepped close to me so he could whisper. “Maybe we should pretend to like each other here? I mean, for the sake of the others, so this shoot isn't unbearable for everyone?”

I glanced over my shoulder at him, then slowly pulled my arm out of his hand. “Try not to touch me while we’re here,” I said, then kept my chin high and walked away from him without another word.

Jack’s eyes stayed on me as I exited the studio, and once I was out of his sight, I found a wall, rested my back against it, and sighed deeply. My heart was beating too fast. I could feel it thudding against my ribcage with constant pressure that threatened to leave me breathless for the rest of the day.

Why was this happening?

I thought I had rid Jack Muller out of my system but turned out that six years, was not enough to forget him or the passion he had made me feel. I felt my lower lip tremble as I kept trying to find balance, but my composure finally returned when I remembered his cold shoulder from the next morning, and his hurtful words when I confronted him later on.

It never happened, Nina. We were both drunk; I think we should leave it at that.

His cool, detached tone was all it took to remind me that Jack shouldn’t be on my mind. What we had was history, this was my present, and I had a job to do.

Chapter Two

Jack

THE CLICKS OF THE camera still stayed in my memory even minutes after the shoot ended. Nina was speaking to one of the directors now, and I watched her from the stool where I sat.

A remarkable woman, I thought as I admired her in the black jeans and boots she wore. Somehow, she had managed to stay in my head for six long years; and even now, seeing her again, not so much had changed about her.

She was different physically, yes, but she had her sharp tongue and that lovely smile that made me forget the most important thing.

She's off-limits.

“Hey Jack, would you like to see some of the shots we got?” the manager of the magazine interviewing me today asked.

“Sure thing, Candace,” I answered, then waved at her a little before standing from my chair. The stagehands were already clearing up the set, and Nina was still discussing with Candace

when she glanced briefly in my direction, stared at me hard, and then looked away again.

I wondered what went through her mind as she gave me that icy glare.

Nina Pierce had always challenged me from the second we met. Her brother Ryan was the closest and only person I could call family, and our relationship stood strong over the years since we first met.

Ryan was more like my confidant. The only one who knew all my secrets, but Nina was like a pin that poked and pierced me in corners I never wanted to feel anything in.

Even now, from across the room, she made adrenaline pump through me steadily with no option of release in sight. I looked at her and took my time to admire the curve of her hips in the jeans and the full length of her legs.

She used to be much more slender back then, but just as comforting to look at. Red has always been her color, and the red blouse she matched with her black jeans now matched the color on her lips and brought out the full beauty of her creamy skin. Her blonde hair just seemed to complement it all.

Or maybe I just have a thing for blondes?

Either way, I couldn't stop thinking about Nina. I strode towards the exit and met up with Candace, then put my hand on the small of her back and left the studio with her. Candace showed me a few pictures through the lens of the camera, and I had to compliment the skillful shots taken.

“Nice, they all look really lovely even without the edits,” I complimented.

“Yes, they do. Nina is one of our best. We had to bring her into Denver just for this shoot, so don’t worry, you’re expected to see the best plastered all over ‘Page Six’ soon.”

I gave her a short nod, and she walked out of the office first before I got up and walked out too. I had reached the exit of the building when I saw Nina flagging down a cab. My car was steaming in front, my driver on the seat and ready to take me to the location of my next appointment, but Nina’s hurry made me even more curious, so I got in the car and glanced at my watch.

“Follow that cab, please,” I said. My driver nodded and moved without asking questions. I still had an hour to my meeting, and I could afford to show up late today since it was simply a review meeting.

The drive was a few minutes, and I watched Nina get out of the cab, hug a woman, and then walk with her into the building. “It looks like a studio,” I muttered before telling my driver to continue to our previous location.

The rest of the day Nina stayed on my mind, and it didn’t take much for me to figure out that I wanted to see her again.



“THIS IS AN ABSURD plan,” I said to my handler while on the phone later that evening. “I’m to meet the sheikh. I have

brokered thousands of deals for the CIA before. Why do I need a wife to make this one work?"

Ryan was in my home office with me, and he pretended to be focused on the tabloid in his hand, but I knew he could hear everything I said. He was the only living soul who knew this tiny detail of my life, but he still didn't know quite enough. *Some information isn't meant to be shared ever*, but Ryan had been useful in gaining some info on celebrities for the CIA in the past, and I had come clean with him about my undercover attachment to the institution back then.

Only thing was, he didn't know what I did exactly.

I dropped the call with a frustrated sigh and began massaging the back of my neck. "More talk about wife, family, and trust," I complained, almost sounding like I was whining. "How do I find a wife in three nights?"

"You can hire someone," Ryan suggested as he flipped through to the next page. "I hear that's a big thing now."

"Hire? I don't trust anyone to take them to Jeddah with me."

"What about Candace? You've been seeing her for some time now, haven't you?"

"She's a reporter working for Page Six. Why would I take a reporter to see the sheikh? It'll give access to too much exposure."

"What about Juliet?" he asked, and I frowned because the name didn't sound familiar at first. "The redhead?" Ryan asked to remind me, and I gasped.

“Oh—Julian,” I corrected. “She’s out of the country, and we broke up.”

“Ouch, I thought you had finally found the one,” he teased.

“There’s no one, Ryan, you know that,” I reminded him as I got up from my executive chair, loosened my tie, and then walked around to join him on the couch.

I picked up the empty glass from the center table, poured myself some of the brandy, and then sipped from the glass. “Some of us aren’t as lucky as you are to find true ... true love.”

“When you say it like that, it sounds like it’s a terrible thing to be in love,” Ryan said with a smile as he picked up his glass too. “But it’s a wonderful thing. You’ll find out once you start to feel it.”

I arched a brow at him and asked, “Have you reconciled with your wife yet?”

Ryan’s smile turned sly, and his eyes gleamed. “Oh yes, we reconciled well,” he answered in a suggestive tone before bursting into a short laugh that I joined. “Of course we reconciled. Sarah is the love of my life. I can’t stay upset with her for long.”

“Good for you, my friend,” I said as I got on my feet and patted his shoulder. “Right now, I need a drink while I wallow in thoughts of what to do next. Finding a wife, traveling to Jeddah ... Things like this make me wish I never left the service in the first place.”

“Being a billionaire suits you better than being in the Navy trust me,” Ryan said, then flashed the tabloid in his hand at me. “Look at this picture. Billionaire Jack Muller shares three secrets to his success. It looks more like you’re sharing secrets to have you charm your way into everyone’s heart,” he joked.

I chuckled and shook my head before grabbing my coat from the stand in my office. “Let’s go to the club,” I suggested. “I drink better when I’m there.”

Ryan and I drove to “The Cartel,” one of my many successful chains of establishments here in Denver. When we arrived, the place was bubbling as a bartender came to serve us in the VIP section. While I enjoyed the loud music and let it drown my thoughts, my mind continued its quick search for answers to my predicament.

The sheikh I was to meet was the most-notorious known leader in Jeddah. Zayed Al-Mufti had been on top of the CIA’s list for years, and he was a distrusting man who had found and murdered some agents sent in the past to infiltrate his cartel.

I had met Zayed once, and I knew how fierce he was. My approach had been to befriend him first, since he was friends with another good Arabian politician of mine. Sheikh Zayed had been on my radar for three years now, and it was finally time to get the deal done.

“I just texted Nina to meet me here for some drinks. She’s on her way ... I’d like to see the look on her face when she gets here and sees you’re here. She could never stand you even in the past and it’s always so funny.”

Our drinks had arrived, and I enjoyed the strength of the martini while sipping and relaxing on the chair. I crossed my legs in front of me and looked at Ryan. “You always like to do that to her, and I take the brunt of it. Why is it so funny that you like to put us in the same space when she can’t stand me?”

“Because she’s my sister, and it’s fun to see her slice you with words.”

“She really has a way with words,” I agreed with a smile as a familiar warmth entered my heart just from thinking about Nina.

Ryan knew nothing about that night with Nina yet, and I wanted it to stay that way because I knew that as casual and lighthearted as my friend was, he did not joke with his little sister. Nina was the one thing that could cause trouble between us.

And Ryan is the only one on my side. I can’t lose that.

“Either way, it’s fun watching you two go at it,” Ryan continued, and as he kept talking, my mind zoned off for a bit as a crazy thought slid in.

I needed someone to play the role of my wife. Someone I could trust—someone smart and yet strong. Someone like Nina.

But she’s never going to agree. It was a crazy idea, but as soon as it entered my mind, the wheels of my brain ran with it. What if I could convince Nina to be my wife?

Just for a few weeks, of course. I had no intention of marrying her or anyone else, but I couldn't think of anyone more perfect to play this role.

When Nina arrived at the VIP section, I watched her sashay her way toward where Ryan and I sat. Whenever we hung out here, it was restricted from other VIP guests, and since my club was big enough, they could use other VIP sections.

"Hey Ryan," Nina greeted sweetly, then looked at me and said, "You."

She sat, crossing her legs in front of her, and I admired the show of skin in the short red-sequined dress she wore.

"Why are you wearing a wig?" Ryan asked, staring at her in shock as she tossed some strands of the black hair to one side of her shoulder and smiled.

"We're at a club, right? I can be whatever I want in it," she answered.

"I don't even want to know," Ryan said, then got on his feet. "I'll get us more martinis. The night is still young."

He walked away, and I looked at Nina. She pretended not to notice me staring, so I took the chance to admire the small frame of her shoulders exposed on her halter-neck dress and the tiny pendant that sat on her chest.

I remembered that pendant. Ryan and I chose it for her twentieth birthday; she hadn't taken it off since.

"This place keeps getting bigger by the day. Business seems to be booming," she said as she eased further into her chair

and looked at me.

I didn't reply. I was too lost in admiring her and taking in all of her small gestures and facial expressions. My body stirred just from looking at her. Heat swamped me and brought passion alive deep inside me.

Without thinking or realizing that my crazy idea was already breathing life, I blurted out the words. "Marry me, Nina."

Chapter Three

Nina

I FROZE, EVERY TINGLE swimming through me just because Jack was watching disappeared, and the only thing left was mirth bubbling to the surface with a force I couldn't hold back. I burst into a thick laugh and let my insides roll with it.

“Nina,” Jack said as my laugh subsided, but the grin on my lips stayed. “I mean it, Nina, marry me,” he repeated.

“You're crazy,” I said while shaking my head and giggling again. “You're a clown, actually.”

“I'm serious.”

“You can't be.” I looked at him, and he cocked his head to one side, then gave me a solemn look. “You're insane,” I whispered and picked up the glass on the table, then sipped from the martini. “Hmm, strong, just what I need to knock me senseless tonight and rid me of your silliness.”

“Why is it silliness that I'm asking you to marry me?”

I took another sip. “because ...” I was about to take another swig from the glass, but I paused and looked at him. “Because

we don't work well together.”

The right corner of Jack's lips lifted into a smug smile, and then he leaned forward on his chair and pried the glass out of my hands. “Last time we were together, we worked really well, Nina. I know you remember it too.”

Bang! Heat exploded inside me just from his suggestive words, and a slow hum started in my blood. It made me melt inside and feel queasy in the pit of my stomach.

I hate this feeling. I hated that I was feeling it for Jack of all men. Why did it have to be him?

“I'm not doing this with you, Jack.”

“Doing what?” he questioned in an innocent tone like he didn't know what I was talking about.

“I'm not flirting with you tonight. In fact, I'm waltzing out of this section right now to find myself some hot man to take me home tonight, and it's not going to be you.”

Why did you just say that? I wanted to cringe as soon as the words were out because they made me sound jealous, or rather desperate to make him jealous.

Either way, I kept my chin high, huffed, and then walked away from him.

Once I was out of the VIP section, I walked to the dance floor, found myself a nice guy to dance with, and then began rocking to the music playing. My eyes wandered to the exit of the VIP section as I rocked my hips against the guy behind me. I could feel his hardness rise and press into my back just from

our dance, and it freaked me out, so I pushed away from him, and walked over to the regular bar to get myself a double malted scotch.

A hand tapped my shoulder after I finished the first shot, and I turned to see the man I just danced with. “Hey,” he said as he sat beside me. “You’re such a great dancer.”

Urghh, is that a flirting line? I thought as I looked at him and smiled. He looked like a nice man, but too simple. His ginger hair was a mess, probably from all the tousling he was doing with his fingers, and he couldn’t even look me in the eye.

“Can I buy you a drink?” he asked.

“Buy me two,” I told him with a smile. “I’d like to forget all about tonight,” I added with a sigh, and he grinned. He happily bought me two shots, and after downing them, the man put his hand on my shoulder again and began talking about how much he loved coming to this bar.

I shimmered away from his touch the first time, and he put his hand on my waist next. I was about to pry his fingers away gently when I heard him yelp, and I turned to see Jack standing behind me, bending the guy’s fingers.

“One rule about flirting with women is to never touch them till they make the first move. That just makes you look like a creep,” he said in a stern, gruff voice that sounded rough. “Now hurry away.”

Once Jack and I were alone at the bar, Jack smiled, took out his handkerchief, and wiped his hands.

“I didn’t need you to save me, Jack,” I said to him before looking away and facing the bar again.

“But I need you to marry me, Nina,” he said as he sat beside me.

Not again. “Jack ... whatever game you think you’re playing, I’m not interested.”

“It’s not a game, I’m in need of a wife.”

A harsh chuckle left my lips. “Any woman who marries you will be so unlucky.”

“Why?” he asked, frowning like he was genuinely confused.

“Because you will drive her insane,” I told him, then got up and began walking towards the exit. I got out of the club, but Jack was right behind me. The second he touched my shoulder, I grabbed it, twisted it back, and made him groan.

“Nina, it’s me,” he said with a tinge of hurt trickling in his tone.

“I know,” I said. “You taught me this move, remember? For self-defense? I was only eighteen at the time,” I reminded him, then smirked and released his hand. “Leave me alone, Jack. I mean it.”

With that, I walked away from him, not minding the fact that my cheeks burned from the flush of his unexpected proposal.



WHAT IS HIS END game?

I knew Jack Muller too well. He wasn't the man for romance and love. Playing around, yes; charming ladies, yes; but definitely not love.

So why was he asking me to marry him?

The thoughts of Jack swamped my mind as I focused on wiping my lens and preparing for the next photoshoot with my newest clients. The photography agency I worked for was in partnership with Page Six for a year, and we were handling all of their photoshoots and video coverages for whatever publications they were making.

Jack was just one in the long line of celebrities I had to photograph for the coming week. After wiping the lens, I took out my phone and began checking my schedule for the day.

I checked my time. It was almost time for the shoot to begin, and I was certain our model for the day was out of the dressing room. Sighing and rubbing the back of my neck to ease some bits of my tension, I walked towards the studio.

The entire place seemed completely quiet, and I was wondering where the rest of the team had disappeared as I opened the door to walk in.

“Surprise!” the crowd in there inside yelled, shocking me till I shrieked and staggered back. Jack was kneeling in front

of them, holding a bouquet of flowers, and wearing a very dazzling smile that made my heart tickle a little.

“Marry me, Nina,” he said in his silky tone. He nibbled on his lower lip as he smiled at me. His eyes squinted at the corners, and his gaze turned smoky enough to make my cheeks hot.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I queried him as I drew closer.

“Marry me, Nina ... I’m not standing up till you say yes.”

I looked up at the expectant faces of everyone standing behind Jack, and the flush tunneling through me slowly started to spread into anger.

Was all of this funny to him? Did he think he could make me flustered in front of all these people for fun?

Visibly upset and feeling tight knots form in the pit of my stomach, I ignored the chants of “Say yes” from the crowd, grabbed Jack’s arm, and pulled him to his feet.

“Come with me,” I said in a stern voice as I led him away.

Of course, he came willingly. There was no way I could drag Jack along with me. Not with his size and build. Even through the sleeve of his suit jacket, I could feel the rippling, toned muscles beneath.

Touching him there reminded me of that night. Feverish whispers of desire floated through my mind.

Open your eyes ... I want to feel you ... Make love to me, Jack.

Stop remembering that night! I cautioned as I got to a corner, then pushed him against the wall and released him.

“What is the meaning of this? If this is some kind of silly joke to you, Jack, then I’m one hundred percent not interested in—”

“I’ll pay you,” he interrupted as he took my hand and put the flowers he held in it. “Thirty thousand if you say yes, and another thirty once the deed is done.”

My eyes widened, and I blinked rapidly, trying to process what he just said to me.

“Thirty too small?” he asked, then rubbed his brow. “Fifty?”

“Jack,” I stopped him. “What are you doing? You don’t need a wife ... You don’t even want a wife.”

“You’re right, I don’t, but I need one.”

“Start explaining.”

He sighed, combed his fingers through his hair, then looked me deep in the eyes and launched right in. “I need a wife for a business deal. There’s a partner in Jeddah, and I need him to partner with me on a project. I can’t go into the details now, but he’s big on family, and the one way to win his heart is to appear like I have the same values as him. That way, he will feel safe getting in bed with me.”

I arched a brow suspiciously, and he sighed again. “I mean, do business with me.”

“I know what ‘getting in bed’ means,” I remarked and punched him on the shoulder lightly. “So, this isn’t some prank you’re playing?” I asked tentatively as I looked at the flowers, then lifted them to my nose and inhaled their scent gently.

“Do I ever play pranks on you?” he asked, then burst into a light giggle when I slanted him a death glare. “Okay fine ... but for the record, they are always Ryan’s ideas, not mine.”

I smiled a little, and Jack slipped his hands into his pockets and then smiled.

“So, yes?” he asked. “Those roses suit the shade on your lips,” he added, and I suspected it was a side comment because he looked distracted while staring at my lips. “And I’ll be a very good husband; I give you my word.”

Fifty thousand was a lot of money. I didn’t think it was right to fool anyone into thinking he was something he wasn’t, but the prospect of having that much cash was tempting.

There’s a lot I can do with it. I could even dream of owning my own photography agency again. It was a dream I had given up on for some time now because I didn’t think I could ever raise enough funds to start one, and it was a competitive market.

“Nina, I need this,” Jack said in a low tone and brought my attention to him again. “I wouldn’t risk my bachelorhood if I didn’t.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said to him, not wanting to give in too easily.

“Thank you,” he said, and was about to come for a hug, but I stopped him by raising a hand.

“Distance ... I haven’t agreed to anything yet.”

“Right,” he replied, then winked and grinned. “But you will ... you definitely will.”

Chapter Four

Jack

“IT’S TIME,” I SAID to Nina, three days later, as we sat in the private lounge airport terminal and waited for our flight. She was wearing a lovely black dress I had picked out for her, and the diamond ring on her left hand sat right on her finger.

“I still think this is a terrible idea,” she said to me, as I got on my feet and then extended a framed arm for her to slide hers into. We started walking towards the boarding area together, and I inhaled a little because I loved the scent of lilies that clung to her. “We can barely stand each other, and pretending isn’t your strongest suit.”

“I’m a very good actor,” I told her. “You’d be shocked.”

She glanced at me, and I smiled. “Jack I’m being serious right now ... I don’t think this is a good—”

“Relax,” I cut in, then covered her hand with mine. “The first rule of acting is to never give away your fear. That way, your rivals get to fear you more.”

Her brows glued together, and a deep frown marred her face. “So, you’re an actor now?” she asked.

“Nope, but I’m a billionaire businessman. Acting is part of it ... do you think I enjoy sitting in long-ass meetings for hours every day? No, I don’t, but I act like I do because that makes people think I’m efficient and serious indeed.”

“That is nothing like this,” Nina pointed out. We had reached the entrance of the flight now, and once we were settled in the private cabin minutes later, I turned to her again, and she said, “You might need to pay me more than fifty thousand.”

“Oh, come on,” I said, dragging my words out. “You’re not even in Jeddah yet, and neither are you my real wife, but you’re this cranky?”

She was about to speak again, but I laughed. “It’s a joke, Nina, relax.”

I put my hand over hers again before I could stop myself, then began massaging the front of her palm. “If anything goes wrong, I’m here to protect you. You have nothing to worry about, okay?”

It took a while, but she finally nodded. “That is strangely comforting,” Nina said to me, and I smiled again, satisfied that I had been able to calm her down before I settled into my seat and put on my belt.

It was a fourteen-hour plus flight to the most populous city in the international hub of the Emirates, and I couldn’t wait to have a feel of the city. Famously known for its turbulent history and vibrant culture, there was a lot to do whenever I was in the famous city. I wasn’t sure if Nina had been there

before, and I knew it would be fun taking her on a desert safari ride, or driving in an ultra-fast car with her.

Nina would definitely fit into the classic life of the rich housewives of the politicians and the royal sheikhs in the city. She gave off their vibe already, even though she was simply dressed, in a black dress and red heels that I already loved.

Her blonde hair had more bouncy waves than usual. That was courtesy of the hair stylist I took her to, and her nails were painted her favorite red shade, too.

