



DARK SOUL

CHIMERA FORCE  BOOK ONE

J.R. PACE

ALSO BY J.R. PACE

Mont Blanc Rescue Series

Book 1: Mountain Struggle

Book 2: Mountain Impact

Book 3: Mountain Trial

Book 4: Mountain Shadow

Book 5: Mountain Deadpoint

Book 6: Mountain Secret

Book 7: Mountain Target

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Sharp's Cove Series

Book 1: One Night Years Ago

Book 2: Two Favors Repaid

Book 3: Three Times Ablaze

Book 4: Four Cards Exposed

**

Standalone Novella

Cold and Bitter Snow

DARK SOUL

CHIMERA FORCE BOOK 1

J.R. PACE

Dark Soul

Published by J.R. Pace

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Note to readers: This book contains adult scenes and language, and is intended for adult readers.

Second chances are not given to make things right, but to
prove that we could be better even after we fall.

—Unknown

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Dark

Luke Dark closed his eyes and found himself back in the kitchen of his childhood home.

The floor was a patterned linoleum in shades of red, orange and white. The central table was made of scuffed wood, big enough for their family of five, with space left over for one or two guests. Sitting at one of the high chairs, his sister, a little girl in pigtails, waited for her milk.

Something he said made her laugh, a beautiful sound.

Outside, the neighbor's dog barked.

He was barefoot. As he poured the milk, he could feel the cold seeping in from the floor, through the soles of his feet.

He blinked, and went somewhere else.

This time, it was snowing directly into his face, the frigid air making him gasp with every pained breath. It was so cold he couldn't remember the last time he'd been warm.

Somebody behind him—one of his men—said something that made him smile, even though smiling stretched his lips and the skin around his mouth painfully. They had many miles to cover and only a few hours of daylight, but they were all together, and as long as they kept moving, Dark knew they would be alright.

He blinked again, and found himself back in the box.

He knew this one was neither dream nor memory, but for a few seconds longer, he could pretend.

Finally, it was the cold that dragged him back to reality. It made sense that all his dreams took place in the cold. It was so cold inside the box that his breath frosted with every exhale.

Dark pulled up his knees against his chest. He wouldn't complain about the cold. Although the isolation boxes were colder than the cells in the main wing, it was also quieter here,

and he'd learned he valued the quiet more than he valued the warmth.

This time around, he hadn't even tried to get into isolation. It'd happened naturally, when an inmate who should have known better had come into Dark's cell and tried to steal the single book each inmate was allowed to keep in their cell. If anything, Dark thought he'd been remarkably moderate in his response, only breaking the man's hand and nose. He didn't expect the man would try again—at least not with Dark's book.

Dark shook his head, determined to get back to his earlier daydreams, when steps sounded in the hallway outside his cell.

That's strange.

Guards walked by once an hour, every hour, but he could have sworn it'd only been a few minutes since the last time they'd been around.

If there was anything that separated military prisons from their civilian counterparts, it was discipline. Everything happened at the same time every day, allowing everyone—both guards and inmates—the illusion of control.

The cold must be making your mind foggy.

“Get up, Dark.” Dark recognized the voice as belonging to a young, heavy-set guard with a reddish beard. “We have a Christmas visitor for you. Hands up where we can see them. You know the drill.”

Christmas.

It's Christmas again.

That meant he'd been here four entire years. Sixteen left until his debt to society was paid.

And then what?

You'll be fifty-one years old.

Dark shook his head.

He couldn't—*wouldn't*—start pitying himself.

He wasn't a good man.

He wasn't looking to redeem himself.

He just needed to keep his head down and—

“Come on, Dark. You might have all day, but I don't,” the guard said impatiently.

“Who is it?”

“Mr. Smith.”

“I don't know a Mr. Smith.”

The hole in the door clacked open, letting in more light than Dark had seen in the last few days. He squinted, letting his eyes get used to it.

The guard gave a long-suffering sigh. “What do you want me to do about that, Dark? I'm not your personal assistant. Give me your hands.”

Knowing he wasn't going to get any more information from the guard, and not really blaming him for his lack of interest in the matter, Dark stuck his hands through, waiting for the cold steel to wrap around them.

And then he was out of the cell, and walking down a long corridor. Prisons were made of long corridors, each one beginning and ending in identical-looking doors, and maybe that's what made people go crazy when they'd been inside long enough, that feeling of moving without moving.

He followed the two-inch yellow line painted on the floor, careful to stay on the line. Stepping off was a violation of the rules.

One of many rules.

The guard didn't say anything, nor did Dark expect him to. Whoever this Mr. Smith was, he clearly held some clout, since one of the first things that happened to inmates in solitary confinement was that their visitor privileges were revoked.

That was no hardship for him, since he didn't get visitors. His sister had tried to visit when he'd first arrived, but he'd refused to see her. He didn't want to give her the idea that this

is what she would be doing with her weekends for the next twenty or so years.

The guard led him into a private visiting room—that was interesting, since those were usually reserved for lawyer visits, and Dark was pretty sure his lawyer wouldn't be coming to see him. He hadn't had much use for a lawyer. He'd admitted to his crime and, as a result, his sentencing had been swift.

No sense in wasting time and taxpayer money.

The room was bare except for the table and three chairs in the middle, the walls the same dirty yellow as the rest of the prison's public areas, a color that attempted to be cheerful but failed miserably.

Three chairs.

That was another interesting thing.

“Your hands,” the guard said, looping the chain between his hands through the metal ring on the table.

Dark sat down, facing the two empty chairs, and prepared himself to wait. That was the other thing one learned to do in prison. Wait. Wait to be allowed to go somewhere. Wait to come back to the cell. Waiting, all the time. He'd thought he'd learned patience in the military, but that was nothing compared to the kind of patience he'd had to develop to survive in prison.

He wasn't kept waiting long, and that was a surprise as well.

He kept his expression neutral as two men in dark suits walked in, closing the door behind them. One was in his early forties, strong and tanned, with thick black hair and eyes so dark they looked almost black. The other one was at least a decade older, with mahogany skin and a forehead that was a textbook case for male pattern baldness. His shoulders were no longer as wide as they must have been in his youth, but he looked like a man who kept in shape. Regardless of their differences, they moved around each other like men who'd done this together before.

They paused for a moment, as if waiting for Dark to say something. When he didn't, they moved further inside the room, each one heading to one side of the table and taking a seat. Once again, communicating without words.

They're not lawyers.

The first flames of curiosity flickered inside him, but Dark didn't move a muscle. In the last four years, he'd perfected a look of complete indifference—a protection mechanism against anyone who tried to get too close to him, for any reason. Not that many people wanted to mess with a man his size, even in here. Most were happy to let him be. But a few had had to be taught.

The two men took their time getting settled on the hard, institutional chairs, until they looked almost comfortable.

And still they looked at him. Waiting.

You can keep waiting.

Finally, the older, bald man broke the silence.

“We're going to give you a choice today,” he said, bringing his hands together until the pads of his fingers joined their counterpart.

“I don't know you,” Dark said. He didn't mean that in a bad way. Just that it was difficult to have a conversation when he had no idea who these men were.

The older man looked at the younger one—deferred to him, it seemed, although Dark didn't get the feeling the younger one was the boss.

“Our names don't matter. What matters is, we can be your ticket out of here,” the younger man said in a distinctive, clipped British accent. The kind of voice one didn't forget.

Dark wondered, not for the first time, if this was some kind of dark joke, or a psych experiment.

Dangle freedom in front of an inmate, see how long it takes him to start salivating.

Of course, that wasn't going to work with him.

He didn't deserve a second chance.

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"Do we look like we're the kind of men to waste time with jokes?" British asked.

He looked like the kind of man who'd never even cracked a smile, but Dark understood a rhetorical question when he heard one, so he held his silence.

Finally, the older man gave British a little nod.

"If you want your freedom, you'll stand up and follow us when we get up to walk out of this room. If you stay sitting down, we'll understand you're not interested in our offer."

Despite himself, Dark's heart beat hard against his chest.

You could get out of here.

"What do you want from me in exchange?"

British answered first. "Finally, a good question. Unfortunately, not one we can answer right now. So let me ask you a different question instead. *Does it matter?*"

It mattered to Dark.

Because, if these men had read his file, they probably thought he was a lost soul—a man without a moral compass.

A man who would be willing to do anything to get out of here.

And maybe they're not so far off the mark.

Dark didn't move a single muscle. He still sat the same way, sprawled back in his chair as far as handcuffed hands would let him. But already ... already he could feel, he could smell, the possibility of freedom.

Which pissed him off, because he could also feel all his hard work from the last four years—all the effort spent accepting this fucking place—unraveling, all in a single instant.

British's nostrils flared. Like a shark detecting vibrations in the water, he seemed to detect the change in Dark.

“Come with us, Captain Dark, and all questions will be answered.”

There was nothing coincidental about the man’s use of Dark’s military rank. And it fucking hurt to think of everything he’d lost. Of everything he would still lose.

Don’t listen to them.

You don’t deserve your freedom, and you don’t want to know what they want in exchange.

Stay where you are.