She was breathtaking, but still off-limits, I had to remind myself as I tore my gaze away from her and pretended to listen to the cabin member making the announcements.

Nina dragged in a deep breath after some time, then leaned close to me and whispered. “What if he sees right through us?” she asked. “I mean, our hatred for one another is pretty hard to miss. We always argue, and I can’t even stand you.”

I chuckled for a bit and closed my eyes. “But we’ve known each other for a long time, and that makes this perfect. That, makes you perfect for this ... think about it, what other woman knows personal details about me?” I shook my head to buttress my point and continued. “I don’t keep any woman that close.”

“That’s because you have too many women; you’ve practically lost count.”

I paused, thought about her words for a second, and then agreed. “True. But the sheikh doesn’t know that, thank

goodness. Besides, couples are supposed to drive each other crazy, and you're good at doing that."

Nina's eyes widened for a bit, and I saw the crimson color that crept up from her neck to her cheeks. "It's you who drives me insane and mad with anger; you know that, right?"

"You're driving me insane right now," I answered her as my lids dropped close, and my gaze stayed on her lips. Nina had to know that I wasn't talking about our constant disagreement.

She definitely feels this palpable chemistry too, right? I could never get her out of my head. Not in the last six years and somehow since her, no other woman could be enough.

"Excuse me," Nina said, and her voice broke the moment, so I dragged my gaze from her lips to her eyes, and found them on me. "I need to get to the bathroom."

I let her through, since the flight had taken off a while back, and she hurried away from me like she was being chased.



ANOTHER HOUR INTO THE flight, Nina was busy with a magazine, and she hadn't said a word to me since, even though I kept looking in her direction. I always wanted to see her expressions. I wanted to know if she was smiling or uncomfortable. Those little things mattered to me for reasons I couldn't understand.

When she looked away from reading and found me looking, she questioned, "What?"

“Nothing,” I answered. “Just practicing for how I’ll smother you when we arrive at the sheikh’s palace. I did some digging and found out that he loves playing golf and likes to fight in jujitsu. You happen to be good at both, so I think you two will bond quite well.”

“What’s your business project about?” she asked, instead of replying to me. “I’ll need to know some details, right? So, I can tell what needs to be said and what not?”

“I’m dealing arms,” I said to her, then paused to gauge her reaction.

I wanted to know if she would believe me, but of course, Nina was clueless.

When she burst into a fit of laughter, I joined, and we both laughed for some seconds before I cleared my throat and said, “Sports outfits. The sheikh happens to be interested in bringing his brand to the country, and I’m interested in partnering with him. It turns out, I have the trust of the American citizens with my chain of businesses.”

“Is it your first time trying to partner with him?”

“Yes,” I answered. “But we have met a few times, so I am quite familiar with him.”

I picked up my tablet, opened it, and scrolled to a picture. “Sheikh Zayed Al-Mufti—some say he’s the richest in the entire country. He’s invested in the US market, owns shares in multi-billion-dollar insurance and banking companies ... and

what's interesting is that he's married to an American. The second wife, though," I explained.

"This sheikh," Nina muttered as she stared at the picture of the man. "He looks fierce."

"He is fierce and dangerous," I told her in a low voice. "Dangerously good at business deals. If I'm not careful, he might rip me off," I joked.

"No one can rip you off, though, can they? You're incredibly good at what you do."

"I am," I answered, then smiled a little. "That's a compliment from Nina, I feel like basking in this moment."

"Don't bother; it won't last," she told me and made me laugh for a bit.

It felt good to sit and talk with her like this. In the six long years that had passed between us, not once did I not miss her. Most times, it felt as if she never wanted to return to Denver. Other times, it felt like she wanted to, but she just didn't want to see me. Either way, I knew that our one night had changed things between us.

We still bickered, sure, but there was something else in the air surrounding us now, and it was definitely hotter than ever.

"So, is there anything about you that I need to know?" she asked as she toyed with the ring on her finger. "Scandals in Jeddah? Papparazzi looming somewhere to take pictures of us together?"

“It’s the Middle East, not Hollywood,” I answered her with a smile. “There are no paparazzi, but there will be parties, lots of them, so get ready.”

“I’m all for parties,” she said. “I’m a great dancer.”

“I know you are; I remember too well.” My reply came out before I could stop myself. Nina had turned to me now, and her captivating blue eyes merged with mine. The heat sizzling at the moment then made my breath hitch in my throat, and I blew out air from my lips to diffuse my insides from heating up.

“You remember?” she asked. Was it just me, or had her tone dropped a notch?

I nodded my next reply. “You used to dance whenever you came to the club.”

I always watched Nina back then, my eyes keen on her like a hawk’s. This craving for her did not start on that first night. It had always been there, and her defiance of me just made it worse.

“I didn’t know,” she said as she looked at my lips, too. Then she tilted her head to one side and added, “I never noticed.”

The air carried her words to me like a whoosh. I saw her lower lip quiver, and her chest rose high as she dragged in a deep breath.

The tension in the air snapped, and I realized I was inching closer to her, unable to deny this craving building inside me.

“Nina?” I questioned in a silky tone that I couldn’t even hear properly. She held my gaze as I put a hand on her chin and gently tilted it forward. The question was clear. I wanted to taste her lips, and I needed her to let me.

“Jack,” she answered in a sultry tone, and it was all the “yes” I needed.

My lips closed over hers, and just like that, every memory from that night came flooding back with tremendous effect. Her lips were soft, moist, and just as delicate as I remembered.

She parted for me, and my tongue took charge of the dance. Nina kissed me back slowly. Her lips curled over mine, parted, and then repeated the motion from the start. I was losing track of time and reason.

This was better than what I spent nights dreaming about. It was better than the memories, and the flush of heat pooling and stirring my nerves alive also brought my hardness to a heated stance.

My entire body hardened. My right hand moved to the back of her head, and I held her steady; I needed to feel more of her passionate kiss and hot breath.

I was drowning, and my heart was pounding so fast, I wondered if she could hear its rhythm.

The rocky bounce of the plane made us jerk apart abruptly. Nina yelped as the turbulence hit hard and the lights in the plane began to twitch.

I instantly remembered her fear of turbulence and rocky planes. Images of her devastated expression as she cried at her parents' funeral flashed in my head, and panicking, I turned to her and saw that her face had gone pale, and she was frozen in one spot.

“I'm right here, Nina,” I said, and clamped a hand over hers to show my comfort. “Take a deep breath and stay calm ... I'm never leaving you,” I added just before another bout of turbulence hit, and the alarm bells went off inside the cockpit.

Chapter Five

Nina

MY INSIDES SHOOK WITH fear, but in the mix of that dreadful sensation was the warmth and flutters in the pit of my stomach.

He kissed me ... We kissed ... the kiss was another reason why I wanted to panic, but the fear of crashing overpowered it at that moment. Tears blurred my vision, and I tried not to cry out loud. Ever since my parents' plane crash years back, a part of me had always feared this happening.

Jack suddenly swooped his hands around my shoulder and pulled me to him. I went willingly into the crook of his arms. His touch didn't only offer me warmth. It also offered comfort, and I desperately wanted that.

He makes me feel safe.

He kept rocking me gently and patting a hand over my back while the entire cockpit shook.

"Stay calm; I'm right here with you," he whispered, as he smoothed a hand over my hair and pressed a kiss to the top of

my head. The kiss made me freeze again, and a painful pang hit my chest.

Why did he kiss me? There were different kinds of kisses, and a kiss on the tip of the head was different from the passionate one on the lips we just shared.

Different emotions slashed through me as I snuggled closer to him. The turbulence lasted for a while, and I probably overreacted through it all.

When it finally subsided, nausea rising in my throat started to subside too, and I could finally drag in a deep breath without the threat of puking all over my lovely dress.

“Do you feel better?” Jack asked, just before the lights came back on.

His eyes remained fixated on mine, and the wrinkling of his brows showed his worry. His grip remained tight on my hand, and when I realized I was also holding onto him, I cleared my throat and removed my hand.

“I’m fine ... I’m better now,” I said to him, forcing the words out of my tight throat. I pretended to cough again, then tore my gaze from his and leaned back on my chair.

The second I closed my eyes, I released a deep breath and inhaled it back again. My nerves still tingled from the kiss, and it left me confused.

The last time Jack touched me, he made it clear that it was a one-time thing—so why did he look at me that way? Why did he watch me? touch me? and now kiss me?

Stop thinking about it. It had to be his usual playboy antics. Besides, I was his fake wife now, and we were going to do a lot of fake shows of affection over the coming two weeks. I had to find a way to make sure it did not get to my head.

Or my heart.

But I wasn't immune to Jack; I never had been. Even while I prided myself on being the one woman he had not been able to woo in the past, I had still always admired him. He was only five years older than me, so it had been easy to hang around him and my brother all the time. When I turned eighteen, it had become even more frequent.

There was always something to remind me of Jack. I fell asleep at some point while thinking, and that was the last I remembered of our journey. When next I opened my eyes, I was lying on a king-size bed with white sheets draped over my body.

It took a second for my mind to register what was happening. A tall, well-built man stood by the window, and the reflection of sunlight coming in through the parted drapes cast a shadow on his frame.

When he turned around to face me, I realized it was Jack, and he looked even more handsome than the image of him in my dream.

Slowly, I sat up on the bed and groaned. My head hurt a little, and my eyes still felt heavy.

Jet lagged.

“When did we arrive?” I asked him while rubbing my eyes. I yawned, stretched my hands out in front of me, and then flipped the sheets off my body. “I was very tired, I guess; I missed the fun of arriving here.”

“Trust me, it played out even better with you asleep,” Jack said to me as he smiled. “I carried you out of our limo and brought you in here in my arms. It was a sweet moment, and it made the sheikh believe we were so deeply in love.”

Jack was smiling because he found this amusing, but it wasn't. “That's mortifying,” I told him, then shuddered on purpose before getting up from the bed.

Jack was wearing his suit pants and a white shirt. The first three buttons were undone, and I caught a glimpse of his bare chest just from a side glance. My throat thickened, and I swallowed hard as a shot of desire ravaged through me.

“How rested are you?” he asked me as he began pacing around the bedroom. “The sheikh will expect us to join his family for dinner tonight, but if you're not up for it, I can tell them that we will have breakfast instead. It was a long flight here, and I don't want to tire you out before the show even begins.”

“Are you kidding me?” I asked with a small laugh. “I'm ready to put on a show, my lovely husband,” I said, then walked to him and hooked my arms in his. “Don't worry, darling. We'll make them believe just how hot and scorching our romance is.”

“Mortifying,” Jack answered, then shuddered just like I did seconds earlier.

This made me laugh, and I punched him playfully on the arm before moving away from him.

“Get ready then, I’ll leave you to it,” he said, before picking up his phone from the bedside table and walking out of the room into the adjoining living room of our en-suite room.

What a residence, I thought. More like a palace. I couldn’t wait to explore this place.



“GOOD EVENING, MRS. MULLER.” The sheikh’s wife greeted me when I arrived at the dining area with Jack. Jack’s hand rested on the small arch of my waist as we stood in front of the sheikh and his wife.

I hugged the woman lightly before she kissed both my cheeks and said, “I’m Liliana.” She had a beautiful smile, and I noticed the elegant red dress she wore had gold threaded embroidery all over it. The outfit gave her a majestic look, and even the smooth pale tone of her skin screamed wealth.

“Nina,” I said with a smile, then cleared my throat and moved to the sheikh. Just like in the pictures, he was a fierce-looking man, and his keen eyes remained pierced into mine as Jack introduced us.

“Sheikh Zayed Al-Mufti, this is my wife, Nina,” Jack said as he extended a hand towards Zayed.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Sheikh Zayed,” I said as I accepted his extended hand for a shake. His stern eyes remained, scrutinizing me for the few seconds we shook hands before he burst into a wide smile that reached his eyes.

“I’m pleased to meet you too, Nina,” he said before releasing my hand. “I see you’re the woman that has captured my friend’s heart. She’s a lovely woman, Jack,” Zayed continued, as he patted Jack’s shoulder.

I gave him my best smile. “Not every woman can capture this one,” I said, carefully drawing out my words so I sounded just as polished as his wife had.

My comment made the sheikh smile, and he nodded. “You’re right ... men like Jack rarely ever see the need to settle down. It warms my heart to see he’s a man of a great mind.”

Zayed spread his arms wide and continued in the same elevated tone. “Please, sit ... I had my workers make dinner as American as possible. I am sure you will enjoy it.”

We all took our seats at the table, and slowly, music began playing in the background as the workers came to the table and began opening every dish displayed there.

The eight-foot rectangular table was full to the very edge with a variety of dishes. I smelled cinnamon, and even parsley as they opened the serving plates.

There was a mighty-sized turkey in the center of the table, vegetables, fruits, nuts, a strange-looking doughnut, and

another that resembled mac and cheese, but I suspected it was not.

“Iranian sangkak,” Zayed said as a worker began serving me some. “Have that one; you will love it, Nina.”

I was tempted to opt for the wine two men brought in, but Jack was giving me a pleasant smile, and I could see the sheikh was very excited to have us, so I gave him another smile. “I know I will,” I answered.

He laughed, clapped his hands, and motioned for us to eat.

During the course of our dinner, a light conversation played out on the table, and I answered every question the sheikh slanted my way with wit and a pleasant smile. Jack leaned close at intervals, put his hand on my back, caressed or touched my cheek, and stared deep into my eyes.

Each time he did it, my heart skipped a little, and it was getting increasingly difficult to forget that all of this was just an act.

“Nina’s such a brilliant young woman, Jack,” the sheikh said after we finished the first course of our meal and dessert was served. “How did you two meet?”

“Bowling,” I answered.

“At a club,” Jack said at the same time, and then we both laughed, and tried to answer again.

“Bowling.” We chorused this time, and I relaxed a little, thankful that we were in sync this time. The sheikh arched a brow; his wife, too, wore a distrustful look; and I took charge

of the situation. “Jack and I met through my brother,” I said. “I wasn’t eighteen at the time, so I couldn’t really go to clubs, but they always sneaked me in with a fake ID and made sure I didn’t drink too much,” I explained.

“Ah, so you two knew each other from way back?” Liliana asked, and the conversation began to flow nicely again.

“Yes,” I said with a smile. “We met when I turned sixteen. Jack and my brother were in college then. They met in college.”

“I love young romance,” the sheikh said, and flashed his set of sparkly teeth. “And you’re good at bowling?”

“She’s a monster at bowling,” Jack supplied and puffed his chest a bit to show his pride.

“And golf too,” I added, knowing that this pleased the sheikh as well. “My Liliana is great at playing golf too, *sahih hubiy?*” he asked, using an Arabic endearment.

Liliana smiled at him, and Jack winked at me, then gave me a secret thumbs up when neither the sheikh nor his wife was looking.

We continued discussing during dessert, and Liliana and I fixed a golf match date for some time during our stay.

When we finished dessert, I saw the sheikh give Liliana a soft nod, then she got up, gave all of us nods, and then whispered goodnight to me before leaving the dining table.

Jack looked at me then, leaned close, and then whispered, “You have to excuse us now, sweets. The sheikh and I have

some business to discuss.”

His use of endearment left me flushed, but that didn't deter my mind from the curious thought that sparked in there.

Jack brought me here because he needed me by his side to convince the sheikh to partner with him. So why did everyone need to excuse themselves to discuss this business? Every worker here, and also the sheikh's wife?

Chapter Six

Jack

I FOLLOWED ZAYED OUT of the dining area and entered the inner room, where his men had cleared out and prepared for our meeting. Usually in mansions like this, there was always a secret room for meetings. I wasn't surprised to see that the sheikh's inner space required fingerprint recognition, had security cameras at adjoining hallways, and was also heavily guarded by his men.

Once we stepped over the door's threshold, another door opened and exposed the long corridor we had to walk through to get to the meeting room. Every step I took led me deeper into it. I matched the sheikh's pace till we finally reached the main room.

The space resembled a study, but there was a far distinction between the American-styled study and the sheikh's inner room.

The red lights gave the place a dull yet somehow vibrant vibe. The entire mansion was somewhat enclosed from the outer world. Most doors were sealed off, leaving only the main

entrance and probably a secret exit that only the sheikh himself knew.

Zayed waved a hand to offer me a seat, and once I lowered myself onto the fluffy couch and crossed my legs in front of me, two men marched into the room with suitcases, dropped them on the table, and opened them.

Slow music ebbed into the atmosphere around us and eased the mood. I couldn't understand the lyrics as it wasn't English, but the sheikh was nodding and swaying his head to it already, and the dazed smile on his face showed he was pleased.

At least we didn't get killed on arrival. I had worried about Nina, especially during the dinner. I knew she had a penchant for being curious, and when I got back to our en-suite room, she would have a lot of questions about my conversation with the sheikh tonight and how the business dealings went.

I wanted to keep her far away from the inner dealings I had with the sheikh for her own sake. I didn't think I could handle her getting in harm's way when I was responsible for bringing her here in the first place.

Sighing, I controlled my expression and lowered my gaze to the open suitcases. A wad of clean dollar bills filled one, and the pistols were lined up in the other.

Another of the sheikh's men brought us an expensive bottle of cognac with two glasses. Once he filled them, the sheikh waved a hand to signal him to leave, and then it was just two of us in the room.

The walls around us were framed with glass, and different weapons I couldn't even begin to name stayed enclosed inside the space. It wasn't my first time dealing with criminals like Zayed Al-Mufti, but yet every time it was like I was experiencing the rush of adrenaline that spiked my protective instincts all over again.

Alone with the sheikh now, I engaged in a stare-down that he started. I met the sheikh's dark gaze steadily and kept my jaw hardened to show my fearlessness. I had dealt with Zayed before, and I knew the rules.

Zayed Al-Mufti was a suspicious SOB who never slacked. The first and last time I dealt arms with the sheikh's crime ring, I hadn't engaged in the activities myself. My partner agent had been in charge of the dealings while I supplied him with information about Zayed.

My conversations with the sheikh had solely been via messages he sent through his trusted cartel men. It was all done off phone or internet records so he could avoid being traced. This meant that one wrong move and my head was on the line.

Nina's too.

The sheikh suddenly smiled, then picked up his glass. "I like you, Jack," he said with a smile. "I rarely ever like Americans. And I like your wife too."

"She's a sweet lady," I commented, then remembered Nina's smile and how well she played the role of my wife. I

hadn't doubted that she would do it well. She was always perfect.

“Sweet ladies are known to lead to a man's death. How well can she be trusted?”

The sheikh picked a gun from his suitcase, cocked it, and made his hand rest on his thigh while the barrel remained pointed at me. “You know what it means to deal with the Al-Mufti.”

I assessed the weapon. “A sig sauger,” I said. “I'll deal with you better than that pistol.” I reached into the inner pocket of my suit and took out a bullet I carried with me for the night.

I raised it between two fingers for the sheikh to see, and then I slowly placed it on the table. “9x19mm ammo for MPX weapons have a parabellum cartridge, can hold up to 41 rounds, and are fitted with a streamer weapon light, vertical foregrip, and suppressor. This is the kind of deal you show up to in person, Sheikh Zayed Al-Mufti. The American CIA will kill to have their hands on my shipment.”

“I do not show up for my deals. That's my one rule, and you know it.”

“You should show up for this one,” I insisted, but cautiously so as not to raise any suspicions. The game was to make sure the sheikh liked and trusted me enough to be there. If that didn't work out, then my CIA team would cut their losses and take whoever did show up.

Chances were, whomever they caught wouldn't say a word about the sheikh or his cartel.

“The tartan tactical Sig-Sauer is what I like to call a beast. I think it'll be befitting for your person, sheikh Zayed Al-Mufti.”

Another tense moment passed; I expected more resistance, but the sheikh simply held my gaze steady before he said, “Beat me to golf and we'll see. I might either kill you or show up. I'll make up my mind.”

“Then it's settled. I look forward to our D-day then, cheers.”

I lifted my glass and tipped it in the sheikh's direction while maintaining a smile on my lips. Everything was going according to plan.



HOURS PASSED BEFORE I finally left the sheikh for the night and headed to my bedroom. Nina was pacing around when I entered the room and closed the door behind me. My gaze first latched onto the silhouette of her in the lovely pink satin nightgown she wore, and heat rushed through all of me till I couldn't catch my breath.

She turned to face me, then paused in her strides for a second before she rushed forward and grabbed my hands. “You're back ... how did it go? Is he pleased? Could we fool him?”

My gaze dropped to her hands on mine, and my breath hitched in my throat. Nina's gaze pierced into mine, and the intensity of her gaze rocked me off my feet. I had to remind myself to breathe and drag my thoughts back to reality.

"I ... I don't know yet," I answered, then slowly pulled my hand out of hers. "He says he'll either do business with me or kill me."

Her eyes widened as she gasped and paled. Nina's pallor disappeared further as I gave her a serious look, but a few seconds later, my lips widened into a smile, and I laughed. "It's a joke, he's not going to kill me, Nina."