He forced his tense muscles to relax. He would remain sitting down, even if it killed him.

British seemed to detect the change in him. Something flashed in his eyes, and then they were dark pools again.

“You’re here because you became part of the problem, Dark.” He looked at his colleague quickly. “We’re giving you the chance to become part of the solution.”

“Come with us,” Bald said, spreading his hands amiably to reinforce his words. “If you don’t like what we have to say, we will bring you right back.”

The emphasis was on the word *back*.

“All you’ll lose is a bit of time,” British continued, waving an elegant hand, “and it looks to me like time’s the one thing you have plenty of.”



The seat and the floor vibrated gently beneath his feet.

Strange that flying should feel so foreign, when once upon a time it’d been an everyday occurrence.

Dark leaned back into the luxuriously soft seat and closed his eyes.

He hadn't actually seen the outside of the aircraft. He'd been blindfolded from the time they'd left the prison, until long after he'd boarded the plane.

Finally, his blindfold had been removed by British, who turned out to be the only other passenger. Bald was nowhere to be seen—unless he was the pilot inside the cockpit.

British was currently sitting across the aisle from Dark, staring intently at some papers and pretending he didn't feel Dark's eyes on him.

Dark looked around the cabin. With its plush seats and gray-on-gray decor, it didn't take a genius to know this wasn't a military plane.

And though he didn't have a watch, he would bet ... well, he didn't have much to bet, anymore ... but from the amount of time they'd spent in the air, and the glimpse of sea he'd gotten out of the one window whose shade hadn't been pulled all the way down, he was pretty confident they must be halfway across the Atlantic by now.

That was a surprising range for a private jet.

Whoever owned this baby didn't have any cash troubles.

Dark hadn't asked where they were going. He didn't like to waste his time, and he didn't think British would tell him anything else until he was good and ready.

Dark stretched his legs out. If he wasn't still wearing his handcuffs, he might almost have been able to forget about the mess he was currently in. But he didn't want to forget about it. He had to stay alert. He had to figure out a way forward.

Find out what they want.

Then decide whether it's something you're willing to give.

Closing his eyes, he pretended to doze.



Alexia

The first sign that someone didn't belong in Gstaad was when they didn't know how to pronounce the name of the town. The right way to do it was with a hard, guttural *g*, followed quickly by a soft *sh* sound, and that was just the start of the word.

Alexia had learned this the hard way, but then, she'd never had any illusions that she belonged in this place. Hell, she wasn't the kind of person who would normally even have set foot in a place like this—she defined the *middle* in middle class, in all senses. An average girl who'd grown up in an average town in upstate New York. With average grades, an average job, and average life, until—

She shook her head. She couldn't start thinking about that now. She had to get out of bed and get ready for work.

While she gathered her courage, she felt in the dark for the glass panel on the wall that controlled the blackout curtains filtering out all light.

As the curtains magically opened to reveal the mountains outside, Alexia found herself holding her breath. Her room was technically in the basement of the large house, but because the house was built on the side of the mountain, she still had a view.

And what a view.

Whatever else might be going on in her life, *this* she could never tire of. She'd seen a lot of snow as she was growing up, but never like this, snow that looked so fresh and untouched, as if every night God sprinkled some fresh powder and sharpened those peaks, getting them ready for the day ahead.

She almost laughed out loud at the thought. That was a service the Gstaad municipality could just about afford to pay for.

Gstaad in winter—she hadn't been here long enough to know if it was the same in summer, but imagined the uber-

wealthy migrated somewhere else by then—was the strangest of places.

The barista in the local Starbucks—and yes, she went to Starbucks for her coffee fix, rather than any of the local third wave coffee shops, not because she cared an iota about the coffee, but because walking into the Starbucks made her feel a little closer to home—had described Gstaad better than she ever could.

A town where even millionaires feel out of place.

To be someone in this town, millions weren't enough. The entire town was designed for people whose net worth began with the *b* for billions.

And how much of that money they were willing to part with during their winter holiday determined the location and amenities they'd get in exchange. And how relevant they'd be in the town's social scene.

Alexia hopped out of bed, making her way quickly to the bathroom, closing the door, and turning on the water as hot as it would go.

Thankfully, she'd remembered to set out her clothes the previous evening—black jeans, since her employer hated blue jeans, a thick undershirt and a beige turtleneck sweater. They waited for her on the beige ottoman in the far corner of her bathroom.

An ottoman in the bathroom.

It was one of the many things about this house she'd given up on understanding.

She pondered, as she did every morning, how the house could be so cold. As much as her boss spent on rent, and she was pretty sure her yearly salary would probably only cover a week's rental of this house, if that, he didn't seem willing to spend any money heating it. In the mornings, when the heating had been off all night, it was cold enough that she could just about see her breath every time she breathed out.

But maybe her employer, Arseny Kvyat, didn't notice the cold like she did, since he'd grown up in a place that was

much colder.

Even her charge, twelve-year-old Nikolai, had laughed when she'd mentioned the cold. Apparently, they all thought it was normal.

And maybe it was normal—in Russia.

But Alexia hated it.

She took the quickest shower imaginable, making sure not to get her hair wet, then dried herself briskly on the soft bath towels that were left for her every day. That luxury she could get used to. Towels that were soft like a cloud, and big enough to wrap her entire body in.

At eight-twenty five she was down in the enormous dining room, waiting for her employer and his son to arrive.

The cook had told her this was one of the few chalets in the area with an independent dining room. She assumed the implication was that it was one of the few chalets large enough to have both a large dining room and a large living area, without having to combine the two spaces.

The cook, who was Russian and traveled with the Kvyats wherever they went, seemed strangely proud about this, as if the status of her employer somehow translated to her as well.

The world of the uber-rich was like that. You had to listen to what they said, but also read between the lines to hear what they weren't saying, but expected you to understand anyway.

Alexia squared her shoulders and settled down to wait.

Anything to avoid being late.

Her first week here, she'd seen her employer rant for hours after his masseuse had made him wait ten minutes.

Alexia wasn't going to take the risk.

Four minutes.

She took a deep breath and looked out the large panoramic windows facing the deck—and the mountains beyond. Even the sight of the mountains wasn't enough to soothe her, though.

This breakfast her employer insisted on sharing with her and with his son was easily the most stressful part of her day. And of Nikolai's too, she was sure, though the boy had never spoken about it.

If there was one thing she'd learned about her charge in the month she'd been here, it was that the boy was loyal to a fault.

Two minutes.

As cold as it was, her palms were sweating.

She ran through the schedule she'd planned for the day, thinking it would have been so much easier to send him an email or print him a note with the schedule. But Arseny Kvyat didn't like to get anything in writing, from her or from anybody else. He preferred to hear things directly from the source.

And what Arseny Kvyat wanted, he got.

Her stomach grumbled as she eyed the large buffet that'd been set up on the sideboard. It was the kind of spread she'd read about, growing up, in novels depicting Victorian country estates. Not the kind of thing one imagined could exist in real life. Artfully arranged platters of lunch meats, cheeses, breads and pastries, as well as eggs cooked in several ways, and some dishes that she'd learned were Russian breakfast staples, including Russian pancakes and *grenki*, a kind of fried bread.

Drinks included all kinds of fresh juices and a big jug of Russian tea, a drink she knew took over three hours to make and was made fresh for Mr. Kvyat every morning.

In one corner sat a high-end coffee machine, ready to grind Black Ivory coffee grains—the rarest and most expensive coffee in the world, Mr. Kvyat had explained—on demand. Alexia hadn't dared tell him it tasted just like regular coffee to her.

One minute.

She took one last look at the sideboard. There was enough food there for twenty people, but she knew it would just be the three of them eating. Or two and a quarter, since Nikolai never ate much in front of his father.

At precisely eight-thirty, Arseny Kvyat strode into the dining room. He walked with poise and confidence and dressed in the finest clothes, but nothing could hide the fact that he was a bear of a man. He was in his mid-fifties, with a broad, ruddy nose that spoke of his love of food and drink, and thick pouches under his eyes that spoke of a chronic lack of sleep. Not surprising, perhaps, for a man who started as a mechanic in an aluminum plant and eventually became one of the great Russian oligarchs.

Her first thought, as always when she set her eyes on her employer, was guilt. Because she wasn't who she'd claimed to be, and because she had reasons for wanting to be here that had nothing to do with teaching Nikolai.

Alexia swallowed hard, pushing the guilt back and focusing on her anger instead. It was still there, the kind of anger that hadn't faded with time—the kind of anger that could never fade.

And, regardless of her motives for being here, she was doing the best she could for Nikolai—teaching him English and math, yes, but also hopefully teaching him about himself, and about everything he could become.

“Good morning, Miss Alexia,” the man said as he entered the dining room. He gave her a quick once-over, but Alexia was glad to note he paid a lot more attention to the sideboard than to her.

“Mr. Kvyat,” Alexia nodded.

The cook came inside and dropped a last platter of some colorful, exotic fruits, then departed back into the kitchen. Kvyat watched her leave with a satisfied expression.

“You know why I bring my cook with me wherever I go?” Kvyat asked.