She sighed and rested a hand on her chest as her shoulders sank with visible relief. "I was scared for a second," she said, then moved towards where I now sat on the bed and took the spot beside me. "I thought you meant it literally."

"How can I?" I asked, then tilted my head to one side to assess her. Nina glanced over her shoulder at me briefly, and when our eyes met, she dragged her gaze away from mine immediately and cleared her throat.

I noticed the right sleeve of her nightdress had slid down a bit. I could see the creamy skin at her shoulders, and the cute, tiny birthmark dot resting there.

Desire rushed through me and threatened to make my nerves spark. I couldn't react to her like this. I spent the last six years trying to forget all the things Nina made me feel, but sitting beside her alone in this room made it feel like those years hadn't happened.

Even the kiss during our trip.

Goodness lord! *I have to get away from her.*

I rose to my feet to break the tension slowly ebbing through me, then combed my fingers through my hair and began reciting the events of tomorrow's schedule so I could get my head on straight.

"Tomorrow I'll probably play golf with the sheikh. You have to stay back and entertain his wife. Drink with her and learn things about the Arabian culture. You're good with people, and I'm sure you two will get along fine."

She stopped pacing and turned to face me. "Well, I want to play golf while I am here as well," she challenged.

Nina got on her feet and walked towards the door. Her strides gave me the chance to admire the swing of her hips and the rounded curve of her behind.

Lord ... I was drowning in the sensuous heat wave that clouded my judgment and made me hard in every single way and spot. My nerves snapped and sizzled, the flutters in my chest built, and the only way I could hold onto my restraint was by reminding myself of all the reasons why she was off-limits.

She's off-limits ... She's Ryan's sister, she's off-limits.

"This room is en-suite, so I was thinking we'd at least get two rooms to ourselves. How do we share a bed?"

"It's a king-sized bed, Nina," I pointed out to her as I took off my suit jacket, and then my tie before I sat on the bed and

began to kick off my shoes.

“I know it’s a king-sized bed, but I can’t share a bed with you. I mean ... you didn’t really think we were going to share the bed, did you?”

When I didn’t say anything, she shook her head, strode over to the bed, and grabbed a pillow. “You take the couch,” she said and tossed the pillow at me.

“Ouch,” I groaned as I caught it, and tossed it aside. “How do we pretend to be in love if we don’t sleep together?” Her reaction to my statement made me chuckle before I added. “Relax, I mean in the same bed and nothing else.”

Nina stopped pacing, and then a small frown formed on her face. “I mean it, Jack. We’re not lying in bed together.”

I got up and began unbuttoning my shirt while looking at her. The crimson color formed on her cheeks as she watched me. Her gaze followed my finger’s movements till the shirt dropped to the ground, and I stood before her, my chest rising and falling with the force of my breathing.

Did she know what she was doing to me? Could she tell?

A slow hum started in my blood as I stared at her lips. I tried to tell myself to look away, but God, she was making it so difficult with the way her eyes held onto mine.

Something snapped in the air then, and I couldn’t tell who moved first, but the next thing I knew, I had crossed the distance between us and plastered my lips to hers for a soulful kiss I knew I wouldn’t recover from.

Chapter Seven

Nina

HIS HANDS SWOOPED AROUND my waist as he drew me to him, and I was mindless to stop him. All I wanted to do was feel the heat of his kiss and enjoy the pleasures that wracked through my whole body. His tongue found its way into my mouth and reminded me of all the pleasures I had forgotten.

I was lost in the heat of his kiss, and the warmth his embrace created around me. Jack also seemed mindlessly into the kiss. When my lids fluttered open, he slowly pulled away from me. I noticed his eyes were still closed, and he rubbed his nose against mine, drew in a deep breath, and sighed. “Nina,” he called.

His voice made me shiver. The hoarseness and the trembling undertone tore apart every restraint I prided myself on. At that moment, I wanted Jack and nothing else.

No one else.

I initiated the next kiss, snaked my hands around his neck, and lifted myself on tiptoe so I could meet his lips fully. Nothing else mattered from then on, because his larger palms

pressed against my back and then slowly started to undress me.

He slid his hands under the nightgown, and his hands grazing the bare skin of my thighs and bottom made me shiver. Jack lifted me effortlessly into his arms and carried me to the bed.

Once my back sank into the mattress, he climbed in after me and parted my thighs so he could rock his hardness into me. The memories of our first night together came back with lightning speed, but the tingles racing through me and the pleasure curling my toes was more intense than that night.

I knew there was no holding back. I wanted Jack, and I could tell from his pants and the passion in his searing gaze when he looked at me that he felt the same way.

His lips hovered above mine, but he kissed my neck instead, then drew the nightgown to my neck, raised my body off the bed, and took it off completely.

“God, you’re so beautiful,” he growled in a shaky voice. “You drive me insane.”

His words egged me on and made a small smile form on the side of my lip. I loved the way he looked at me. He took his time like he was feasting, and he stared at every inch of my body before he trailed his hands down from the swell of my breasts to the curve of my hips and my full thighs.

When he spread my legs apart again, I willingly parted for him. My fingers gripped the sheets as he began kissing my

inner thighs and working his middle finger toward the folds of my most sensitive spot.

I cried out when his slow strokes became more intense. My hips moved up from the bed because I wanted to meet his thrusts and enjoy the sensations of his lips and tongue on me.

“Jack,” I cried out, moaned, and then nibbled on my lower lip.

“I’m going to take you slowly,” he whispered. His words felt more like a threat than anything. I shivered in anticipation of what he could do to me. I wanted him to do whatever he wanted. “I’m going to pleasure you tonight.”

His shuddery breath against my wet inner lips made my toes curl deeper into the sheets. Once he kissed up my abdomen and got to my breasts, my fingers worked their way up his muscular neck into his hair, and I ran my hands through his thick strands, loving his murmurs and the softness of his kisses around my nipples.

Every touch and stroke of his tongue around that spot made me grow wetter. His hardness bulged out of his pants and begged for my attention, so I stroked my right hand down the bulge, then unbuckled him and unzipped his fly.

Jack was harder than ever—he was hot and pulsating, ready. I wanted him buried deep inside me to the hilt, and as I stroked my hand down his length, his groans told me he wanted the same thing.

Jack grabbed my hands and pinned them over my head with one of his, then he kissed my lips deeply again, licked a path down to my navel, and toyed with it before he gently guided the tip of his male hardness into me.

I sighed and spread my thighs wider for him. The feel of his velvety hardness thrusting inside me was more than I could stand. I nibbled on my lower lip, closed my eyes, and gave in to the sensations rocking through me.

My thighs quivered and I cried out when he slid out to the hilt, paused, and then thrust fully into me without warning.

Our bodies started an old sensual dance of pleasure then, and I was his fiddle. He played with me, made me gasp and cry for him, then kissed me till I was breathless and drove me to the edge, only to start all over again.

Seconds flowed into minutes; our soft sighs and his murmurs filled the night. The sheets tangled between our bodies; Jack found my hands and linked our fingers, and he kept his thrusts deep and filling till I was moaning and shuddering over the edge of sanity and climaxing with intensity.

When he bucked his hips and thrust into me one last time, I felt his warmth fill my insides and heard his groan while he emptied his seed into me.

My heavy breathing slowly returned to normal, and Jack slid to the side of the bed, then carried me with him so my head could rest on his shoulders.

Jack curled me into his body and rested his chin on my head. “Don’t move,” he said, his words a low, breath-carrying whisper in the air. It soothed me and made me relax further into his warm embrace and close my eyes.

I hoped to stay in his arms like that for a long time, but deep down, a part of me knew that come morning, Jack would no longer be beside me.



I WAS RIGHT, I thought as I opened my eyes the next morning and groaned as the brilliant rays of sunlight filtered into the room through the open windows.

I sat up in bed slowly, stretched my arms out over my head and looked around to see Jack was not on the bed or in the room. My right hand curled around my neck, and I closed my eyes as images of our heated night flashed through my memory and made me sigh.

I licked my lower lip, then blew out air from my lips before I got out of bed and went into the bathroom. Somehow, I hoped Jack would show up before I finished my shower. I wanted to talk about last night, but if he didn’t want to, then that was fine too.

Either way, I wondered where he had run off to. I spent time in the shower, took my time to try out the shampoo and conditioner in there, and then I did a little dance and tried to get my mind off the fact that last night was the second-best night of my life.

The first was one that I had spent six years trying to forget.

Some minutes after I got dressed in a stunning blue dress in the closet, I stepped out of our room and headed down the majestic hallway toward the stairs.

A gentleman greeted me with a head bow there, then he said something to the man with him in Arabic before he looked at me again and smiled.

“Mrs. Muller,” he said. “I’m Sayed and I am to accompany you for the rest of the day.”

“Accompany?” I questioned as I put my hand in his, and then let him guide me down the stairs. Once we got to the ground floor, we began walking towards the dining hall.

“Yes,” he answered. “The sheikh is out golfing with your husband, and as our guests, I’ve been given the privilege of making sure you have everything you need—including a very American breakfast.”

Sayed did a hand wave once we got to the dining hall, and I noticed the table was already set with different dishes I couldn’t even recognize, and yet it was called American.

“Can I just have toast or a bagel or something?” I asked with a polite smile.

The man ticked with his lips and then pulled out a chair for me. “Sheikh Zayed Al-Mufti left very specific instructions. He’ll kill me if I don’t follow them.”

I sat and rolled my eyes. *Why did everyone make jokes about dying?*

Three women dressed in lovely black dresses and their hair covered filed into the dining hall, and one of them placed a plate in front of me while the other began to serve me some tea.

It felt like I was in some regency movie where I would have servants make me breakfast and also wipe my lips if I spilt tea.

This is crazy.

I forced on a smile because Sayed was watching me, and once they served me some salad, chicken, and sweet potatoes diced in a bowl, I picked up my cutlery and tasted the salad first.

“What about the sheikh’s wife?”

“The shay kaha is out with her friends. They decided to visit the mall this morning, and I don’t think they’ll be back until much later. It seems like you’re stuck with me for the morning, Mrs.”

Sayed wore a full smile, and I could relax a little because it seemed harmless. Although I couldn’t eat much of the breakfast, it helped to drink some of the delicious tea served.

After breakfast, Sayed and I walked the long halls of the mansion, and he gave me a detailed breakdown of the portraits of every sheikh that had lived in the palace before Zayed Al-Mufti.

“The elder elected the sheikh in the past, but now it’s more of a political alliance,” Sayed was saying as we walked back

towards my bedroom, and I stopped in front of the door and turned to him.

This was really nice, Sayed,” I told him. “Thank you for keeping me busy for the morning.”

He bowed his head. “Ring the bell in your room if you need anything. I’m always at your service.”

I released a deep breath when he walked away, and I glanced at the watch on my wrist to realize I had spent the entire morning with him. It was past noon now, and there was still no sign of Jack or text from him.

Sighing, I opened the door and entered the suite, then gasped from shock when I saw Jack standing near the window.

“Jesus, you scared the bejeezus out of me,” I said as I closed the door behind him. I hesitated at first, then I crossed over to him and waited till he slowly turned around to face me. “I missed you this morning. When I woke up, you weren’t here, and ...”

Jack held my gaze, then he rubbed his jaw and said, “The sheikh is inviting us to dinner tomorrow night. I have to go out and meet some of his friends this evening. I just dropped by to make sure you are all right.”

He moved to walk away from me, but I touched his arm to stop him. “Is that all you’re going to say to me?” I asked as I met his gaze. “I thought we would talk about last night.”

Jack’s gaze dropped to my hand on his arm, and he slowly peeled it away. “I don’t want to talk, Nina,” he said in a soft

voice. “Not now.”

“Jack—”

“Get ready for tomorrow night,” he cut in. “Don’t forget, we can’t screw this up.”

A lump formed in my throat when he walked out of the room, and I released a deep breath.

Right. What made me think anything would be different after letting him make love to me the second time?

Chapter Eight

Jack

NINA PROBABLY WENT TO bed pissed that night, because when I returned from my late-night clubbing and playing card games with the sheikh in his private club, she was fast asleep on the bed, the pillow curled tight into her body.

I admired her from the couch, where I sat because I was too scared to join her on the bed. I didn't want to lose control again and make love to her like I wanted. That passion was not one I wanted to indulge in because I would only lose my mind.

Nina sighed in her sleep, and I knew she was waking up when she groaned, shifted the duvet off her bed, and yawned. A soft knock came on the door then, and I didn't think before reacting.

I got up, took off my shirt completely, and climbed into bed with her. While the early visitor knocked again, I plastered a hand to her lips, then ruffled her hair with one hand, and pushed the sleeve of her nightgown down.

"Someone is out there," I whispered when I lowered my lips to her ears. I let my lips brush over her skin because I wanted

her flushed, and then I grazed a finger over her lower lip to intensify the effect before I got out and walked to the door.

My own body hardened because of the slight touch on her lips, and since I wanted whoever was at the door to see that we were being passionate before they came, I didn't bother to kill the desire that sprang through me.

"Good morning, Mr. Muller," the woman on the other side of the door said with a wide, cheery smile. Her thick Arabian-accented English came bouncing off as she continued. "Compliments from the shay kaha. They expect you and the Mrs. to join them for dinner tonight. Have a good time."

I took the box she held out to me, and I noticed the lady trying to poke her head further to look into the room. I let her get a better glimpse of the room's inside by pushing the door wider open. Once she caught a glimpse of Nina, still looking beet red on the bed with her hair ruffled, she smiled and walked away.

"That was close," I said when I locked the door again and turned to Nina. "I know the sheikh will be watching us, so we can't slack off at any point."

"Did you sleep here last night?" Nina asked as she eyed me closely.

"Yes," I answered, then pointed at the couch. "I took the couch."

She pressed her lips together, and I saw her small frown before she slid out of the bed, pushed the sleeves of her

nightgown off her shoulders, and let the cloth fall to her feet.

Jesus.

My instant reaction was to turn away from her. “What are you doing?” I asked in panic as she stood in front of the dressing mirror and stared at herself.

Slowly, I turned back to her, and my gaze dropped to the sexy perk of her ass. Nina lifted one shoulder in a shrug, and without glancing back at me, she replied. “You’ve already seen me naked, so what’s the fuss about?”

When I didn’t say anything but simply stared at her because I couldn’t take my eyes off her body, she added. “Besides, it means nothing to you anyway. We might as well act as if it never happened.”

“How do we do that when you’re naked in front of me?”

She slowly turned around, then walked towards me with slow steps that I knew were calculated. Her striking blue eyes held onto mine, and she put her right hand on my bare chest when she reached me. “Why? Are you scared you’ll do something you don’t want to talk about again?”

“Nina ...” I called in a growl-like voice. Every nerve ending in my body sparked alive, and my fingers itched to touch her. I could inhale her sweet scent.

Lilies ... I thought as it filled my nostrils. The only reason why I was still holding back was that I knew I couldn’t let myself touch her again. If I had, I would never be able to stop.

Nina was the one woman I couldn't have. She was my best friend's sister, and she deserved better than a guy like me who couldn't commit to anyone.

All I'll do is put her in danger. My life was a constant circle of danger and death. I couldn't drag her into all of this. I couldn't let her know about it either.

I swallowed hard, and she trailed her hand down to my waistline, then used her finger to circle close to my belt.

“So, you're just going to torment me?” I asked in a voice that barely sounded like my own. “Because I refused to talk about that night?”

“Doesn't affect me either way,” she answered. “I don't care either.”

She pulled away from me and walked away. My gaze followed her till she entered the bathroom, and then I broke out into a deep sigh and turned around to face the bed.

Once I heard the water from the shower trickle down, I picked up my shirt from the couch, put it on, and tucked it in. I had to get away from Nina before I did something as crazy as joining her in the bathroom, damn the consequences.



SHE'S DRIVING ME INSANE! Did the shay kaha give her that dress on purpose? Why did it have to look so seductive on her?

Nina was a fine woman, and she had no trouble making the men in the room admire her. The dinner had just begun. The sheikh was on the front stage giving his speech, and the prominent friends he had surrounding us were all attentive, but I could still see people turn in our direction.

Red was Nina's color, but tonight she was ravishing.

Sayed, the man she was talking to, also couldn't get his eyes off her. The glass of sparkling champagne in her hand wavered, and she kept giggling at whatever he said.

Hearing her laugh like that and smile at him made me want to poke his eyes with my fingertips—or worse, bury the 9mm bullet in my pocket in his skull.

But that was extreme ... the man was just being nice.

Get a grip, Jack, and focus Nina is your wife ... She's yours here, and he can't take her away from you.

All of that talk of control snapped away when it was time to dance, and Nina let Sayed lead her to the dance floor instead.

What is she doing?

I clenched my fist without realizing it and was about to march towards them to interrupt when a clear voice said behind me. "Your wife is a true American. I can tell from how she acts and that tickling laugh of hers."

The shay kaha held my gaze and smiled radiantly. I took her hand and pressed a kiss to the front of her palm, then pretended not to feel the hot course of jealousy snapping through me. "She is indeed. It's why she has me hooked."

“I can see you love her. The way you look at her is amazing. My darling Zayed looks at me the same way.”

A dimple flashed on her cheek as she smiled, and then she sipped from her glass.

“You must know, Jack, that the sheikh is a nice but formidable man. He’s not the kind you want to deceive or make a fool of.”

Her words sounded like a warning, and it made me tense. It was hard to tell if she was threatening or just advising me at that moment because she kept on a pleasant smile and even waved and tipped to other guests in the room.

“I do fear the sheikh,” I answered. “He’s a man I respect. Why would I want to fool him?”

“Many have tried,” she answered. “All have failed, and lost their lives for it.”

She met my gaze fully then, and after looking at me for a while, she looked at Nina. “She looks lovely in that dress. It would be a shame to have to wrap her in black and bury her.”

“Is this a threat or warning?” I queried, wanting to know if the shay kaha suspected something, or if she was just being tense to instigate fear. My palms turned sweaty for a bit, and I flanked in Nina’s direction.

I never feared operations like this, but I had never had to bring a woman I cared about to this dangerous place before.

“It’s just how I make sure our guests don’t cross the line, Mr. Muller. I’m sure you understand. Just in case you have the

intention of doing so.”

When she walked away from me, I dropped my champagne glass in the first server’s tray I saw, then walked over to Nina and Sayed. “Times up,” I announced, then took her arm and tore her away from Sayed’s embrace.

Goodness, the smitten look in his eyes made me want to puke.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Nina asked in a harsh tone as she tried to stop me from dragging her along.

“You’re drunk. If you want to dance, then you dance with me.”

“Let go of me or I’ll scream and kick you,” she threatened.

I stopped walking, turned to her, and pressed her to my body with my arms wrapped around her waist. “You’re with me, Nina ... you’re my wife, don’t forget that.”

Nina tipped her head back and burst into a low laugh. “Your wife? You’re delusional, I could never marry you.”

“Nina ...”

“It’s just a game, Jack, get your head on straight. Don’t think one night rolling in the sheet with you will make me squirm with pleasure just from the sight of you and bend to your will.”

She hiked her chin in defiance, and her cheeks blazed red, but she still matched my steps fluidly and blended into the dance.

“People are watching,” I said when my keen gaze quickly darted around us and I saw that the sheikh was dancing with his wife, but looking at us.

“What?” Nina asked.

I pressed her close to me; she gasped and her lips fell open. I loved that reaction, and the wide look that entered her eyes satisfied me because it showed that she was also feeling this tension in the air.

“People are watching us,” I said and lowered my lips to her ear. Her breasts pressed into my chest, and her scent made me forget to breathe again.

“Oh.” she gasped before I twirled her around and brought her close again.

Our eyes met and our gazes lingered. Every other sound around us ... the music, the light chatter of the guests, and even the clinks of glass against glass evaporated into the atmosphere.

Only Nina existed in my world. Only her ... her eyes, her lips, her voice.

I wanted her ... I craved her, and before these two weeks were over, I was sure she would drive me to the point of no return.

The song ended, but we didn't pull apart. Her chest rose and fell in rhythm to mine, and her lips remained slightly parted. They were lush and painted red, and I wanted to kiss her till

she moaned into my mouth and clutched my shoulders for support.

“I need a drink,” Nina said, then pulled away from me and sashayed across the room.

I loosened my tie and noticed Sayed glaring at me from where he stood.

“I need a drink,” I muttered to myself, then stalked away from the dance floor to find myself something strong to drink.

Chapter Nine

Nina

SCOTCH DID NOTHING TO help me, and the champagne only made me miserable. The second I opened my eyes the next morning, the only thing I could think of was the splitting ache in my head and the patchiness in my throat.

“Try not to get up,” I heard Jack’s steady voice say when I tried to sit up. He stopped me by putting his hand on my forehead, and the feel of his cool hands against my flushed skin made me relax a bit.

I groaned as bile rose in my throat. The urge to puke hit hard and the knots twisting in the pit of my stomach hurt. “What happened last night?”