Alexia could think of lots of answers to that question, but didn't think he'd appreciate hearing any of them. Following her own maxim not to say anything if she couldn't say anything nice, she shook her head politely and waited to be enlightened.

“Fewer chances of being poisoned that way. If I didn’t trust Mrs. Babanin as much as I do, I’d have to hire a personal food taster.” He laughed heartily, as if there was something funny in his words.

Alexia shivered, unsure what to say—glad for the distraction Nikolai provided as he walked inside the room.

“I’m sorry I’m late, Father,” Nikolai said quickly.

Late in the Kvyat household was relative.

The boy was dressed in navy blue, as usual, in the clothes Alexia had come to recognize as his uniform around his father, what he wore to be as inconspicuous as possible. It looked like a school uniform, even though the boy wasn’t in school at the moment. He’d been taken out of school when his father had decided to spend the winter in Gstaad—hence why Alexia had been hired.

Apparently, that was the kind of thing the uber-rich could do when they so wished.

The man’s thick lips pursed for a moment, and Alexia held her breath—before his mouth relaxed, lips spreading into a grin.

Arseny Kvyat is in a good mood today.

“Come, my boy. Let’s sit down and eat. One can’t learn with an empty belly.” He began loading up a plate full of food for himself. “Right, Miss Alexia?”

And with that, Alexia launched into her detailed explanation of the lesson plan she’d come up with for the day.



Dark

Before the plane landed, British brought out the blindfold again.

Dark tripped on the last step coming off the plane, came close to kissing the tarmac—would have, except British wrenched his elbow backwards, drawing a curse from him but successfully keeping him on his feet.

He let British push his head and body down until he was sitting on a plush leather seat, in a car that still had that telltale *new car* smell.

The secrecy was starting to piss him off.

If Dark's internal clock was working properly—and he was pretty sure it was—ten hours separated them from Kansas.

So most likely London, or somewhere in western Europe.

Or somewhere in Western Africa. Dakar or Bissau.

But no, it was too cold for that.

Western Africa was warm, even in January, and he'd felt cold air on his cheeks and hands as they stepped off the plane.

Honestly, he didn't give a shit where they were.

Who do they think I'm going to tell?

My reflection in the mirror, when they return me to my cell in Leavenworth?

Something clenched inside him at the thought of going back to prison. Anguish, hot and rancid, pushed its way up his esophagus, until he thought he might vomit.

He purposefully kept his expression neutral under the blindfold, sure that the other man was looking at him. Dark could smell the tea British had been drinking on the plane, right before the blindfold had gone on again.

And he knew British would be looking out for external signs that Dark was about to crack.

Because there was no doubt in Dark's mind, one of the purposes of this little trip was to provide him with a little reminder of what it felt like to *move* again, instead of *standing still*, waiting for his life to pass by, as he'd been doing the last four years.

So he regulated his breathing and made sure to give nothing away, used the handcuffs against his wrists as a reminder that he wasn't really free.

The temperature inside the car was warm, but the window against his shoulder felt chilled.

Another sign that they were probably somewhere in northern Europe.

Dark had always wanted to visit Oslo.

He wondered if this might be his chance.

He might not even find out if the assholes kept the blindfold on the entire time.

Eventually, the car slowed down, then stopped. British left him in the car while he stepped outside and exchanged some words with the driver, speaking too quietly for Dark to overhear.

Then the door opened again, and British helped him out, again careful to move Dark's head out of the way, making him think he'd done this plenty of times before.

Military.

Or police.

Except he hadn't looked or dressed like either of those.

Dark inhaled the cold, fresh air. It felt good going into his lungs. Fresh air was in the top five things he'd missed while in prison.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" British said without missing a beat.

Dark didn't bother replying. Eventually, the man grabbed his elbow. Dark let himself be led up what he assumed was a

paved road or driveway. Finally, there was the sound of a door creaking open. They stepped inside a space that *felt* cavernous.

Cool and damp.

But not cold.

So heated.

Some kind of large warehouse.

“Are you going to take this off?” Dark asked when the door closed again.

“Of course. I apologize for the secrecy, Captain Dark,” the man replied, his tone all but apologetic. “Please go ahead.”

Dark brought his bound hands up to his face and pulled up the blindfold.

Not a warehouse, but an industrial building of some sort.

Set up a lot like ... an office?

The silence was almost oppressive. They were alone here.

“So. Did you draw the short end of the stick? Where’s Bald?”

For an instant, the man’s eyes glittered with something like amusement. He blinked it away.

“That’s the best question you can come up with? I wonder if we’ve made a mistake with you.”

Dark didn’t let himself get riled.