I was still wearing the red lace dress that the shay kaha gifted me, but I smelled like alcohol and sweat. *Goodness, what disaster did I cause last night?*

“You don’t remember a thing I’m sure, but you were quite the showgirl last night. You put on a lovely show for the sheikh and his men. Who knew you were such a good pole dancer?”

I was certain color drained from my face when he mentioned pole dancing. I gasped and nearly puked, but the bile rose to the surface and hooked there.

Jack's eyes stayed on mine, and then he suddenly burst into laughter and shook his head. "I'm kidding," he said. "You didn't do anything because I brought you back home immediately."

He was sitting so close to me on the bed, and his shirt was unbuttoned at the top so I could get a glimpse of his chest. I remembered dancing with him, and the nervousness of heat that rushed through me when he whispered in my ears and held me to him made me shiver.

I had too many drinks last night because I needed to keep him out of my head and nerves. Although the alcohol only made him look more tempting.

I groaned and plastered a hand to my face, squeezing my eyes shut. When I reopened them, Jack was still sitting on the bed with me, and his eyes searched mine for a long moment before he said, "Since you're bent on driving me insane, I guess it's only right that I should tell you that we're going on a date today."

Date?

I gasped from the shock of his words, but quickly cleared my throat and pretended like I didn't know what he was talking about. "What do you mean I drive you insane, I don't know what you're talking about."

“Oh, but you do, Nina ... you do it every time, even in the past.”

“I don’t do anything,” I denied hotly, even though the back of my neck burned, and his suggestive gaze made the spot between my legs tingle and pool with heat for him.

Jack scooted closer to me on the bed, then he put his hand over mine and said, “You know what you do to me, Nina. You watch me, and you look at me with those eyes ... you know it when I look at you, too, and you seem to enjoy it.”

The pressure on the side of my head doubled. I had to remind myself that Jack was no good for me. He was here now, but he would run off soon and pretend as if nothing happened.

Like, there was nothing between us.

“Jack ...” I swallowed, licked my lips, and then said, “You’re the one who wants to pretend like there’s nothing between us.”

“You make it impossible,” he answered, his voice a shred of a whisper, and it faded into a wisp that rattled my heart inside its cage, and almost made me writhe on the bed.

He hadn’t even touched me yet and I was melting for him. His face drew closer to mine till I felt his hot breath whispering against my skin.

My lids fluttered close before I could control them, and he touched my chin with his hand, then slowly inched towards

me. I parted my lips and held my breath while waiting for his kiss, but it didn't come.

He withdrew and my eyes snapped open. "Get dressed, love ... there's much to do in the city of Jeddah," he said, then got on his feet and winked at me.

"What do you mean?"

"The sheikh has organized a tour for us. It'll be just you and me in the rising heat of the Middle East. I'm sure we'll have fun."

Jack walked away from me and went into the bathroom. He didn't come out until some minutes later, and when he did, his hair was dampened from his recent shower and the droplets of water that glistened on his skin made him look even more delicious to me.

While he dried his hair with his towel, I gaped at him and enjoyed the flexing muscles of his well-defined arms and back.

Jack turned to me, and I quickly averted my eyes from him at the same time before I got on my feet. I walked towards the bathroom, but Jack stopped me by grabbing my waist and pulling me to him.

He didn't give me the chance to react. His lips crashed down on mine and he kissed me senseless till my breath snatched and my head swooned. My pulse was spiraling out of control, but his taste and his scent were all that mattered. He

nibbled on my lower lip, teased my tongue with his, and then brushed his nose over mine.

“Don’t tease me like you did last night again. Or I promise you, I won’t be able to hold back.”

Jack released me and walked out of the room into the adjoining living room of our en-suite space. I stayed in one spot for a long time, trying to find the strength to move again, because his kiss had completely shattered my control.

When I finally finished my shower and got dressed in simple jean shorts with a crop top and kimono tossed over my shoulders, I joined Jack in the living room so we could begin our tour.



WE STOOD IN FRONT of a water fountain and listened to the tour guide giving details about the holy city of Jeddah. Jack had his fingers linked with mine, and even though the sheikh’s men followed us since the start of our tour, he kept his composure and acted like nothing else mattered but me and our time together.

“Having fun?” he asked me as we began strolling around the museum with the tour guide. He showed us the old coins and displays of Islamic manuscripts, weaponry, and Islamic attires on display.

I especially loved listening to the cultural stories of their gods and beliefs. When we finished with the museum, we

walked down the street while holding hands, and decided to try out the local food store at the corner.

“Sure you can handle it?” Jack asked me with a testing smile as we stared at the kabsa we had ordered.

“You kidding me? I should be worried about you. You’re the one who always has cereal for breakfast and pizza for dinner,” I reminded him, and we both chuckled.

I remembered Jack liked to eat light, and it was crazy considering his size was twice mine and he worked out a lot. He tried his best to look casual with the way he styled his shirt so, he left it untucked from his pants.

Jack rubbed his palms together, then he dragged in a deep breath. “You go first,” he said to me.

I shook my head and smiled. “You go first.”

We both hesitated, then agreed on going together. When he rubbed his palms together again, he picked his cutlery and we both dove into the food together.

“Hmm,” I sighed, as I chewed and enjoyed the mixture of rice, meat, and vegetables. “This is amazing.”

“It is,” he agreed, and then we dug into the meal with gusto. By the time we exited the roadside store, we were both giggling and talking about how weird it was that the sheikh and his people served so many dishes and called them American.

“They have no idea what toast is,” I said as I hooked my hand in his and matched his pace. We laughed again, and I

indulged in the light sound of his laughter because I loved it.

“I have to admit it though, the sheikh is completely smitten by you. He talks about you all the time, and he’s even thinking of inviting you to go golfing with him.”

“Is that allowed? I thought golfing was for the men here.”

Jack shook his head. The sheikh has more liberal views. Besides, this isn’t the 19th century, things don’t happen that way anymore.”

We fell silent as we continued strolling for some time, and I enjoyed the cool breeze that ruffled against my skin even though the afternoon sun filtered through the sky and brightened the day.

I had used sunscreen earlier, so it wasn’t as hot as I thought it would be. Then again, I was enjoying my time with Jack too much to even remember the troubles I had with forgetting all about him.

“I hope the business you two have turns out fine,” I said as we kept walking down the street and admiring the beautiful sites of ancient architectural buildings.

“It will,” Jack answered as he glanced at me and smiled. “We already started it right.”

I nodded and considered asking a few more questions. Jack rarely ever talked about himself, and in the years, I have known him, he still maintained that aloofness about his personal life.

“When I left the Navy, I didn’t think I could ever find balance in my old life again,” he began after they stayed silent for a long time. “It’s strange how one can easily feel out of place when they stay away from everything they are used to for a long time.”

“Why would you think you wouldn’t fit back into your old life?” I asked him and turned to look at his expression again. “I mean, you’re Jack and it’s always so easy for you to fit in anywhere.”

“Not exactly,” he answered, and that made me laugh. “What? I mean it. everyone sees me and thinks it, but I’m not so great with people. I mean if I was, how come Ryan and you are my only friends?”

“Oh, but it’s easy for you with women.”

He tilted his head to one side and chuckled. “Come on, with women it’s different. All you have to do is be a gentleman. Trust me, I never do too much, and it works every time.”

“It didn’t work with me at first,” I boasted.

Jack laughed. “But it did in the end, didn’t it?” he answered.

I punched his arm and chuckled harder. “Boy, aren’t you the cocky one?”

I was enjoying this light banter between us because it was different from our usual bickering. Jack also seemed at ease with all of it, and I wanted the moment to last for a long time even as we spent most of our day out.

Our strolling came to an end when we reached a park, and Jack took me to an empty bench so we could sit. The sheikh's men still hovered around, and I looked around us to find them watching us intently.

“The sheikh will always have us followed, won't he?”

Jack nodded. “He doesn't trust easily, and he shouldn't. People like him are targets all the time.”

“Why would he be a target?”

He didn't answer the question, and I stared at his face for a long time before asking another one. “Why did you leave the Navy? Ryan always told me you were good at it. So, what happened?”

“I got tired,” Jack answered. “It was always one dangerous situation after the other and as much as I loved helping out the country ... I just ... I couldn't handle watching anyone else die.”

The ache in his voice was evident because it turned hoarse, and I wished there was a way I could console him. Without much thought, I reached out and put a hand over his, which was resting on this thigh. “I'm so sorry you lost someone back then.”

It took a long time before Jack finally answered and said, “Yeah, me too.”

Chapter Ten

Jack

I had never told anyone about why I left the Navy before, but with Nina, I wanted to bare my soul. I was enjoying our time together so much that I even forgot about all my earlier resolve.

Nina's hand on mine filled me with warmth, and I liked it so much that I didn't move away from her.

"There was a kidnapping and I lost two friends there ... I can never forget them, or how close we were," I said, then began explaining without the details of our operation why the emotional trauma had been too much for me.

"Leaving was the best choice for me," I added, then sighed and pulled my mind out of the painful memories it was sinking into. I didn't want to think about that right now.

The sheikh's men were still watching us, and I needed to find a way to contact my CIA team and find out if they had made it to Jeddah as planned. It was only three days till D-day now, and I had to give them the information they needed so they could plan for the night.

Of course, I didn't want Nina to notice either, so I had to do it in private while I was away from her.

"You know what we should do?" she asked suddenly, and the excitement in her voice brightened the mood. "We should do something fun. First, we should try and ditch these men following us. It's so boring with them behind us like this."

“You sure you’re ready for something that bold?” I asked as I looked at her, and she nodded before her lips widened into another smile that made my heart flutter.

Nina made me feel warmth in places I never thought I would feel again, and even though I was scared of letting her in because I didn’t want her in harm’s way, I still couldn’t bring myself to stay away.

“All right then,” I said and took her hand. “I’ll ditch them, just follow my lead.”

We started a fast walk around the park so we could blend in with the crowd of passersby strolling close to us at that point. I glanced over my shoulder several times, to make sure the men were still following us but far enough behind, before we ducked into the first bend and then took another one. I didn’t know where we were going, but the goal was to make sure none of the sheikh’s men were around us.

When we entered an alley that looked more like a local market, I took off my black jacket and handed it to Nina. “Put this on,” I said to her, and she did it immediately before we stepped out of the alley and reached the main road again.

Nina glanced over her shoulder at the same time that I did, and when she looked at me again, she said, “That was easy.”

“I know, right.”

I matched her grin, then tightened my grip on her hand. “But they might still catch up, so let’s take a cab from here.”

I flagged down the first one I saw, and once we hopped in, I told the driver to move.

“Where are we going?” Nina asked amidst her small chuckle after we had driven for a while.

“Let me think of something.”

She tossed her gaze to one side again while I admired her for a second and tried to think of what I really wanted to do with her. The afternoon was far spent, and the heat had started to dwindle.

Nina glanced back at me and the small smile on her pursed lips made me flutter all over. My throat tightened, and I couldn't find words at first because the heat spiraling inside me was spinning out of control.

“We should go on a date,” I blurted out before I could stop myself.

“Like a date-date or ...”

“Yes. We should go on a real date, Nina. Just you, me, and the sunset. I'm guessing it'll be very lovely to spend time with you like that.”

She didn't say anything, but her eyes lit up, and she gave me a soft smile before nodding her answer. “Okay,” she mouthed.

I noticed our hands rested close to each other on the seat, so I inched mine closer to hers and covered her palm with it.

I told the driver to take us to the sheikh's address, and we stayed that way for the rest of the ride.

Once he dropped us at the entrance, we started the fifteen minute stroll into his estate and had to pass all the security checks at the entrance before we finally made it to the palace.

"You think the sheikh will be mad?" she asked when we reached the door. "We weren't supposed to ditch his security and our limo like that."

"Who cares?" I asked her, because I loved the glint of mischief in her eyes.

We entered the palace and luckily for us, the sheikh was not around.

We went into our bedroom, and gave Nina time to prepare for our date while I freshened up in the second bathroom, choosing a navy-blue suit from my custom-made collection in the closet.

It took her over an hour to finally come into the living room. I was sitting with a glass of cognac in one hand and my gaze glued to the television screen, but as she walked closer to me and I noticed her, I gasped.

Nina looked stunning in the black dress she wore. It had long sleeves, but the fabric clung to her body and highlighted every curve. I loved what she did with her hair.

The blonde strands were tied into a bun on top of her head, but some curls fell to the side of her face and framed her

cheeks perfectly. I loved her smile, and the light I could see in her eyes.

All of it just made me want to get on my feet and kiss her till I was breathless.

“You ready?” she asked as she stood there and toyed with her fingers. She linked them multiple times, and I tried to control my anticipation.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

I got up and leaned down to brush my lips over her cheeks, and then I took her hand and walked her out of the room.



THE SHEIKH HAD PROBABLY heard the news of our outing because I could still see his minions hanging around the restaurant we visited.

I enjoyed the matazeez served. It was the restaurant’s nightly special, and it was tasty. Nina seemed more interested in the wine, and I continued to watch her as she licked her lips and then sipped from her glass.

She caught me looking at her at some point, and I didn’t bother to look away. Our gazes met and lingered for a long time, till she gave me a wide smile and looked away.

“You’re a beautiful woman,” I told her. “You make me forget all the reasons why this is wrong.”

“What are the reasons?” she asked, and her voice sounded almost breathless to me.

I didn't take my eyes off hers as I answered. "You're Ryan's sister. You're my best friend's sister ... you're off-limits."

"Ryan doesn't determine who I spend my time with," she countered. "He doesn't even care."

"It's a rule. I shouldn't lust after my best friend's sister."

"But you do anyway."

I nodded and sighed. "I do anyway."

Her lips formed a small smile, and she didn't bother to hide it as she stole her gaze from mine. I picked up my glass. I needed to find an excuse to leave the table so I could send a message to my team.

My burner was in my suit jacket and all I needed to do was get to the restroom.

"Excuse me," I said to Nina. "I need to use the restroom."

I got up, and her gaze followed me as I walked out of the dining area and took the directed path to the restroom.

Once in there, I took out the burner and dialed my handler's number. I turned on the water faucet in there and flushed the toilet so the sound would drown my voice.

"It happens tomorrow," I said once Jim Taylor took the call. "I'll text you the location, and you know the drill. His men will swoop and camp out, so you must make sure you play your path well."

"Trust me," Jim answered.

"Good."

I ended the call after that because Jim and I never did anything other than pass information with the burner. Once I finished and turned off the water faucet, I walked out of the enclosed space and moved to the sink to wash my hands.

A man pretended to be washing his hands too, and I knew he was one of the sheikh's men. He kept looking at me, so to intimidate him, I asked in a gruff voice. "Is there a problem?"

"No," he answered quickly, then wiped his hands on his jacket and walked past me.

Alone in the restroom now, I stared at my reflection in the mirror for a long time before I straightened the lapel of my jacket and walked out of the restroom.

When I got to our table, Nina was no longer sitting there. Panic rose through me as I looked around the dining area and tried to find her. The heavy pang that entered my chest felt like it would make my heart stop beating, and I didn't know what to think or do.

I raced to the receptionist and asked. "There was a blonde lady sitting over there, have you seen her?" I asked.

"No, sir," the woman answered.

Oh God ... Nina.

I was starting to hyperventilate, and I couldn't think straight because of the tension ebbing through all of my muscles.

I spun around on my feet and continued searching for her. Two men approached me to take me out of the restaurant

because I was causing a scene, and I let them lead me to the door and push me out.

A limo parked outside drove to my front, and the door slowly opened. I saw Nina sitting in there, and seeing her instantly made every heaviness in my heart fade.

“God ... Nina ...” I raced into the limo and grabbed her hands.

“I’m sorry, the sheikh’s men took me out and ...”

“It’s all right ... it’s all right,” I consoled, then wrapped my hands around her till she calmed.

When I pulled back again, I looked at the men sitting in front of the limo and asked. “What is the meaning of this?”

“The sheikh wants to dine with you both, and we were asked to bring you back to the estate.”

“You can’t kidnap my wife and tell me—”

“It is not kidnapping, sir,” the man interrupted. “She refused to come with us and we had to make her.”

I swallowed and linked Nina’s hand with mine to make sure she wasn’t frightened.

“Fine ... take us to the sheikh,” I said.

The driver took off and we began the ride back to the sheikh’s palace, and I brought Nina close to me so she could rest her head on my shoulders. I didn’t say a word to her, and I didn’t let her speak. The sheikh wanted to send a message because he suspected me.

What I had to do now was cement his trust and make sure he didn't have any other reasons to doubt our alliance.

When we reached the palace, I walked with Nina inside and we met the shay kaha waiting at the wide empty hall they used as a reception area.

“Welcome, Mr. Muller,” she said, then looked to Nina. “Mrs. Muller ... the sheikh awaits your arrival. He hates it when his guests are late to dinner.”

Chapter Eleven

Nina

AFTER DINNER, I HEADED back to our room. I paced around for some time and tried to get my head on straight. Dinner was amazing, yes, and the sheikh had been very nice, but it did nothing to hide the tension I felt the entire time we sat at the table.

The worse part was, the shay kaha kept looking at me like I stole something, and even when the sheikh was trying to be nice, her side glares did not go unnoticed.

Did I do something to blow our cover? Or are these people naturally untrusting?

I heaved out a deep breath while pacing and kept waiting for the moment Jack would walk in so I could talk to him.

Seconds ticked into minutes, and soon I was done waiting. I dropped on the bed and kicked my feet out of the stilettos I had worn the entire night so I could massage my feet and heels, then I walked out of our room and padded down the stairs gently.

I didn't make it far before I heard the first hushed whisper somewhere around the hallway. It was dead quiet, and I suspected dinner was over.

So why hasn't Jack returned?

I remembered being asked to leave the dinner table the other day, and I wondered if it was a usual thing around here to have secret meetings after eating tofu, or whatever that white stuff they served at dinner was.

The hallway smelled of jasmine, probably from the candles they lit all over the place.

“The deal is in three days; you can't screw it up now or else the sheikh will blow your brains with one of the guns he's trying to get. You know how he gets, especially when he feels suspicious about something.”

“The American stays,” the second man whispered. “He stays no matter what, and we will reconsider this once the deal is done. You don't want to go against the sheikh's wishes, trust me.”

I froze in my tracks, and as I lowered my feet to the next stair, I heard a creak that echoed loud through the hallway.

What is this I'm hearing? Guns? Dealing?

Too scared to make a sound, I turned to head back to my bedroom, but the stairs creaked again. I was sure that caught the attention of whoever was speaking in the hallway.

Not wanting to wait and find out, I raced back into my room, quickly closed the door shut, and locked it. My chest

heavily panted now, and the buildup of pressure threatened to cut off my air supply.

I didn't know what to think or do as I panicked and struggled for air.

Unable to stay still because of the jerky movements coursing through me, I got on my feet again and began to pace. One finger rested on my lip, and I played back all I had overheard in my head.

I probably misheard, right?

Someone pulled on the door just then and I nearly jumped out of my skin when I heard the reverberations. I hesitated to open the door, wondering if it were the men I overheard.

The last thing I wanted to do was get Jack in trouble. *But does he know the sheikh deals arms? How much of this is Jack involved in?*

The bang on the door came again and this time, Jack's voice followed.

I opened up. Once he was in the room, I shut the door behind us, and I turned to him. "What the hell, Jack, what's your deal about? Because just now I overheard some guys speaking about guns and the sheikh being suspicious and ..."

Jack closed the distance between us in a split second and silenced me with a kiss. His tongue slipped into my mouth and it took control of my senses and everything else. It happened so fast, but it was so hot and unlike anything I have ever done before.

And this is not real. The words came to remind me this was all an act.

I was pressed into his body as his hands roamed my back and squeezed my behind so I could grind my hips against his. From fervent passion to slow burning need, soon our tongues were sliding and matching each other's rhythm.

He cupped my chin and made me step on my tiptoes to meet his lips. I drowned in the desire that coursed through me, and I shoved my hands under his shirt to enjoy the feel of his taut muscles.

Jack stopped me when my hands touched his nipples, seizing my wrists and drawing away from me. "There's a camera in the room," he whispered into my ear, and kissed the side of my neck till he got to my earlobes and nibbled on them.

"Wait ... what?" I croaked. I didn't hear him well because of all the sensations I was fighting at once, and it took him repeating the sentence for me to understand him.

"There's a camera in the room," he answered at a slower pace, then slowly nodded. "Pretend to be into this, and I'll take you to the bathroom, turn on the shower and we'll talk. No one will hear us in there."

Right.

My head spun as he lifted me off the ground, and my hands swooped around his neck because it was all I could manage.

He carried me into the bathroom and dropped me in the bath, then turned on the shower so the sound drowned our voices.

His lips hovered close to mine for a bit, and my hands stayed on his chest as I continued panting. Neither of us said anything, and we kept staring deep into each other's eyes while Jack breathed deeply through his nose.