“Do you mind if I sit down, if you’re not going to tell me what this is about?”

British seemed to come to a decision.

“Come. We’ll be more comfortable inside.” He led the way down the empty hallway, past a bright, industrial kitchen area and several office spaces, until they came to a conference room with a large oval table in the middle.

Dark’s eyes were immediately drawn to the large windows on one end, but the blinds were down, making it impossible to see outside.

British took a seat on the side closer to the windows. “It’s safer for everyone if you don’t know where we are just yet.”

Dark sat down opposite him. He made a show of looking around the room. There was no one-way glass. Nowhere for anybody else to be hiding. “We’re here alone. You’re not worried I’ll overpower you and run away?”

British raised a dark eyebrow, letting Dark know he was welcome to try. Dark wondered what kind of training the man had, to look so confident, when Dark was years younger and had height and weight in his favor.

A tablet appeared in the man’s hands. “Let’s see. Four and a half years ago, you were in Syria. Stellar service record, until one day you killed your commanding officer. You could have run that day, but you didn’t.”

Dark forced himself not to flinch. He’d ended two lives that day. The life of his commanding officer, and his own.

“You didn’t fly me half-way around the world to tell me something I already knew,” Dark retorted.

“I knew your commanding officer,” Mr. British continued, his voice soft.

Dark tensed. Most people in prison had left him alone. But there had been several people, guards and inmates, who’d wanted to teach Dark a lesson, and it often started with those five words.

He raised his eyes to meet the other man’s gaze, letting him know he wouldn’t be an easy mark, even handcuffed as he was. But British wasn’t giving off any signs of aggression.

“Relax. I know all about shades of gray.”

Neither of them said anything else for a long time.

“I’ll get right down to it, then,” British finally said. He seemed disappointed, as if he’d hoped Dark would keep asking questions. “Five years of service, in exchange for your freedom.”

Service.

Dark wasn't a stranger to service. It's what he'd always wanted to do. The 75th Ranger Regiment had been like a second family for him. When he'd lost that, he'd lost not just his job, but everything he'd ever worked for, everything he'd ever aspired to be.

And he'd missed it, while in prison. More than proper coffee. More than fresh air. Service was top in the list of things Dark had missed, and none of the jobs he'd taken up in prison had come close to filling that void inside of him.

So hearing the word, now, bandied around so carelessly by someone who likely didn't know what it meant ... it made Dark angry. Angrier than he'd been this entire time.

"Service?" he repeated.

"Five years of service," British repeated. "Or you fly back today."

Dark steadied his breathing before responding.

"Define *service*."

"Fair enough." The man's lips stretched into a thin line. "You do whatever I tell you to do."

"You're going to have to be more specific," Dark said stubbornly.

"I don't have to tell you there are bad people in the world, Captain Dark."

"People like me, you mean."

British waved his hand, as if Dark was of no consequence.

"Dangerous people. Individuals whose very way of life is endangering the lives of countless others, and who find themselves, to all extent and purposes ... above the law."

"I thought nobody was above the law. At least in the United States."

"We both know that's not the way it works. Let me spell it out for you. You're going to set up a team, Dark. The five of you will be ... let's say you'll be the blunt instrument at the

service of the taxpayers of a number of nations standing behind the project.”

“The United States?”

“The United States, yes, and many others. You don’t need to know the details. That’s why I’m here.”

Dark swallowed.

“You think I will murder people for you.”

He’d had a good life once.

How the hell did everything go so wrong?

“Not murder. Justice. You will take these people down, by any means necessary. On my end, I will promise you this: none of the people on the list I will provide are good people, Dark.”

“You promise ...” Dark snorted. “I met you less than twenty-four hours ago, and I’ve spent most of the time since then blindfolded. Not exactly a way to generate trust.”

“Take some time to think about it, but I’ll need an answer today.”

“If these people are so dangerous, why not put the SAS or SIS on this? You’re obviously British.”

The question didn’t seem to faze the man.

“The world has changed, Captain Dark. And some things transcend nationality. Right now, we have the choice to either do nothing or to escalate the conflict. With you, we can expand that competitive space. Fight these people at their same level. The countries behind this project ... they have the will to change things, but also the knowledge that there is no way to do it using existing structures.”

“You’re looking for anonymity. If we fail, you’ll drop us.”

British nodded gravely. “We will. We’ll deny all knowledge or involvement.”

Dark snorted. “And you were the best salesman they could find to pitch this mess?”

British sat up straighter. Finally, Dark had gotten under his skin.

“Don’t misunderstand the situation. I’m not a salesman, Dark. I am a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

Dark’s skin itched.