Jack was close to me now, but I suddenly felt like he was far away. He stared at my lips, then at the rest of my dinner dress soaked in water. He came close to kissing me again, but he stopped and instead nuzzled the side of my neck, then he looked at me again.

“Goodness Jack, just kiss me,” I blurted before I could say anything else.

“What?”

“Just kiss me,” I said again as I searched his eyes. “You’ve been staring at me, and we both know that you want to kiss me ... I want you to kiss me, I ... God what am I saying?”

I stopped before I said any more foolish things, and then I drew out a deep breath and shook my head. Jack also took a long breath, then he closed his eyes. I watched the droplets of water bounce off his long lashes, and I stared down at the shirt sticking to his wet skin.

How is the water so cold but yet I'm hot inside?

My cheeks were flushed, and it was like a tornado inside me. He had to feel all of this too, and the tingles made my nerves forget what they were supposed to do.

“It’s all right if you don’t want to,” I said in a tinier voice. Jack looked like he was struggling, though. I saw his jaw tighten, then he plastered both his hands on the sides of the wall to trap me in the middle. “It’s all right if you don’t want to kiss me again, Jack.”

“That’s the thing, Nina ... I want to,” he answered, then inhaled deeply after lowering his head to the croon of my neck. “I want to every time.”

I could feel the prod of his erection against my stomach, and that made me wetter for him.

“I heard from ... I overheard ... the sheikh is dealing guns and there’s a deal going down in three days. Did you know? Do you usually do business with men like this? I mean they even mentioned you and ...”

Jack kissed me again, cutting off my sentence, and then he began peeling my clothes off. I tried to stop him, but the urgency in his kiss and the desire coursing through me sparked flames.

This time, he ravaged my lips. His right hand moved into my hair, and he stroked my strands as he pressed me against him. I was shirtless now, and I felt him unclasp my bra. The second my breasts were freed, he dropped his lips down and started to kiss my nipples.

After another kiss and dance of our tongues, he was sliding the rest of my dress down my waist. I managed to stop him, and I pulled my dress back up so I could talk to him without wanting more of this madness.

Jack let me put on my dress, but after his deep breath, he took my lips again and began massaging my arms.

I moaned into his mouth, then continued to rock into him. Everything he made me feel was all-consuming, but I needed him to tell me what was going on, so I put my hands on his chest again and stopped him.

“Jack, tell me what’s going on,” I said again as he tried to take my lips for another kiss. “Jack ...”

“Nina, please ...” he said in a husky voice, and then he stopped trying to kiss me. I frowned and shook my head. “What is it you want to know? What do you want me to tell you?”

“You’re not surprised,” I whispered while staring at him with wide eyes. “I mean, I said the sheikh is dealing arms and you ... you didn’t even bat a lash. Oh my God, Jack, what is really going on here? Did you know about what the sheikh is doing?”

“Tone it down,” he answered, but not in a harsh tone. He pulled away from me, turned off the shower, and he walked out of the bath with his body dripping wet.

“Jack,” I called, and followed him out of the bathroom. He walked past me again and returned to the bathroom. “Right, there’s a camera in the room. They’ve been spying on us, and you knew this? You didn’t bother to tell me? I mean we made love in this room and ... he’s been watching us the entire time? Is that even legal?”

“Nina, what do you want me to tell you?” Jack interrupted. “The sheikh didn’t trust us, and he wants to know what we are up to, that’s all.”

“So, what are you up to, Jack?” I folded my hands across my chest. “What about the secret meetings after dinner? And the suspicious look that the shay kaha gives you every time. I want you to tell me what kind of deal you have going on with the sheikh.”

“That’s none of your concern, Nina. You don’t have to know everything.”

“Actually, I do, and it is my business,” I cut in. “I mean, Jack, you brought me out here to play your wife, so the least you can do is be honest with me.”

I raised both my hands in the air and waited for him to say something, but the look in his eyes told me all I needed to know. *He knew about this, and he didn’t say a thing.*

“Damn it, Jack, what are you entangled in?”

“You’re not my mother, and I don’t need you to try and clean up after me,” he answered, then tried to walk out of the bathroom again, but I pulled him back in.

“I’m paying you to do a job, Nina,” he said through gritted teeth. “Just do that and stop this.”

He walked out of the bathroom after that, and I followed him. Jack dried his hair with a towel. His clothes were still wet, and I could see the well-formed muscles of his back as he stood without looking at me.

What in God's name is going on?

I didn't know what Jack was doing here, and it was clear that he was hiding something. It was no longer the sparks between us that I was worried about.

Something's going on here, and I have to find out what.

Chapter Twelve

Jack

NINA HAS THE BEDROOM all to herself because I can't bear to be beside her all night. All the emotions coursing through me led me to one fact. *I needed to get my head on straight.*

The sheikh was suspicious. The conversation after dinner with him was more of a warning, and I remembered every word he said.

I need you to understand, mister. That I do not care for American frivolities. If you try to cross me, then be assured that I will kill you. The sheikh had taken a long pause before he added. *And your pretty American wife.*

I scoffed as I replayed the words in my head and emptied the glass of brandy in my hand before turning around and walking back to the sheikh's mansion.

It was almost daylight now, and I had spent most of my time out by the pool watching the blue waters and the stars in the night sky. Nina deserved to rest, and I feared that I would make love to her again without thinking about the repercussions.

What matters is the deal, and in a few days, we would be back in the states with no need to talk about or remember our time spent in the steaming desert heat.

When I walked into the mansion, two bodyguards greeted me with a head bow, and they walked past while speaking their native dialect. I didn't see the sheikh's personal man around, so I suspected he had spent the night in one of his clubs.

The deal would go down tomorrow night, and all of this would be over. I just needed to get Nina to stop thinking about what she overheard. When I got to the bedroom, she wasn't in bed, and her clothes lay on the ground.

"Nina?" I called and shook my head as I looked around the room. The place smelled like her. Soft ... warm and sweet. I wanted to pull her close to me and kiss her hard till my body swooned again.

"Nina," I called again, and she walked out of the bathroom naked and dripping wet. The water clung to her skin in a sexy way, and seeing the curves of her body made me nearly drop to my knees.

Nina's body was shaped perfectly, and she made me forget all about staying away and focusing on the deal. Truth was, I had always admired her. I don't know if she would believe me if I told her that now.

"Jack," she said, then sucked in a deep breath. Her breasts rose and fell gently. That caught my attention and made me

drag in a deep breath too. “Jack?” she called again, but this time in a questioning tone.

“I uh ... you’re uh ...” I stuttered, and it wasn’t like I was seeing her naked for the first time. “If you could just put something on, please so I can apologize to you properly,” I rushed to say, then turned away from her and blew out air from my lips.

Nina made no move to put on some clothes, so I turned to her again, and this time my heart did a speedy spin. “Nina, come on ... clothes.”

“Why?” she questioned and surged. “You’ve seen me naked, and you’ve had your hands on this naked body before, so what’s the big deal?”

“I. Uh ... all right,” I said, then she smiled and waved her hand in front of her too. I licked my lips and tried to refrain from doing all the tics and expressions I knew how to do, but I still couldn’t form the right sentences in my head, and she kept her gaze pinned on mine, so I couldn’t look away either.

“Nina I ...”

“Jack, say what you have to say so I can join the shay kaha in the lounge. She sent over an invitation and expects me to just honor them. That’s how things are done here in the Middle East.”

She rolled her eyes as she spoke, and she looked even more beautiful to me by the second. “Well, now I’m going to go put on a two-piece if you have nothing to say.”

I turned to watch her grab the bottoms of a red swimsuit, and I watched her hips wriggle as she fit into them before she turned to me topless.

“I’m sorry, Nina,” I said to her finally. “I came by to tell you that. I’m sorry about last night and our talk and shutting you out.”

“Is that why you’re wearing last night’s suit?” she asked, then pointed at my shirt. “You stormed out of the room in wet clothes.”

“Yeah. I spent the night drying up by the pool.”

“By the pool?” she asked, then a smile played out on her lips, and it made me chuckle too. “So, you came here to apologize?”

“Yeah, and to offer to take you to dinner tomorrow night after my deal with the sheikh is done.”

Nina nodded and pursed her lips before she picked up her bikini top from the bed and put it on. “I’d take dinner,” she said, and lifted one shoulder in a light shrug. “And I overstepped last night. I’m sorry. I mean the sheikh might not be so innocent, but I’ve known you a long time, Jack, and you’re a good man.”

She came closer to me and put her right hand on my chest. “You’ve always been a good man, and that wouldn’t change just because you’re in the Middle East with a crazy Arab family.”

I smiled, and our gazes lingered for a long time before she sighed and took the first step back.

Nina put on a kimono, then she walked out of our room. I sighed and scrubbed my fingers through my hair roughly before sitting on the edge of the bed.

I might be in more trouble than I thought. The thing was, my *body* wasn't just responding to Nina now. My heart was too, and there was nothing I could do about it.



“YOU KNOW WHAT YOU have to do,” I said to Jim, then sighed. “It goes down tonight, so make sure you do it right.”

“Trust me, Muller. I’ve never let you down. Sheikh Zayed will be so pissed he met you.”

The call ended, and I stuck the burner in my suit pocket before putting on my tie and adjusting it appropriately. Nina was probably still with the shay kaha, and I remembered seeing her in that red bikini the previous afternoon.

A shiver raced through my spine and reminded me of our planned dinner for tonight. Once I handed over the sheikh to the CIA, I planned to take Nina out to dinner, then we would spend the night in our suite before heading back to Denver.

Nina probably had a life to get back to in New York, but I was hoping we could make the best use of the rest of the time we would have in Denver. *And also here in Jeddah.* If we could take another tour of the city, that would be great.

I finished getting ready, then I stared at my reflection in the mirror one more time before heading to the door. Nina came in just as I got there, and I stopped in my tracks and then smiled at her.

“Hey ... you ready for tonight?” I asked and smiled at her. “I’m more than ready.”

“I am more than ready too,” she told me, then she took a step closer to me and brushed a hand over my chest. “See you soon, love.”

I leaned closer to her for a kiss, but she dodged my approach and smirked. “Later, Jack.”

She shoved me out the door and locked it, so I dragged in a deep breath and walked over to the sheikh’s home study and knocked. The door opened, and a stony-looking man stood on the other side with no smile on and his forehead squeezed into a million crease lines.

“Is the sheikh in? If he is not, I can come back another time.”

The man stepped away from the door, but he didn’t say a word as I walked in, and he closed the door behind me. The sheikh was standing behind his desk, and he was wearing an ankle-length robe with long sleeves, and a loose tassel with no collar.

He wrapped his head in a keffiyeh, and he gave me a hard look as always before he smiled. “Muller, welcome,” he said, then extended the glass in his hand towards me.

When I reached him, he motioned toward the empty glass on the table. I picked it up, poured myself some vodka, and then sipped.

“You ready for tonight, Sheikh?” I asked him.

“As always.”

We finished our drinks, then drove out in the sheikh’s limo with a dozen of his men and rode out to the warehouse where I was to meet with Jim and his men. I had this all planned out from the start; Jim’s men would act as my American dealer contacts, and I would pretend to sell them the arms they needed just before the rest of the CIA guys would burst in.

It was a perfect plan, and it had worked every time I had ever gone undercover.

The sheikh’s men surrounded the warehouse, so there was no other way to bring in the CIA except by pretending they were in a gang too. We waited a few seconds before the black SUV arrived, and I held my breath till I saw Jim step out of the car first and walk towards us with his hands held high.

“That’s my guy,” I said, speaking in the little Arabic I knew.

The sheikh nodded, and then he motioned for me to step forward first. Jim didn’t meet my gaze, as expected as he had to act till the last minute, and I knew the van with him was either loaded with operatives or guns. Whichever the case was, there was no way we would get out of there without a full-blow fire exchange.

Thank goodness my suit is bulletproof.

“We have what you ordered,” Jim said, then opened the first box of guns he held and showed it off.

The sheikh nodded, and I stepped forward first to pretend to check the guns before moving back to his side. “It’s already as planned, and there’s more in the back of the truck.”

“Good.”

Zayed waved a hand and a man brought out a suitcase, opened it, and showed off the wad of dollar bills inside it. “Place yours on the ground and we’ll do the same,” he said.

Jim looked at me after the sheikh spoke, and I nodded. He lowered the suitcase to the ground and the three other men standing by his side did the same.

The sheikh’s man also lowered his cash to the ground, and as Jim slowly straightened again, he did a quick spin, pulled out his gun, and fired the first shot.

I first saw the shocked look in the sheikh’s eyes before he ducked.

As expected, the firefight broke out after that. I took out my 9mm pistol and fired at the sheikh’s right-hand man trying to take the sheikh to safety.

Another reverberating shot rang loudly in the air as I was about to make another move. There was smoke and the terrific scent of gunpowder shuffling through the air when I felt the first tinge that struck my chest.

More bullets came flying in my direction then, and I had to dodge. The zooming sound of a revving engine fired up in the

air. While the CIA men fired at the moving vehicle, I tried to get in the van and chase after that alongside Jim.

I pulled the door open with force and was about to get in when another sting came at my side. This time a blotch of red stained the lower side of my shirt, and I groaned before managing to get in the car and start the engine.

Jim was already calling off the rest of the men through his radio as I drove off. The sheikh had managed to escape, but not all his men did.

“You know what this means?” I said to Jim as I struggled to catch my breath. He didn’t need to ask what I was talking about. I knew he understood perfectly. Not arresting the sheikh tonight meant only one thing.

He’s coming for us.

“I’ve got to get Nina out of that house before he hurts her,” I said as the cold clamp of terror gripped my heart.

“I’m on it,” Jim answered, then began dialing another number.

Chapter Thirteen

Nina

THE MANSION WAS TOO quiet for me, and I wondered where everyone was. The shay kaha dipped into the pool again, and this time she stayed submerged for a long time before she re-surfaced and smiled at me.

“Are you enjoying the water?” she asked as her dazzling smile reached me again.

I nodded, then wiped the water off my face and swam towards her. The blue bikini she wore matched the shade of the water, and when she combed her fingers through her hair, I saw some curls bounce off.

Liliana was a beautiful woman. With curves in the right places and charm. I wondered why she was married to the sheikh. Not that I thought it was bad, but it seemed like she must have had her choice of men at some point.

Liliana caught me staring because the smile on her lips turned sideways and she laughed. “All right, come on, ask what’s on your mind, dear.”

Her laugh was more like a ring in the air, and I wondered if it was because she was genuinely amused, or if she just laughed to clear the tension in the air. I coughed and shrugged. “Nothing much,” I lied, then followed her out of the pool so we could sit on the lounge chairs there.

Liliana crossed her legs in front of her, and I took one good look at her abs before smiling and looking at her again. “I’m just wondering how you ended up in the Middle East, married to a sheikh.”

Another laugh left her lips, and she tilted her head to one side. “I fell in love,” she answered.

Honestly? I regarded her closely as she continued. “When I first met Zayed, I was in Paris working as an au pair. I thought that was the dream for me. Living in a romantic city like Paris and enjoying the culture ... Zayed showed me that there was more to enjoy than what Europe had to offer, and he made me a one-year deal ... we travel the world together for a year, and if I don’t like it, then I can be an au pair, but if I do, then I must be his wife.”

“And a year later you were married?” I asked.

She nodded. “You got it. We find love in different ways.”

Liliana was silent for some time, then she looked at me again. “I think Jack does love you very much. His gaze never leaves you, and I know that look far too well.”

“I love him too,” I replied while ignoring the heat that flushed my cheeks and neck. Jack and I were not real and even

though we were navigating through the sparks forming between us, I was still aware that it was nothing but a ticking time bomb.

Once we left Jeddah, there would be nothing left of it.

But not for me.

I dragged in a deep breath, and Liliana asked a question that made me freeze. “How did you know you loved him? Jack, I mean ... he seems like a nice man and the sheikh speaks highly of him. It’s their first time doing business, and I hope they can continue and form a relationship.”

“I hope so too.”

I turned my head sharply to look at her, and her gaze stayed on mine while her smile stayed expectant. She blinked twice, and I could easily tell she was the kind of woman who never took no for an answer.

“I ... uh ... I think I was eighteen at the time,” I said to her. “Jack’s my brother’s best friend, and I thought ... well, he didn’t really notice me at first, but I always had a tiny bit of a crush on him.”

“A tiny bit?” she questioned with an arched brow.

“Okay, maybe more than a tiny bit,” I confessed, and we both laughed.

Liliana got up and picked up a towel from the table beside her. She dried her hair with it, then dumped it on the ground. “You know what we should do?” she asked, then went ahead and answered her question. “We should have a girl’s night out.

Just you and me exploring the city. Go get dressed and meet me out front. There's a lot you have to see in this beautiful city."

She walked away, and I admired her till she left the pool area before I got on my feet. Sighing, I picked up a towel, wrapped it around my body, and then headed into the house.

I made it to the wide, curved area leading to the stairs and saw a man come out of a corner and walk towards me. It wasn't my first time seeing well-built and stern men around the mansion, so I didn't pay much attention to him as he approached.

I continued towards the stairs and climbed the first one before I felt the man's closeness behind me. The second I turned, the blow to my head came, and it knocked me out before I could take another breath.



THE NEXT TIME I opened my eyes, I was lying on a bed with white sheets pulled over me. I groaned from the pain at the side of my head, then sat up and rubbed my eyes.

What happened?

The last thing I remembered was walking into the mansion so I could get dressed and join Liliana for a fun night out, then someone came up behind me and knocked me out. I was still wearing my bikini under the oversized t-shirt I had on, and I wondered who had draped me in these clothes too. They felt warm but strange.

Cold fear gripped my insides as I sat up on the bed and looked around the room. It was dimly lit, but it smelled nice and felt warm.

“Who’s there?” I asked, feeling the need to understand what was happening. As I got up and padded softly around the room, my feet hurt, and it felt like I was walking on eggshells.

What about Jack?

“Who’s there?” I asked again when I heard a click on the door. My shoulders tightened, and so did every other muscle fiber in my body. I held my breath, then clenched my fists at my sides and squared my shoulders.

I was ready to defend myself with a punch if anyone came into the room and tried to attack me. I dragged in a deep breath, then took a step closer to the door as it opened.

“Good, you’re awake,” the man that stepped in said, and I noticed the holster on his waist first before I looked up at him again. He also noticed my clenched fists and how I had them raised and poised for battle.

“What are you doing?” he asked with an arched brow.

“Ready to defend myself,” I answered, then tightened my fist again. “Who are you? Why am I here? Where is Jack? What did you do to me? Why did you bring me here?”

“Relax,” he said, drawing out his words first before he raised both his hands in the air. “Jack and I work together. I saved you from the sheikh’s mansion and brought you here

because Jack is injured, and we need to wrap up our business here before ...”

“Jack is injured?” I interrupted, not hearing anything else he said after that phrase. “I ... what happened to him?”

Tears stung the back of my eyelids instantly, and I rushed across the room to meet the man. “Please take me to him right now. What happened? I need ...”

“Relax,” he said to me again, then he turned and led me out of the room to another adjoining bedroom where Jack lay. “He’s going to be fine ... just a graze of the bullet in his lower abdomen, and the doc here has taken care of it. He’ll be out for some time because of the pain meds, but as soon as he wakes up, we should be on our way to Denver.”

“Wait,” I breathed out because my head was spinning. *Bullet wound? Denver? Was there a shootout?* “What the hell is going on?” I questioned in a loud tone and lifted my confused gaze to look at the man and the doc still bending over Jack and checking his vitals. “What ... are you all in some Arabian gang or something?”

“CIA,” the man answered, then extended his hand. “Jim,” he added. “I’m Jack’s handler.”

My head swooned some more, and I nearly dropped to the ground because I felt light-headed. *CIA? Handler?*

“I don’t understand,” I stammered.

“And you shouldn’t,” he said. “None of this concerns you, and I have no idea why Jack would think of bringing a civilian

into this, but he did. Apparently, he believed you would play a wife better than a fellow agent.”

“She does play a wife better,” Jack whispered in a shaky tone from where he lay, and my gaze bounced over to him again.

My heart did a speedy dive inside, my stomach also clenched hard with knots that threatened to suck away my peace, and I held my breath.

Jack groaned and tried to sit up. Neither of the men tried to stop him, and I didn’t rush to his side even though all I wanted to do was hurry to him, wrap my arms around him, and wait for the pain to subside.

How is all of this possible? Did he lie to me? Why did he lie to me?

A tear slid down my cheek, but I wiped it off immediately. Crying was out of the question. I was also benefitting from this deal.

“Can I have a moment alone with the lady, please?” Jack asked as he rubbed the back of his neck and got on his feet. He swooned on his feet, and Jim turned to him. “Jim?” Jack questioned again.

“Get some rest,” Jim said before he walked out of the room alongside the doc.

Jack and I stared at each other for a long time before he took some steps towards me again and put his hands on my

shoulder. “Were you hurt by the sheikh or his men?” he asked as he peered down at me.

I lifted my eyes to hold his gaze, and I shook my head. “No,” I whispered. “I was kidnapped and brought here before that could happen, I guess.”

“Those were my orders.”

“What is all of this, Jack? CIA? Gunshot? You said you had a business deal with the sheikh, and we were supposed to go to dinner after and ...”

“I’m an agent, Nina,” he cut in. “But that’s all I can tell you, and I’m sorry.”

He held my gaze without flinching, but I looked away first and nodded before stepping back. My heart ached, and so did my head.

“Right,” I said to him before shaking my head. “I guess I should sit tight and play the role of the good wife then.”

“I’m trying to protect you, Nina,” he said without following me. I turned my back to him and didn’t look back as I walked out of the room and back to where I lay moments earlier.

Jack and I had nothing to talk about anymore, and frankly, I didn’t think it was worth the try. It was clear he didn’t trust me.

Chapter Fourteen

Jack

FIVE MINUTES LATER, I walked into the room, and Nina got up to walk out. I stopped her before she could make it out of the door and gently turned her to face me.

“We should talk, Nina.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she answered without meeting my gaze.

“Don’t be so stubborn,” I countered. “I couldn’t tell you that I was with the CIA, and the reason I was coming to Jeddah was to sell out the sheikh. You would have freaked out ... you were already freaking out when you are overhead the sheikh’s men talking about arms and deals.”

“Okay, so now you didn’t tell me because you didn’t think I was trustworthy or because I’m a child who would freak out at the slightest secret.”

“That’s not what I mean, Nina,” I said and shook my head. “God, can’t you just understand? I’m under oath not to tell civilians ...”

“Jack,” she stepped and raised a hand in the air. “It doesn’t matter. I thought we had something ... or rather, I thought we were building something, but it is obvious I was wrong.”

“You weren’t,” I said, and took her hand again. “This past week has been the best week of my life since you left Denver years ago, and ... Nina you must understand that the last thing I want to do is hurt you. Six years ago, I told you—“

“You told me you didn’t want me,” she said, and pulled away from me. “You said it in very few words.”

I remembered the morning after our passionate night too, and I could tell from the pain-stricken look in her eyes that she also hadn’t forgotten.

“I was scared,” I told her. “Ryan’s my best friend and you’re —“

“I’m what?” she asked, and I saw her cheeks flush red, either from her annoyance or the same heat that was flooding me at that moment. “I’m what, Jack, just say it.”

“You’re off-limits,” I answered. “You always have been.”

“You don’t decide that. Not you nor Ryan can decide who I choose to be with or what I do with my life.”

“This isn’t about you deciding, Nina ... This is about doing the right thing. I don’t want to ever put you in danger, or see you hurt. I don’t think—“

“You don’t think I can take it?”

“Let me finish, Nina,” I snapped back at her. I was anxious to get my words out before I lost my train of thought concerning our relationship together.

Her eyes widened after that, and she huffed before turning away again and marching out of the room. She slammed the door behind herself, but I followed, not willing to let this conversation go to bed just yet.

“Nina ...” I touched her arm, but she shoved it against my chest to free herself.

“Let go of me, Jack,” she fumed. “You don’t want me to get hurt? But you hauled me all the way to the Middle East on false pretenses, and let me stay with you and some sheikh and his wife who are arms dealers?”

“You weren’t supposed to find out,” I defended.

“Of course, I wasn’t. I was supposed to be the loyal and calm wife who asks no questions and does your bidding, right? Too bad, I’m not that kind of girl, Jack.”

She folded her arms across her chest after pouring out her anger, and she finally met my gaze. Her chest still heaved with the sheer force of her exasperation, and I loved the crimson that crept up her neck.

It was then I realized Nina was wearing only a white shirt. Her legs were bare, and I couldn’t even tell if she had noticed herself because she was busy fuming.

“You’re getting it all wrong, Nina,” I said to her. “I’m sorry for keeping this from you, but it was for your own good.”

A slicing pain cut through my side then, and I groaned from the effect.

“Are you all right?” she asked with a frown when I looked at her again.

“I am,” I breathed out.

Nina dropped her arms, then walked to me and peered down at my side. “Did you really get shot? Like with a real bullet?”

A raspy chuckle left my lips, and I combed my fingers through my hair. “I guess so,” I told her. “We need to leave Jeddah though. The sheikh will be raging mad with the need to find us and end us.”

There was no expression on her face, and I couldn't tell if she feared what I just said or if she was more fixated on staring at my abdomen.

“Nina ...”

I put a hand on her shoulder at the same time that she raised her head. Our gazes met; everything I was about to say to her completely vanished, and all I could do was stare into her eyes.

“When we leave Jeddah,” I finally managed, but felt the tunneling of desire rush through me, making it difficult to think or breathe. “When we leave Jeddah I ...” I repeated, then paused, and searched her gaze.

Her lips were so close to mine, I couldn't breathe because she was too close, and the heat emanating from her affected me.

I lifted a hand and stroked her cheek. When Nina didn't stop me, I tilted her chin towards mine and brushed my lips gently over hers.

I was supposed to tell her what happened next once we left Jeddah. The deal wasn't complete yet; the sheikh hadn't been arrested, and I was sure he would try to find me.

Jim and I still had to do more work, and we had to find a way to bring him down while the investigation into his ring continued. The arrested men would be detained and questioned.

There was a lot of work left to do, but at that moment, Nina was all I could think about. I deepened the kiss just before the door burst open and Jim entered the room.

"Oh, my God, I interrupted," he said as we both jerked apart and put some distance between us. I rubbed my brows, and Nina stood with her back to me as she paced.

"Jim?" I called, and he slowly turned to face me.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," he continued, and a slow smile spread out on his lips before he cleared his throat and spoke. "Flights are booked for your return to Denver. The agents and I will handle the rest of it and make sure to find enough evidence to bring the sheikh down. For now, you've got to leave and lay low."

"You sure there's nothing I can do?"

"The sheikh will be after you," Jim answered. "Leaving Jeddah's what is best for now. Don't worry, I'll be in contact."

Our work isn't done yet.”

He left the room after that, and I remained in one spot for some time before letting out a deep breath and closing my eyes for a second.

“This is still surreal to me,” Nina said behind me, and I turned to look at her. “I mean ... CIA? You left the Navy for this?”

“I left the SEALs because my work there was done. I wanted to retire, but they couldn't just let someone as good as me leave that easily.”

“Cocky,” she commented and smiled.

Seeing the spark return to her eyes relieved me, and I strode to her then took her hands in mine again. “You shouldn't be involved in all of this. The less you know, the better, and once you return to Denver, there will be no need for you to remember any of this.”

“All of it?” Her voice quivered, and I saw her lower lip tremble before she pressed her lips closed.

“Well, not all of it,” I answered before taking her lips for another kiss.

This time, I didn't let anything hold me back. I kissed her till I was also out of breath, and I backed her towards the bedroom where we could have some privacy, shut the door behind me, and then carried her to the bed.

Nina was a vixen, and she matched the ferocity of passion coursing through me. Our tongues met and danced. Intense

shivers of pleasure and longing rocked me to the core, and I did not only want to feel all of her; I also needed to.

My lips left hers so I could kiss my way down the side of her neck. Nina moaned low when I nibbled on her ear lobe, then thrust my tongue into her mouth again. Ours was a fiery dance of passion and need.

I pushed my hands under the t-shirt she wore and met bare skin. The bikini top was the sexiest thing on her. I remembered wanting to take it off when she first put it on.

Once her breasts were exposed to me, I suckled on one nipple and toyed with her areola till she burrowed further into the sheets and released a low moan that sounded more like a purr.

Nina spread her legs for me when I massaged her inner thighs. I wanted to taste her, so I trapped her wrists above her head and brought my lips down to her already sensitive and wet center.

She writhed beneath me on the bed when I grazed her thighs ever so gently with my teeth, then shifted her bikini bottoms to one side.

“Oh ... Jack,” she murmured, then breathed in deeply. My lips closed down on her swollen lower lips, and I lapped her tenderly with my tongue. My erection hardened further with every stroke.

Nina drove me mad with need. I didn't want to control myself ... there was no shred of control in me at that point. All

I wanted was to feel the pleasure.

“Let me,” I whispered when she tried to break free from my hold on her wrists. I let her go, then took off her bikini bottoms completely before pressing my right palm flat on her lower abdomen and starting another round of pleasurable thrusts with my tongue.

She cooed and moaned, thrust her head from side to side, and then dug her nails into my arms. Every second made her grow wetter, and her thighs trapped me between her legs. I didn't want to be any place else.

“Jack,” she cried out as her sex convulsed against my lips. I slowly drew back, then got out of bed to rip my clothes off. Ignoring the ache in my side, I moved into her arms again and groaned when her hot hands stroked me tenderly.

“Make love to me,” she seduced. Her eyes and words drew me in. The taste of her on my lips stayed, and I kissed her deeply so she could taste it too.

When I thrust into her the first time, I loved her gasp and how her body enveloped me with warmth. I flung my head back, unable to stop the shuddering sigh that left my lips. My body shuddered too, and I felt the shaky knots in the pit of my stomach dissolve.

My blood heated up, and as I kissed Nina again, I let my pulse start a race that wouldn't end. *Not like there's any way to control it.*

Slowly, she wrapped her legs around me, and I drew out, then thrust back in with the full strength of my arousal. Just like that, we formed a rhythm and neither of us held back.

I thrust into her deeply, wanting to fill all of her, and made sure she felt me too. Her hands roamed my back, and I enjoyed her touch. Our ragged breathing filled the air, and the heat of our lovemaking consumed us.

This was better every time ... Nina's body was made solely for my pleasure, and as I took her, nothing else mattered. Not even the fact that once we got to Denver, I would have to leave her all over again.

Chapter Fifteen

Nina

THE FLIGHT BACK TO Denver was quiet. I tried hard not to let my hand brush against Jack's as we fit into the back cabin of the flight. The man sitting next to Jack and the aisle was fast asleep, his lips parted as he snored, and with Jack squeezing his shoulders into the middle seat, I could tell he was uncomfortable.

"You know you could take the window seat," I suggested for the third time since the trip began. "It's a lot of hours, and you look like a stuffed bear with how you're keeping your shoulders."

"I'm fine," Jack replied without looking at me. "You love the window seat, so you should keep it."

I nodded and licked my lips, then stared outside to view the clouds for some time before looking at Jack again. Neither of us had talked about our passionate lovemaking last night, or what would happen as soon as we arrived in Denver.

My life was in New York, and Jack ... well Jack had lots of secrets. *Being in the CIA ... secret arms dealer? Does Ryan even know about any of this?*

I cleared my throat and angled my head to one side to glance at him again. The snoring man at Jack's side leaned closer to Jack and rested his head on his shoulder.

Jack's frown deepened, and the sour expression on his face made me press back a chuckle. "Sorry," I said when he looked at me with wide eyes. "It's just ... It's funny."

"I knew I should have booked my tickets back home."

"Why, couldn't the CIA afford to book you first-class tickets and give you luxury?"

Jack's eyes widened further, and I remembered this was supposed to be a secret. "Oh, right," I said and pressed a hand over my mouth. "It's a secret."

"A top secret," he said to me. "No one is supposed to know I work with them," he added in a hushed tone.

"Right," I said again, then sighed and turned away from Jack. I rested my hand on the chair's arm, and Jack suddenly moved, then put his hand on mine. Feeling the heat of his touch made me draw in a sharp breath.

I shivered inside but stilled the sensation coursing through me before it went wild.

"Nina," Jack murmured, and I turned to him.

"Jack ..."

"When we get back to Denver, I'd like to ..."

"Excuse me, sir, could you strap in your seatbelts please?" the flight attendant said, interrupting whatever Jack was about

to say next. We both looked at her, and she smiled before pointing at the seat belt on Jack's body. "Strapped, please."

Jack groaned, and then he did as she asked before he looked at me again.

"Nina, when we get back to Denver, I don't think ..."

"It doesn't matter," I quickly said before Jack could go any further. My heart began a fast pang and I feared he would say he didn't think we should continue this or keep seeing each other. I didn't want to give Jack the chance to break me with his words again.

"We don't have to keep seeing each other when we get back to Denver. My life is in New York and yours is in Denver, or wherever your secret service leads you."

"Okay ..." he drawled. "That's not what I was going to say, but if that's how you feel then ..."

My head snapped in his direction again. "What were you going to say then?" I blurted.

He scoffed, and heat flushed my cheeks. "You really don't want to see me when we get back to Denver?"

"You're the one with the secrets, Jack. The one with the 'I don't want to hurt you' line. I don't know what you want to do, and I'm not going to let you hurt me as you did six years ago."

I said the words before thinking about them. Jack probably wasn't so surprised. I mean, he had to know that he hurt me six years ago, right?

And all of that was because I was off-limits.

“Nina,” he called again.

“I don’t think this is the right place for this conversation, Jack,” I stopped him, and sighed. “Let’s talk about this back in Denver.”

“Okay,” he agreed, and then he shifted his hand away from mine. I withdrew my hand and kept it on my thighs, then closed my eyes and willed my head to stop spinning.

The rest of the flight we barely said any words to each other, and once we landed, Jack had a chauffeur waiting with his car. He drove me to Ryan’s house, then drove off without coming in to say hello to Ryan or Rose.

“Hey, sis,” Ryan greeted me when he came out of his house to meet me. “How did Jeddah go?”

“Great!”

Ryan gave me a side hug, and Rose came out of the house wearing the same excited cheer on her face. *Seems they finally made up.*

“I’m exhausted,” I said to Ryan as I rolled my tiny luggage into the house with him and Rose.

“Then you should rest,” he said to me. “We’ll catch up in the morning. I’m sure you’re jet lagged.”

I smiled at Ryan, then greeted Rose. “Hi, Rose.”

“Welcome back, Nina.”

Once I settled in the guest room Ryan showed me, I dropped on the bed, closed my eyes, and pictured Jack's face in my head. The sweet taste of his lips and the passion in his gaze when he stared at me and thrust deeper into my body.

Heated sensations flooded me and reminded me of our time in the sizzling desert city. It was short, but it was also the best week of my life.

Where do I go from here? I had no idea what would happen next between Jack and me, but the one thing I knew for certain was that if we were going to have a shot at anything, then he had to be truthful with me.

One hundred percent.



THREE DAYS PASSED AND there was not one word from Jack. Ryan was in the club that night when I arrived by cab, and he ordered me a cocktail, then draped a hand over Rose again and kissed the side of her neck.

“Where’s Jack?” I asked lightly as I sipped from my glass.

“I should ask you, Mrs. Muller,” Ryan answered. My eyes landed on Ryan’s, and I didn’t smile till he burst into a light laugh a second later and sent a dismissive wave my way. “I’m kidding, jeez, Nina where’s your sense of humor?”

“I don’t know, I probably left it in Jeddah?” I commented, then rolled my eyes.

“Relax,” Ryan continued after Rose kissed him, then got on her feet and walked away from the table. “Jack called yesterday and mentioned that he had to leave Denver for Langley for a meeting and that he would be back by the end of the week.”

I nibbled on my lower lip and sighed. In a week I would have left Denver for New York, so I didn't think I would get the chance to see Jack again.

Why didn't he call me? On the flight, he mentioned he wanted us to talk, and I spent the last three days anticipating a call or text from him.

“Did he say why he traveled?” I asked as my brows furrowed together.

“I didn't ask,” Ryan answered as I regarded him closely. I wondered if my brother knew about Jack's second occupation as a secret agent for the CIA. It was a dangerous field, and I could only imagine how many times he had come close to being killed while in it.

I drank from my glass again, nearly emptying it, and then I set the glass on the table and got up. “I think I'll take a rain check on tonight,” I told Ryan as I picked up my purse. “I'm a bit exhausted.”

Ryan shrugged again. “See you at home?”

“Yeah,” I answered dryly, before walking away from him and heading out of the club.

Once outside, I breathed in deeply to enjoy the fresh air, and then I flagged down a cab and gave the driver Ryan's address. I dialed Jack's number the entire ride home, but it wasn't reachable, then again after I showered and prepared to go to bed.

The least he could do was take my calls. How could he disappear without a word? What was I supposed to think?

On the verge of panicking, I grabbed a pillow and muffled my scream with it. *Damn it, Jack.* I shouldn't have anticipated anything. I should have shut him out on the flight and taken my mind off him. *Why did I even think it would be different this time?*

That's what I have to do now. If Jack cared about me, then he would have tried to reach out to me since we got back from Jeddah.

You need to get him out of your mind now, Nina. But how could I? When all the things I remembered about him made me flush with warmth.

I fell asleep with the same panicking thoughts and woke up the next day to no call or text from Jack.

The next week flew by fast, and there was no word still. *Point taken,* I thought as I sat with the breakfast Rose made me on the morning of my flight.

My bags were packed, and I was set to return to New York, but I was still hoping for Jack to show up. The pancakes with syrup were wonderful. I knew it was the last homemade

breakfast I would have in a long time, so I wanted to savor it, but the queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach made it impossible.

Jack's not coming, a voice in my head whispered as I tried to concentrate on stuffing my mouth full of pancakes. *He's not coming*.

Breakfast ended, Ryan and Rose were murmuring to themselves about something, and I was lost in my own thoughts. When Rose left the kitchen briefly, Ryan slid a glass of freshly made fruit juice to me, and I looked up at him.

“You’ve been sulking for days,” he said to me.

“I’m fine, Ryan,” I responded. “It’s nothing.”

“You sure? Did something happen in Jeddah?”

“Why would you ask if something happened in Jeddah?” I asked in response to his question, and he frowned. His brown eyes deeply set against mine, and I waited for him to say anything.

“Nothing,” Ryan said. “I just wonder what’s up with you, Nina, and I hope you know you can talk to me about anything.”

“I know,” I said with a tiny smile. Then I finished the fruit juice, and got on my feet. “I’ve got a flight to catch.”

Ryan walked around the table and gave me a tight bear hug, then he kissed my forehead. “We’ll talk soon.”

“I’m going to miss you, Ryan.”

“Me too.”

We stayed in a tight hug till Rose came into the kitchen. “Thanks for breakfast, Rose,” I said when I pulled away. “And for letting me stay the week.”

“Ryan and I both wanted you here,” Rose answered, then she came close and hugged me too. “Have a safe flight.”

A cab was out front waiting for me already, and I got in, then waved at Ryan one last time before he went into his house.

I stared hard at my phone for the rest of the drive to the airport, and I held my breath too, waiting and hoping that Jack would call. Tears swelled up in my eyes when I tried to reach him again and I still couldn't connect.

The ache in my heart was turning to worry. He hadn't mentioned traveling to Langley, so why did he leave without a word?

Is it work? Another undercover job?

I wiped my cheeks hard when I reached the airport and got out of the cab. If I mattered to Jack even a tiny bit, then he should have reached out to me before leaving Denver.

Even if it's just a text.

Slow anger burned to the surface, and I knew that this time, I couldn't let myself wallow in agony because I missed Jack. I did that six years ago, and I couldn't do it again.

This time I would shut him out of my heart. *For good.*

Chapter Sixteen

Jack

“HOW DID IT GO?” Ryan asked when I walked into his house that evening and took off my suit jacket. My shoulder muscles had been tensed for days, and after the briefing with my superiors in Langley on how the job in Jeddah went, I returned to Denver for another line up of meetings with an investor for my new hotel and lounge.

“Not so good,” I told Ryan who happened to know almost everything about this mission. “The sheikh left the country before the agents could find him. His wife was arrested, and she’s being moved back to American soil, and the UAE government are pissed. They’ve threatened to make a big deal out of the arrest. It might even go federal, and the DOJ might get involved.”

“Did Nina see or learn anything about all of this?” Ryan asked cautiously as he sipped from his drink and set his glass on the table again. “She stayed only a week here, but she was worried the entire time and kept asking about you. I told her I didn’t know why you traveled to Langley because I figured

you wouldn't have been stupid enough to get her involved in all of this."

When I didn't say anything, Ryan raised a brow, and questioned again. "Or did you?"

"Of course not, Ryan. I'll never do anything to put Nina in danger."

"Good," he answered, then picked up his glass. "Because she's our sister, and she should never be in harm's way."

His words stung, but I swallowed back the lump that formed in my throat and sighed. "I need some of what you're drinking," I said, and pointed at his glass.

"Brandy," he told me, then got up, walked to his fancy bar in the living room, and returned to the kitchen with a bottle. "Remy Martin, rare," he continued as he poured me a glass. "A wedding gift from my wife."

"She sure knows her liquor."

We both laughed, and Ryan raised his glass for a toast. "To you and arresting the most-known criminal in the entire Saudi kingdom."

"I didn't arrest anyone."

"Well, you sure took a bullet for that."

"Nice ..." I said, and we laughed again. I emptied my shot in one go and hoped the fire from the drink would replace the other sensations tunneling through me because of Nina.