“You’re setting up a team of killers,” he finally said, making no attempt to hide his disdain. “My answer is no.”

“Don’t be so quick to judge, Dark. You and your team will enforce laws in spaces where laws can’t be enforced, using your different abilities to complete each mission.”

“I said no.” Dark stood up, the words harsh on his tongue. “I think we’re done here. You might as well take me back now.”

But British remained sitting down. He flicked absently at the tablet, in a way that made it seem as if he would have preferred a paper copy of the files, instead of the screen. “Sit down, Captain Dark. You’re not doing anything for the next sixteen years. You can spare a few more minutes of your time.”

“Fuck you,” Dark said, his hands clenching into fists.

“I can give you back your freedom, Dark,” he said calmly.

“I said, take me back.”

“I can give you back your freedom,” Mr. British repeated, as if Dark hadn’t spoken. “I can give you more than your freedom. I can get you back in.”

Dark’s heart skipped a beat. He pressed his palms on the conference table to stop himself from falling.

“What do you mean, *back in*?”

“With the Rangers.”

“You ... you don’t mean that,” he growled, his throat suddenly dry. “You can’t offer me that.”

Nobody could offer him that.

Sixteen years from now, all he could look forward to was a dishonorable discharge.

Nobody who wasn't in his shoes could understand what it felt like ... like being repudiated by his family.

“I can make this all disappear, Dark. When the time comes, you will be free to choose whether to rejoin the 75th Ranger Regiment ... or not. If you choose not to rejoin them, you'll receive an honorable discharge.”

Honorable discharge.

The words rang in his ears.

He's lying to you.

Nobody can promise you that.

“You'll have a life again. But first,” the man spread his hands open on the surface of the conference table. “First you need to commit to this ... project ... for five years.”

Dark recognized he'd been played—like a fiddle. A part of him also rationalized there could only be one reason for them to offer this—they didn't expect him to survive five years.

But the chance ... the mere possibility ... was more than he'd had before stepping on that plane. More than he'd ever expected to have again.

And Dark knew there were more questions he should be asking, about the role and what they expected him to do, but he wasn't cynical enough to pretend any of them would make a difference to his answer, so he chose not to ask any of them.

“I'm going to need this in writing,” he said.

British's lips curled into a thin, wolf-like smile.

“You'll have it.”



Dark

Dark sipped his cup of cheap, instant coffee, the hot drink made only vaguely more palatable by the chocolate flavoring the manufacturers had added.

If he'd discovered anything after three days of roaming this building and eating food delivery, it was that the Swiss loved to add chocolate to anything and everything.

As soon as he'd signed on the dotted line, British, whose real name was Thorne, had revealed they were in a renovated warehouse in the outskirts of Zurich—formerly the Swiss headquarters of a well-known global furniture brand. He'd removed the handcuffs and told him he was now free to go anywhere in the building, but not to go outside.

So Dark had spent his time exploring the place.

The bottom floor had been the offices, while the top floor had been designed to house traveling executives, so the company wouldn't have to pay for hotel rooms. Dark was currently staying in one of the studio apartments, and it was nicer than any military housing he'd ever stayed in. He didn't even want to compare it to the prison he'd just walked out of.

The basement of the building, originally housing returned stock and files, had been renovated and contained a brand new gym and training facility. That space was probably the reason Dark hadn't gone mad yet. He'd run and biked hundreds of miles, then hit all the punching bags he'd been able to find, wishing one of them would hit him back.

It felt strange to walk around without handcuffs. He remembered the deafening click they'd made as British—Dark was going to have to get used to thinking of him as Thorne—had taken them off. And even though he knew the handcuffs themselves didn't mean anything—even though he was no more free than he'd been before—he knew he would remember that particular sound for as long as he lived.

And hope never to hear it again.

When he'd gotten tired of working out, he'd gone back to exploring the empty building. It was strange to find himself completely alone, when for so long he'd had absolutely no privacy—yet another thing you got used to in prison. There were always people around you or, at the very least, cameras keeping track of what you were doing. There were no cameras here, as far as he could tell. But maybe they were just better at hiding them.

Thorne came and went, apparently trusting Dark to stay put. And he would, because he'd made that deal, and because what he had now wasn't real freedom. Real freedom was sitting in his pocket, signed by the president of the United States himself—a chance to go back to the Rangers, or at least to go home with an honorable discharge. So no, there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

Yesterday morning, a dozen boxes of gear had arrived, along with a young man and woman, both of them pale, freckled, and clearly scared to death of Dark. After introducing themselves quietly as Carrie and Pascale, they'd proceeded to ignore him as they began sorting through the boxes of gear.