Truth, was, I avoided her on purpose. No calls, or texts, or whatever. It was me running away, but that was the best thing to do. I didn't think I could look her in the eye and tell her I didn't want to take things further.

Also, being close to her would mean feeling the urge to touch and make love to her again.

Things I never should have done from the start.

I made a mistake making love to Nina again and letting myself indulge in all she had to offer. It was the most stupid decision I had made since returning from the Navy, and even though that part of my life was over, oh wished I could hide there and consume myself with what life was like during my deployment.

“Is there something you're not telling me, buddy?”

“I ... uh ...”

“Jack,” Ryan called again to stop me from murmuring. I sighed and pointed at his bottle of rare Remy Martin. “Pour me another.”

Ryan hesitated at first, but he poured me some and handed me the glass to drink. I downed it in one go and sighed before dropping the glass and lacing both my hands on my hips.

“Ryan I ...”

My phone chimed in my pants pocket, but I didn't reach for it because I felt the need to bare my soul to my best friend. Another reason why I ghosted Nina, besides the fact that I was too scared to take things further, was because of Ryan.

He's my best friend and my only friend. Nina should have been off-limits, but I broke that rule six years ago, and deep down, if I was being truthful to myself, I knew that I would touch her again if I took her to Jeddah.

And I did.

“Ryan I ...”

“Jack, just say what happened. Did she find out about the arms dealing and freak out? Is Nina the reason the job went south?”

“No, I slept with her.”

“Nina's always been tough, but I worry too much for her. I know I agreed to the whole fake wife thing, but I was a little scared that things wouldn't work well as you two butt heads at every turn and you can't stand her. I don't know why when you've known her for a long time, but ...” Ryan rambled on, and I didn't think he heard a word I said.

“I slept with her, and I think that ...” My phone chimed repeatedly in my pocket now, and Ryan shot me a quick glare as he ended his ramble.

“What?” he croaked.

“I slept with Nina,” I repeated in slower words this time, then walked across the kitchen to stand in front of him. “I said, I slept with ...”

A punch in my nose was his next answer. His eyes were livid when I looked at him again, and I saw the red flush on his cheeks, ears, and nose.

I groaned, touched my nose, and wiped the blood off under my nostrils.

“I’m sorry, Ryan,”

He grabbed the collar of my shirt, and I pushed against him to fire one myself. “Ryan, I know you’re angry, but ...”

“Angry? I’m pissed, Jack—how could you do that to her?”

“Ryan, listen to me, please, it’s not like I wanted to hurt Nina ...”

My phone kept buzzing, and I groaned, took it out of my pocket, and checked to see who was calling.

Dang it, it’s Jim.

A knot formed in my stomach, and I blew out air from my lips, then raised a hand to Ryan. “Time out, buddy, I need to speak with Jim.”

“Right, but we get back to fighting once you’re done.”

I nodded, then took the call. “Hey, Jim.”

“Where are you? I’ve been calling.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m sending you ticket details to New York right now. Remember the civilian I told you not to use as your fake wife? Well turns out the sheikh has men tailing her, and we need to make sure she’s not hurt, or else that will be on you.”

“Wait, what?”

“Check your e-mail, Jack, and please listen to me next time.”

He ended the call before I got a chance to say anything, and I dropped the phone to the table and sucked in a deep breath.

Okay Jack, breathe and think ... take a deep breath and think.

I was trying to calm my nerves, but my usual go-to antics were not working, and Ryan had started his rambling again.

“She’s my sister, Jack ... She’s our sister, and you ... Oh my God when did this start? When did you first ...”

“Ryan ...” I called, but he didn’t stop talking. “Ryan,” I called again.

“Jack, what the hell were you thinking?” he yelled. “Nina’s not the kind of girl that you hurt and ...”

“Nina’s in danger,” I yelled back at him to get him to shut up, and Ryan froze. His eyes widened, then he stepped away from me and blew out air from his lips. “Jim just called, and it looks like the sheikh is tailing her, and he ... She might be in trouble and ...”

“We’ve got to get to her,” Ryan said, ready to drop everything, including his anger. “We can’t let her get hurt.”

“Yes, we should get to her. I need to get to New York; I need to find Nina and make sure—“

“We need to,” Ryan cut in. “We need to make sure Nina is all right.”

I nodded at him, and he turned to hurry away, but I stopped him by putting a hand on his shoulder. “I don’t want to hurt Nina, but it’s obvious that’s what I’ve done. I’m scared Ryan ... I’m scared that I don’t deserve to be with her, and so I ignored her.”

“I’m going to kick your ass, Jack,” Ryan seethed as he glared at me.

“After we make sure Nina is all right.”

“Yes,” Ryan agreed. “After.”

He walked to the door, and I spoke. “And you could never beat me.”

Ryan shook his head as he walked out of the kitchen, then I sighed, and ruffled my hair with both hands.

Why did I feel the need to run? Nina was everything I wanted. I still craved her. I still wanted her. But now she’s in danger because of me.

Ryan joined me, and we headed for the airport while I tried calling her.

“Her line’s not reachable,” I complained after a few tries, already feeling queasy and scared that the sheikh had gotten to her.

“Let me try,” Ryan said, and he plastered his phone to his ear for a second before saying. “It’s going through.”

“Great,” I answered, but felt another tight knot form in the pit of my stomach because I suspected she had blocked me.

Chapter Seventeen

Nina

OH CRAP! Another rolling bout of nausea hit me, and I hurled the contents of my stomach into the first paper bag I could grab before I groaned.

“Nina, try to get some rest will you, you’ve been at that desk for hours and you aren’t even editing it right,” Lola, my partner at the photography firm, said as she got up from her seat.

“Gee, thanks,” I said and raised my head. “I need to get these ready for the magazine cover in a week. You know how Lisa gets when we’re about to miss a due date.”

“I just don’t feel well,” I complained and got up so I could throw away my vomit.

“Your phone’s ringing,” Lola announced as I entered the toilet. My stomach hurt, my head swooned, and I was feeling feverish.

Nothing felt right since I got back to New York. Jack made a fool out of me, and I was making sure not to ever think of him again, so I deleted all his socials and blocked his contact.

I didn't want anything reminding me of Jack in any way. *Well of course my memories*, I thought and shook my head.

After rinsing my mouth and my face, I walked out of the toilet and picked my phone up from my desk.

"Hey Ryan, what's up?" I asked, cutting into my brother's long ramble on the other end. "I'm all right, Ryan ... I probably caught the flu or something while in Jeddah, but I'm fine and alive."

"Oh, thank goodness. I'm on my way to New York with Jack and we are—"

"You're what? Why are you coming here with Jack?" I questioned, then felt my insides chill. "Why are you bringing Jack to New York?"

"I can't explain now because we're about to board, but ..."

He was breaking up and I couldn't hear a word of what he was saying, so I sighed and ended the call.

My stomach started to rumble again, and I knew I had to get out of the office before I puked all over my clothes.

"Lola, I've got to go," I said while choking back my vomit. "I have to go."

"Please go to the hospital," she said without raising her head from her laptop screen to look at me. I managed to pick up my bag and I raced out of the office, got to the elevator, and hurried out of the building to walk the street a little.

In the two weeks since we got back from Jeddah, I hadn't heard from Jack, but his lawyer had reached out to me, and payment for my help in Jeddah was sent into my account.

I didn't want the money now ... not when I was still angry at myself for falling for Jack again.

Nothing I did could get him off my mind. Not even strolling around the lovely and busy New York City.

The sidewalks were full all the time, the noise couldn't just stop. My head spun; I lifted a hand and massaged my temple.

Why is Ryan coming here with Jack?

I didn't think I could look at Jack or stay near him after he blew me off.

He's a jerk and I should have known.

Goodness! My stomach rolled again, and this time I nearly dropped to the ground, but someone steadied me from behind.

"Careful, miss," he said as he supported me with both hands and held me up.

"I don't feel well," I murmured before I could stop myself. "I don't ..." My words ended with my lids drooping closed, and I blacked out after that.

The next time I was conscious, I was dressed in a hospital gown and lying on my back on a bed. The voices speaking in the room echoed through my head and made the pain much worse.

My throat was parched, and my body ached all over. The queasiness had subsided at least, but the dizziness stayed.

“What happened?” I managed to say and got the attention of the nurse and doctor in the room.

They both faced me, and the doctor walked over to the side of my bed, then put a hand on my forehead. “Good thing you collapsed in my hands,” he said with a smile. “I’m a doctor, so I brought you straight here.”

I tried to sit up but groaned because my shoulders felt heavy. The doc helped me sit upright, then he stepped away to let the nurse check my vitals.

“Thanks,” I murmured, then licked my dry lips and looked at him again.

“How do you feel?”

“Dizzy?” I responded. “Tired and nauseous too.”

“Hmm, it’s common in the first trimester of pregnancy, and since you’re only three weeks along, I’m sure this is just the beginning.”

What!

I laughed because that was the most sensible thing to do at that moment. I wrapped my hands around my abdomen, tossed my head back, then gave birth to a full-blown mirth that shocked both the doctor and the nurse.

My insides tickled as I laughed, my cheeks flushed hot, and my eyes widened when they didn’t share my humor.

“I mean ... I’m on birth control so ...” I burst into another loud bout of laughter and this time tears slid down my cheeks. “I’m not really pregnant, am I?” I croaked.

I raised both hands in a light shrug as I asked him the question, and the doctor picked up the file on the bedside table and handed it to me. “I understand that this an emotional moment, miss, but it’s the truth.

“We did a full blood work-up on you to make sure we didn’t miss anything. You’re three weeks pregnant, miss. The blood test is accurate,” he continued.

My mouth gaped. I stopped hearing for at least a second, and I didn’t even breathe. It was like every process had stopped in my body, and only the doctor’s words rang in my head.

“Well, that’s not possible, I mean ...” I still tried to deny the truth that was right in front of me. *I don’t want to be pregnant ... I can’t be ... this can’t be.*

“I know it’s a shock, and we can do the tests again if you want, miss, but I’m certain the result is going to be the same,” he continued while I stared at the paper in my hands with a frown and confused glare.

Oh, what do I do now?

It was one thing to hate that Jack had dumped me so easily. Now, I had to be carrying his child? The panic came, and I knew I couldn’t stop the heavy pants coming. Another wave of

nausea hit me hard, and I bolted out of the bed, hurried into the restroom, and threw up the contents of my stomach.

I released another heaving breath before rinsing my face and mouth, then joined the doctor and nurse in the room again.

Shaking and feeling choked up suddenly, I hurriedly looked around for my clothes. “I ... I have to go, I’m sorry,” I stammered as I grabbed my shirt and pants, folded neatly on the chair, and clutched them to my chest alongside my bag.

“Miss, you need to stay for more evaluation and ...”

“I must go, now,” I answered in a stern voice, then waited for them to exit the room before I changed into my clothes and hurried out of the building.

My insurance could cover whatever test they had done, and I didn’t need to stay in there for any more minutes because I knew I would burst into tears.

Why is this happening to me? Jack had made me want him, and then he left me hanging out to dry. He made me love him, and then he ditched me for whatever mattered most to him.

I pushed back the bitterness rising in my throat and banished the thought of love from my head. I couldn’t love Jack. I was smarter and more determined this time.

Six years ago, I could have if he let me, but now ... I didn’t even think he felt anything of the sort for me. Perhaps our time in Jeddah was just a hot fling for him.

A fling he paid me for. I hugged my jacket tighter around my body, then adjusted my shoulder bag before increasing my

pace. The only thought on my mind right now was getting to my apartment and taking a long hot shower to cool my nerves.

Reeling from the effect of the news I just heard, and trying to shake off the tension creeping on me, I forced my legs to move, flagged down the first cab I saw, and got in.

“55 East Street, please,” I said to the man without raising my head from my thighs.

I gulped hard while trying to ignore my worry and the panic eating its way inside me. What was I supposed to do with a baby alone? Jack didn’t want me ... He never had, and I wasn’t even completely over him yet.

Tears streamed down my face hard as I struggled with accepting the news. The doctor probably made a mistake, and once I was done panicking, I could take another test just to make sure they weren’t wrong.

Yes, that’s what I must do.

I swallowed hard and finally blinked back the tears. Whatever scent the cab driver had in his car was also very relaxing, and it made me sigh, then settle further into the car’s seat.

“Are you all right, ma’am?” he asked, and I met his gaze through the rear-view mirror. The cab driver’s voice sounded smooth, and I sighed before nodding.

“Yes, sir,” I slurred, then let my head roll to one side before I closed my eyes. In seconds, I was out of my element and fast asleep, completely oblivious to what happened next.

Chapter Eighteen

Jack

“I STILL CAN’T REACH her,” Ryan said one hour after we landed in New York. Ryan took me to her apartment, and we tried the doorbell for a long time, but got no response.

I was on the verge of panic. Adrenaline shot through my system, and the sudden overwhelming sense of dread that filled me made it difficult for me to stop pacing around.

“We need to find her,” I said to Ryan as we left her apartment building and headed for a hotel suite. I tried calling Jim, but he also didn’t pick up, so I spent the next few minutes pacing around the hotel room till Ryan came to me and offered me a drink.

“You think they got to her?” he asked as I took the glass of vodka from him. “You think maybe the sheikh ...”

“I don’t want to think,” I said to Ryan. “I was a fool, Ryan. I was a fool, and I completely ghosted her. I didn’t think ... I just ran because I was scared.”

I blinked back the tears forming in my eyes and lowered myself to the edge of the bed. “What do I do now?”

I remembered the night I spent with Nina and the fact that I missed her immensely for six years. She should have been with me all that time, and I would have been far happier than I was.

Ryan sighed too, then sat on the bed and linked his fingers in front of him. “I don’t know, Jack. I could have sworn Nina wasn’t into you, man.”

“You think?” I asked as I turned to look at him.

He nodded. “She really had me fooled. I thought you two hated each other.”

“I’ve never hated Nina,” I confessed in a tiny voice I could barely even hear. “I just wanted to make sure I didn’t feel anything for her, so I acted like I disliked her when really, I’ve loved everything about her. I always have.”

Ryan was silent for a long time, and I didn’t say anything either because I couldn’t believe I had said those words out loud.

“I think I’m screwed,” I said and rubbed my forehead. “Dammit.”

“Nina will be all right,” Ryan said to console me, and then he put his hand on my thigh and squeezed gently. “Once we find her, I want you to make sure you fix what you broke and make her happy again.”

Tears filled my eyes as I turned to Ryan. “You’re not mad at me?”

“Oh, I’m mad ... I’m livid, but ... you’ve been my best friend for years, Jack,” he said, and then put his right hand on my shoulder and patted. “You’re a good man, and if Nina wants you, then you should stop running and fight for her.”

I nodded and sniffed hard to draw back the feelings and tears reeling to the surface. *I have to fix it*, I thought.

My phone rang then, and I jumped to my feet once I saw it was from Jim.

“Hey, Jim any news?”

“Yes,” Jim answered. “The sheikh has your fake wife.”

Christ ... I rubbed a hand over my face and pushed back the tears burning the brim of my lashes. “What do I need to do? The sheikh wants me and not Nina. I can’t let him hurt her. Just find me an address, I’ll go right there and—“

“Meet me at the location I’m texting to you right now,” Jim interrupted. “When you get here, we’ll figure it out.”

Jim ended the call before I could say anything else, and I turned to Ryan, who had his wide eyes fixed on me. “Any news?” he questioned.

“We should meet Jim. He’ll tell us what to do.”

“That’s it?”

I didn’t answer Ryan, instead, I sprang into action, opened my suitcase and took out my bulletproof vest and my gun.

“Woah,” Ryan exclaimed as I slid in the bullets and stuck the pistol in my hostler before strapping it on. “Do I get a gun

too?”

“Ryan, come on,” I said, and he followed me out of the room.

We drove to the location, and I tried calling Jim again. “Our van is right behind you. I have the sheikh’s location. Our inside man is in there with him, but we must move quickly and get you in there too.”

“How do you plan to do that?” I asked.

“The old way,” Jim answered, and I was certain a smile played out on his face wherever he was now.

“Jim ... the woman I love is in there with the sheikh. I can’t risk her getting in the way of a crossfire, so I’m asking you again—do you have a plan?”

“I do,” Jim answered. “Trust me, and meet me at the Tapestry Hall, 45 Rowing Street. It’s only a three-minute drive from where you are.”

“See you there.”

Ryan was staring at me the entire time, and once I ended the call with Jim, I turned to him and took my hands off the steering wheel. “I’ll have to leave you here, Ryan.”

“What? I mean ... why? I thought we had to find Nina together?”

“I can’t risk you getting hurt in all of this, so I’ve got to leave you here and meet Jim wherever he asks me to.”

“Take a cab, Ryan. I’ll bring Nina back.”

“You sure?” he asked, but I couldn’t answer that question because my hands were shaking and I was trying my best to look steady. “Jack ...” he called again, and I turned to him, plastered my hands on his shoulder, and stared hard at him.

“I’ll bring Nina back, Ryan.”

Ryan got out of the car after giving me a nod, and I sucked in a deep breath to hold my queasy insides in before keying the engine to start.

Once I got to Jim, I parked by the side of the road and walked over to the CIA van they opened for me. “Jim,” I greeted him, and he nodded before I looked at the faces of the other agents in the van.

“We’ve been following the sheikh since he entered the States with his trusted man, who happens to be a CIA agent too. We got his location; he’s holding the young lady in a warehouse on Fort Mason, and we’re headed there now.”

The pain in my chest matched the one in my head, and the only thought keeping me from going insane was Nina. The memory of her smile, and the feel of her skin against mine.

Those were the thoughts that kept me going, and I had to hold myself together until I found her. I blew air out of my lips, closed my eyes, and gathered my strength.

“Tell me what I need to do.”

Jim went over the details of his plan with me while we stared at the layout of the warehouse, which we had been able

to pull from our satellites. We had agents in the van, and another SWAT team from the FBI joining us.

All I cared about was finding Nina.

I'll never let her go this time.

We drove to the warehouse, and the SWAT team, disguised as regular people, carefully surrounded the warehouse. The evening was fast approaching, and the longer Nina stayed with the sheikh, the more I worried that he would hurt her.

“You know what you need to do, Jack ... once you get into the warehouse you make sure you get the civilian out first.”

“Okay.”

“We’re getting the sheikh this time.”

Jim wore a simple jean shirt, and he tucked his gun into it and jumped out of the van before I did.

I walked towards the warehouse while holding my breath, knowing that our contact in there with the sheikh would make it easy for me to walk in.

Once I walked into the dark warehouse, I noticed the men hanging around, and they all stared at me as I approached the sheikh, standing with his back to me.

They probably didn’t recognize me as they were men I hadn’t seen before, but I knew once the sheikh turned around, all hell would let loose.

I just walked into the lion’s den, and I was hoping to get out alive, with the love of my life.

The sheikh slowly turned to me once I stopped walking, his brows furrowed together, and a hard glare in his eyes.

“We meet again, Jack Muller,” he said, then burst into a wide grin. “I knew you would come to me, and you did.”

The sheikh raised his hands in the air, and once our CIA inside man walked in again, the sheikh’s man fired a gun at him.

The booming sound that reverberated in the air mingled with the sheikh’s loud cackle, and my entire body went numb.

Would I get Nina out of here alive?

Chapter Nineteen

Nina

“GIVE ME THE WOMAN and you can have me. I’m the one you really want,” I heard Jack’s voice echo through the walls of the other room, and I began struggling against the binds on my hands again.

He came for me. Jack came for me, and relief flooded every cell in my body as I waited to hear what would happen next. The only thing I remembered was getting in the cab.

I didn’t know where I was, but the atmosphere around me smelled of mandarin, a familiar scent. *Just like the one in the sheikh’s mansion.*

The gag in my mouth made it impossible for me to scream, and the binds holding my wrists behind me bit into my skin. I kept trying to free myself, to no avail. My stomach started to churn again, and when I heard the boom of a fired bullet, I feared I would choke on my own vomit.

Oh God no!

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I imagined Jack being shot on the ground. *What if the sheikh shot at him?*

A man stalked into the room and came at me. As he tried to get the binds off my hands, I kept screaming.

“Shut it,” he snarled at me, then struck my right cheek hard. My head rolled to one side, and I felt tears sting my eyelids again. The man dragged me out of the room I was in to another room, and I saw Jack standing in front of the sheikh, his hands up in the air, and his gun on the floor in front of him.

“I really liked you, Muller,” Sheikh Zayed said, and I caught the gleam of madness in his eyes as the man dragging me pushed me towards him.

I fell to the ground and scraped my knees on the hard floor. Another whimper left me. I raised my head to look at Jack, and the look of terror in his eyes made me sob harder.

I didn't know what Jack had in mind, but I didn't want him getting hurt because of me or the sheikh. I could see the tension in his muscles as he looked at me. I could also tell he was trying to tell me something with his intense gaze.

Jack's lips remained pursed as he stared at me. “Let her go and I'll do whatever you want,” Jack said without taking his eyes off me. “She is innocent in all of this.”

“You thought it would be hard for me to find her, right?” the sheikh continued. “You were sloppy and foolish. You don't just waltz into the lion's den and waltz out without getting bitten. If you want your wife to live, then you must do as I ask.”

“I’ll do anything,” Jack said in the next moment. I looked at him again and shook my head as I sobbed harder. I couldn’t let Jack do anything stupid because of me. “I’ll do anything you want, Sheikh. Just let her go,” Jack said through gritted teeth.

“Good,” the sheikh said again, then he motioned for a man to loosen the gag in my mouth. I heaved out a deep breath once I was free, and the man hurled me to my feet, then pushed me towards Jack.

I collapsed into his arms once I got close to him, and he hugged me tight, rubbed his hands down my back, and kissed the side of my neck. “I’m so sorry, Nina,” he said as his lips stayed muffled against my neck. “I’m so sorry I ghosted you.”

I pulled away from him, and he tucked me to his side, then looked at the sheikh again. “I want you to let her go. You and I have unfinished business, and she has nothing to do with it.”

The sheikh was quiet for a long time before he took the first step towards Jack and hardened his jaw. “You come to my home,” he began. “Lie to me and my wife, and then you try to kill me. You expect me to let you live?”

“I’ll do whatever you want.”

“What I want!” The sheikh yelled, then he flung his head back and burst into a loud cackle that sent a chill up my spine. I stayed stiff at Jack’s side, and I tried to stop the tremors rocking through me to no avail.

I hated that I felt this weak. The nausea earlier today still churned through my system and made it impossible for me to

breathe without quaking inside. My stomach was twisting into a thousand knots, and my knees felt weak too.

“What I want,” Zayed continued in a low tone that sounded even more dangerous. “Is your life, Muller.”

Jack stood erect, and I wondered what his plan was. *How do we get out of here?*

Through my corner gaze, I saw some of the sheikh’s men reach for the gun at their sides, and I screamed at the same time that Jack pulled out another pistol from his left side and fired.

Many shots reverberated in the air all at once. I saw the man to my left aim for Jack, and I moved quickly and wrapped my body around Jack to stop the bullet from hitting me.

The bullet pierced through me, and I felt it. It was a strange, prickly feeling at first, and I barely even heard any sound after that. I smelled smoke, and then something metallic.

Jack yelled, “No!” He pulled me into his arms at the same time I dropped to the ground. The doors around us burst open, and the gunshots continued. There was smoke everywhere.

“Take cover, Jack!” someone yelled to Jack and began pulling him to his feet.

Jack pulled me with him to a corner of the warehouse. Another of the sheikh’s men pointed a gun at us, but Jack fired first at him, then at the three others that tried to shoot at us.

He looked down at me again when his men surrounded the room and made their arrest. “Nina!” Jack called, and he patted

my cheeks to bring me back to consciousness.

I had started to slip into the oblivion of darkness that offered me peace from the pain spreading through my back, but Jack wasn't letting me.

“Stay with me, Nina ... I need you,” he whispered as he framed my cheeks and rocked me into him. “Stay with me, please.”

“You left me,” I whispered back, and I smiled while trying to raise a hand and touch his cheek. Jack was here right now, but it didn't mean that the pain of him leaving without a word had faded.

“I was scared; I'm so sorry, Nina ... I'm so ...”

My lids drooped closed again, and then Jack lowered his face to rest his forehead on mine. “I'm sorry,” he repeated till the shots stopped firing around us. “I should have stayed. I should have called you or tried to work things out, but I was scared of hurting you and I didn't know how to handle my feelings and ...”

He stopped, then licked his lips and released a trembling breath. “I love you, Nina. I've been in love with you from the start. I know I'm late and I should have said this to you a while ago, but ...”

I coughed because the pressure in my chest was rising too high and I couldn't breathe well.

“I'm scared, Jack,” I cried out with the last strength in me. Hot tears burned down my cheeks. “I'm so scared ... I don't

want to die.”

“You won’t,” he quickly answered. “I’m right here with you.”

My breath came out in slow puffs now, and there was no way to stop the ache from spreading through me. I knew this was the end, and I didn’t think I would make it out of here alive anyway.

The loud blares of sirens cut into the fog forming around my brain. I forced my eyes to stay open, but I couldn’t stay awake for long. Jack’s eyes filled with tears too, and I saw the torn expression on his face as he looked at me and held my hand tight.

“I’m so sorry, Nina.”

Jim came to us then and paramedics flooded the room. Jack clutched my hand as they put me on a gurney, and he rushed out of the warehouse with me till we got in the ambulance.

I slid in and out of consciousness the entire ride to the hospital, and Jack’s eyes stayed on me until we arrived. The last thing I remember was when the nurses surrounded my bed and Jack whispered words I couldn’t understand. He ran beside the gurney while they pushed it in, and the nurses tried to get him to stop but he wouldn’t. I tried to speak but I couldn’t, and I feared I would never get the chance to tell Jack the words racing through my mind.

I love him. I have always felt this way for him, and those feelings have lingered in me from the beginning. His fingers

slipped out of mine while they rolled me into the operating room, and I closed my eyes, then sucked in one last breath before letting the darkness consume me.

Chapter Twenty

Jack

RYAN MET ME AT the national hospital, and he stayed with Nina while I went with Jim and the FBI to give a full report on the shootout that happened at the warehouse downtown.

When I returned to the hospital, Nina was still unconscious, and Ryan gave me a full report on what the doctors said. “She’s going to be fine,” Ryan said as he touched my shoulder.

His words offered a little bit of comfort, but they didn’t take the fear tunneling through me away. “I just need her to be fine.”

“She will be. Right now, I need coffee, so I’ll be right back.”

Ryan adjusted the cap on his head, then he walked out of the room. I turned to Nina’s bed and stared at her for a long time. My heart was heavy, and I wished I had protected her better.

I was sloppy. I shouldn’t have let her return to New York so soon. I should have asked her to stay by my side so I could protect her.

None of that mattered now. All I could hope for was Nina's forgiveness.

I sat by her bedside and brushed a hand over the side of her face to get rid of the dangling bits of hair there. She looked so beautiful even in her sleep, and I longed to take her in my arms and cuddle her close.

"This is all my fault," I said in a hoarse voice as I struggled to come to terms with what had happened. I took Nina to Jeddah and put her on the sheikh's radar.

She would have been safe here in New York without me in her life, and now that this had happened, I didn't think I would ever forgive myself for it.

Especially if she never recovers.

Ryan stayed away for a while, and I stayed by Nina's side because I couldn't imagine being anywhere else. This woman was the love of my life, and I realized how deep my feelings ran when I nearly lost her.

I just need her back.

When she stirred on the bed and murmured words I didn't understand in her sleep, watching her only made me want to cuddle closer to her.

"It's all right. I'm right here with you."

I didn't care for anything else, so I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead before I smoothed a hand over it.

The rest of the night I stayed by Nina's side, and the next morning when the doctors came into the room, I got on my feet and let them do their thing.

"Luckily the bullet didn't touch any major organs, and we were able to take it out. She should recover quickly too and be out of here in no time. The baby is safe, so we need to make sure she gets a lot of rest."

"The baby?" I stammered, shocked and reeling with the news at the same time. "I ... is she pregnant?"

"Yes," the doctor answered. "Three weeks pregnant, sir. Congratulations." The doctor smiled at me again before he walked out of the room and let me have my time with Nina.

I held my breath for a long time and tried to slow down the race of my pulse and my pounding heart.

She's pregnant?

Relief flooded me even though I didn't say anything. I simply nodded, then sighed and looked at Nina on the bed again. Ryan came back to the hospital later that day, and he stayed with Nina while I met up with Jim and the others from the CIA.

The meeting was brief. The sheikh was in custody now and was being transported to a CIA base where they would take the investigations to the next stage. My job with the task force, for now, was done. The entire time I thought of Nina, and the baby ... my baby. I couldn't believe it, and yet at the same

time, I couldn't control the burst of joy that shoved through me.

I knew I still had to ask for Nina's forgiveness, and I intended to make sure I proved to her that I was in love with her and I always had been.

"How's the lady?" Jim asked when he walked me out of the base and stopped in front of the building we used as a cover-up-operations base.

"She's all right. The doctor is positive she will recover quickly since the bullet didn't touch any major organs."

"That was a real close one," Jim said. "The chief wants to know why we had a civilian onsite, but I covered up for you. I didn't need to get into the details of why you took her to Jeddah in the first place."

"I needed to fool the sheikh ... I was thinking—"

"You did what you had to do," Jim interrupted. "And you pulled it off. Let's just be grateful that things aren't worse than they are at the moment."

Jim patted my shoulder, and I sighed. "Thanks, Jim. This means a lot to me."

Jim nodded. "You know, I had a woman I cared deeply about once. She too was tall, blonde, and had a killer smile that made me weak at the knees every time. If you love that woman, then you should make things real and protect her. Think about it, mate."

I nodded and thanked him again before heading to the side of the road to flag down a cab. The ride back to my hotel suite was a long one. I wanted to relax and spend the next few hours sleeping, but that wasn't going to happen because I still had to get back to the hospital.

I can't rest until she's all right.

Ryan would stay with her until I got there, and I'd stay the night too.

After a long shower, and some time staring at my reflection in the mirror, I got dressed and headed back to the hospital.

Nina was sitting on her bed when I arrived, and Ryan had probably made a joke because there was a wide smile on her cheeks, and she was holding her sides as she laughed gently.

"Ryan, goodness," she said and tapped his shoulder gently. "Please don't make me laugh, it hurts a lot."

I slowed my steps when I walked into the hospital room, and Ryan cleared his throat, then kissed Nina on her right cheek. "I'll let you two talk."

When Ryan left the room, I slipped my hands into my pockets and rocked back on my heels before sighing.

"Jack," she said in a shaky voice as her gaze pierced into mine. Once again, I was reminded of the shivers she made me feel, and how my heart tingled each time I was with her.

"I'm sorry, Nina," I said, and closed the rest of the space between us. I sat on the edge of the bed and took her hands in my hand. "I'm sorry, and I love you."

I had words lined up in my head, but in that moment, I couldn't think of any to say to her. All I could think of was the feelings coursing through me.

"You said that to me," she answered in the same low tone. "When I was dying, you said ..."

"I really do love you, Nina. I've always been in love with you—always."

My gaze held hers, and hers searched mine before she licked her lips and sighed. "You ghosted me."

"I'm sorry."

"You made me feel ... you made me angry, and hurt and miserable." She shoved against my chest with the little strength she had, but I held her wrists and pressed them close to my chest.

"I'm sorry," I repeated.

"I blocked your contact and all your socials. I never wanted to see you again."

Tears slid down her cheeks as she spoke now, and I couldn't bear to see her cry, so I pulled her into my arms and hugged her tight. "I'm sorry," I hummed again before I kissed the side of her neck and rocked her into me. "I'm sorry ... I'm sorry. I was too scared to lose you or let you get hurt because of my life. I didn't even realize that I was pushing you away."

"I love you, Jack," she finally said, her voice barely audible. "I'm in love with you."

When I pulled back, I framed her cheeks with my hands and kissed her deeply to silence her sobs and fill my hunger for her. “I love you, and I’m never leaving you or our baby again.”

“You know?”

I nodded my reply, and kissed her cheeks, then dried her tears with my hands. “I know, and we’re going to be a family now. Always and forever.”

“I’d like that very much,” she agreed, and a slow smile budded on her lips before she leaned inches closer to me again for a kiss.

This time, I poured every feeling and emotion into the kiss. I loved Nina ... I had made my mistakes, and I planned never to repeat them.

This was a new chapter that I never imagined I would have, and I would get it right this time.

Chapter Twenty-one

Nina

TWO MONTHS LATER

We made love under the basking hues of sunrise, and I loved the expression on Jack's face as he thrust in and out of me fully without taking a moment to breathe.

I didn't want to breathe either. He filled and consumed me just like I wanted. I loved this man, and every second spent with him was magical. Jack's kisses were tender, they made me want to be with him all the time.

We were taking it slow, one day at a time, but I already could not wait to spend the rest of my life with him.

He linked our fingers, drew my hand to his lips, and kissed the front of my palm before his lips came crashing down on mine again.

"I love you, Nina," he whispered as his body slid in and out of mine. My legs stayed wrapped around his waist, and I writhed beneath him, enjoying every moment and the thrust of his hips.

"I love you too."

More kisses and whispers of pleasure made me spiral over the edge. His lovemaking was all I had ever dreamed of, and this moment with him was more perfect than anything.

Seconds after we managed to catch our breath, Jack drew me closer into his arms and caressed my body. He smoothed a hand over my back, pressed me closer to him, then sprayed kisses all over my face.

His touch was warm, and it reminded me of the first time we were together. There wasn't a moment when I didn't want to be with him. Jack also clung to me every chance he got, and that made me feel warmer and safer.

We had a double date with Ryan and his wife tonight, and we were already late to join them at the club. My one week working in Denver would soon be over, and I had to get back to New York to resume work.

"You promised him, not me," Jack said as he continued nuzzling the side of my neck again. "I just want to spend time with you like this and not go anywhere."

He caressed my back, then gently touched the spot where the sheikh's bullet hit me two months ago. "I'm terribly sorry about this, Nina. I'll always be sorry," he whispered as he kept his face buried in the croon of my neck.

"You don't have to be sorry anymore, Jack," I told him, then drew back a little so I could stare into his eyes and touch his face. "I love you, and I'm happy to be with you."

His gaze remained solemn on mine, and we kissed tenderly at first before he slid his tongue into my mouth and took the kiss to another level. The passion in the air made me wrap my hands around his neck and lean closer into the kiss.

When our lips parted, I laughed and rested my forehead on his. “Ryan will be crazy pissed if we miss the hangout for tonight,” I said and laughed as he tickled my sides and pulled me closer to him again. “He says you spend most of your time in New York now and the baby hasn’t even arrived yet. What happens when it does?”

“You know what happens,” Jack answered before he kissed me and stole every thought from my mind. “I’ll make you my wife and move to New York to be with you.”

“What about your business?” I asked as I regarded him closely. Jack had been toying around with the idea of moving to New York to be with me for a while now, but I didn’t think he was serious about it.

“I have the best workers, trust me, everything will be fine. I want to be with you and our son every step of the way. You’re what matters to me now, Nina, and I’m never leaving you ever again.”

“What makes you think it’s a boy?” I asked in a teasing tone.

“I know he is.”

We both giggled like high school kids, then he began caressing my body and kissing me again like he wanted to

make love to me.

“We really should go hang out with Ryan,” I said while laughing, and I drew him out of the bed so we could hop in the shower.

“I’ll just make love to you in the shower then,” he said, then lifted me off the bed and carried me into the bathroom. While the cool water slashed down on our bodies, I responded passionately to his touch and kisses till my body became one with his.

Jack didn’t take it slow. This time, it was raw passion and energy. I matched his pace and his kisses until we both cried out in ecstasy again and clung to each other to finish our shower.

One hour later, we made it to the club. “Ahh, and the latest couple arrives,” Ryan joked when we got to his regular spot. I laughed, gave my brother a side hug, and kissed his cheeks before I sat beside Jack.

“Bourbon for me,” Jack requested, after greeting Ryan’s wife.

“A mocktail for me,” I said to the bartender.

“How are you feeling recently?” Ryan asked.

“Better than ever ... it’s like I’m getting a new surge of energy I’ve never had before. It feels great; I feel great.”

My right hand moved over my abdomen, and I gently caressed it through the blue dress I wore for the night. Jack sat by my side, and he didn’t take his eyes off me. He smiled and

responded to Ryan's jokes, but we made eye contact and I blushed at intervals.

The night faded slowly, and it was the best fun I had with Jack before we returned to his penthouse and made love for the rest of the night. I had found my happy ever after with him, and there was no going back now.



WE GOT MARRIED AS planned a month later, and it was perfect. As I walked down the aisle to meet Jack, the radiant smile on his face and the gleam in his eyes made me want to pause time and cherish the moment.

I loved the way he looked at me, and the sound of his voice when he spoke to me. Jack held my gaze until I walked down the aisle with my brother by my side.

"Hey," Jack greeted me once I got to him. Jim was our priest for the day, and the lovely hall Ryan got us with his connections here in New York was just the perfect setting for our big day.

"Hi," I whispered back, then dragged in a deep breath to steady myself. "You ready?"

"More ready than I've ever been for anything else," he answered, then turned to Ryan and added. "Thanks, man."

"You take care of her," Ryan answered, then they hugged before Jack faced me again.

I couldn't hold back my grin, and the joy tunneling inside me knew no bounds. I loved Jack with everything in me, and this moment was the best I'd experienced so far.

When it was time for our vows, Jack wore the loveliest smile as he held my hands and stared deep into my eyes. "I promise to love and cherish you ... hold and adore you for the rest of our lives. Just as the sun remains radiant in the daylight sky, I will love you till the end of our days."

I recited my vows to Jack with no hiccups at all. The words I said to him reflected my true feelings. Nothing else mattered but what I was feeling.

"You look perfect," Jack said and made me flush even harder than I already was. "Beautiful."

"Thanks, babe."

The kiss after our vows sealed our promises, and I knew this was just the start of our happy ever after.

Epilogue

Jack

TWO YEARS LATER

I held my son close as we posed for the pictures, and Nina grinned as she took the first few shots, then adjusted the length of her camera before she turned to me again and winked. “These look great, Jack. You need to see them.”

“I know,” I said to her. “I’m Jack Muller, remember? Of course, the pictures will look great.”

“Cocky,” she commented and tilted her head to the side before bursting into a full laugh. “But yes, you look perfect in all of them.”

Jayden was giggling and too excited for the shoot, and while we had an interview after this session with the New York Times, I still wanted to enjoy and cherish this time with my wife and son.

“Did you get the perfect one for a front cover?” I was still grinning as I asked, and Nina matched the smile on my face as she nodded.

“I did,” Nina answered, then walked over to me and kissed my lips briefly before she showed me the pictures. We went through every shot she took and decided on the ones she should edit for the cover before she turned off her camera and faced me fully. “You looked perfect in all of them, babe.”

“Thanks, my love. You’re the best.”

Pierce Clean Shots was a year old today, and the agency was running smoothly thanks to Nina’s hard work. “You’re doing great honey,” I said to her before rubbing her back gently and turning to Jayden. Nina’s agency was hired by the New York Times to shoot the cover for our magazine page, and we had been enjoying our photoshoot sessions for over a week now.

Being with Nina like this reminded me of the time our romance resumed after our first night. Asking Nina to be my fake wife at that time was a spontaneous decision, but it turned out to be the best part of my life.

I didn’t regret a thing that happened between us. *Except for the incident with the sheikh of course*, but the rest of it was perfect. *Nina is perfect.*

Jayden too was the second most perfect aspect of my life. He had the same blonde shade of hair as Nina’s and perfect blue eyes that matched the shade of his creamy skin.

“Ice cream,” Jayden announced, reminding me that I had promised him a large bowl after dinner tonight. “Daddy promised ice cream.”

“I know, buddy,” I said to him and kissed his forehead before Jayden pumped his tiny fist in the air, then hurried away from us while jogging around and singing a rhyme to himself.

“He’s a happy kid,” I commented as Nina admired him.

“He is,” she agreed as we kissed again, and I ruffled Jayden’s hair when he came back to hug me, then hurried to go play again.

I wrapped my hand around Nina’s waist and kissed her forehead. My phone buzzed in the pocket of my pants, and I took it out and saw it was a call from Jim.

“Are you gonna take that?” Nina asked when I stared at the phone for a long time. In the last two years, I had been on a mission only once, and even though it wasn’t anything as dangerous as the uncover job we went on in Jeddah, Nina still worried about me the entire week I was away.

I dragged in a deep breath and shook my head. “Actually, I won’t,” I answered, then ignored the call and tucked my phone away. “I’ll give Jim a call back later. Today is all about you, my lovely wife, and my beautiful baby boy. We have a family interview to get to.”

She grinned wide and pecked the tip of my nose before hugging me tight. “Jayden ... buddy, come give dad a hug,” I called, and Jayden came running into my arms with excitement.

We hugged and laughed as we walked out of Nina's studio, and I had never been more happy than I was at that moment.

THE END

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Now, he's my new billionaire boss and my baby's daddy.

Five years later, I set out for a new beginning in New York City.

On the first night at my new job, the grumpy owner was set to make his appearance.

I couldn't believe my eyes, it was Devyn Crane.

He waltzed back into my life and pretended nothing ever happened.

Seeing his firm body and gorgeous green eyes made me yearn for his touch.

But wealth has changed him.

And with money came problems.

He needs my help to set a trap to catch a crook.

A wedding. Our wedding.

My head is spinning and my heart is pumping.

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