Dark hadn't stuck around, since both soldiers—and he was ninety-nine percent sure they were soldiers, even though they wore civilian clothing—looked so uncomfortable in his presence, but the bits he'd seen were top quality, including military-grade weapons, drones, body armor, advanced night-optical devices and thermal-optics devices. It made him wonder, not for the first time, who he was getting into bed with.

He sighed as Thorne walked into the kitchen, a bunch of colored folders in his hands.

Looks like I'm going to find out.

“This is your team. Study these, and let me know if you have any pressing questions. The rest of the team should start arriving tomorrow.”

Dark made no move to grab them—took another sip of his coffee, just to irritate the man who'd kept him waiting for three fucking days.

“Shouldn’t I get to pick the team I’m going to be leading?”

The man’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “Let me be very clear, Dark. You weren’t my first choice for the job. I’m not even sure you’re qualified to lead this team. But I’m certainly not going to explain my choices to you or waste time asking for your opinion when it doesn’t matter.”

“I wasn’t your first choice for the job? You wound me, Thorne.”

“Just study the fucking files.” It sounded more like *fecking*, the way he said it. Dark had to smother a laugh.

Dark finally took the files from the other man, set them down on the table in front of him, still unopened.

“Are these people ... like me?” he asked cautiously.

His handler—for it was clear now that’s what Thorne’s role in all of this was—nodded, at least doing Dark the courtesy of not pretending he didn’t understand what he was asking.

“Like you ... yes.”

“How do you know they’ll say yes?”

Are they all chasing my same pipe dream?

“That’s for me to worry about. But they’ll say yes. Don’t worry about that.”

“And you think you can just put us together and we will be a team?”

“That’s what I have you for, Dark.” He looked down at his watch. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other things to attend to.”

And with a sharp turn of his heels, and a click clack of his shiny dress shoes, Thorne disappeared down the hallways.

More important things, no doubt.

Now that he was alone, Dark didn’t waste any time. He opened the first folder, stared at the picture of a gaunt-looking man and a few pages of heavily redacted text. An IT scientist

with the Australian Army Corps of Engineers. Brilliant resume. And a drug addict. He looked again at the gaunt, haunted face, at the stone-gray, bloodshot eyes—the eyes of a man who would do anything for his next fix. The crime he'd been accused of was redacted, but looking at that picture, Dark could fill in the blanks.

Jesus.

He put that folder down and picked up the next one. There were two pictures in this one, of two men who could be—hell, who were, judging by their matching last names—brothers.

What kind of family environment results in a CIA intelligence analyst and a Navy SEAL?

He kept reading. The analyst had been sentenced to twenty-five years in prison to be followed by five years of supervised release, but there was no explanation as to what had happened.

What the fuck did you do?

Dark turned the page to read about the SEAL, but the following pages were completely redacted, to the point of being useless. The only words left open, other than the names of the two men, were the man's area of expertise—medic—and the name of a place—Kabul.

Sighing, Dark picked up the last remaining file. This one was the only one that wasn't redacted. It showed a picture of a tanned, smiling soldier. American father, Italian mother, but always lived in the States. At age twenty-eight, he'd already been a Sergeant First Class.

Impressive.

An expert in close quarter combat.

Dark read quickly all the way to the bottom of the page. The more he read, the less likely it seemed a man like that would touch this team with a ten-foot pole.

Then he turned the page.

Fuck.

He'd assaulted an eighteen-year-old girl in Syria—hurt her badly enough that she'd needed to be flown to Germany for emergency medical care.

No fucking way am I working with that animal.

Hands shaking, Dark dropped the folder and went to find Thorne.



Dark

There was a soft knock on the door of his studio.

Too soft to be Thorne, even if they were on speaking terms, which they hadn't been, not since Dark had found him the previous afternoon to tell him he wouldn't be working with a fucking rapist, and Thorne had told him where he could stick his concerns.

Dark opened it to find Carrie there, looking for all the world like all she wanted to do was run back down the hallway. Or at least take a step back.

Dark didn't know what she was so scared of, but he took a step back himself, widening the space between them.

She raised her eyes to his, her soft brown eyes widening, as if she hadn't expected him to extend that courtesy to her.

"Uh, the other men have just arrived. Mr. Thorne asked me to tell you they're waiting for you in the conference room."

She'd hesitated momentarily on the *Mr*, as if she'd been used to calling him something else. One more little hint that nobody here was who they pretended to be.

"Thank you, Carrie. I'll be right down."

He took a moment to get ready, more to give the woman time to escape than because he needed the time. Though maybe he also wanted to make Thorne sweat a bit.

You've signed the papers, Dark.

It's too late now for second thoughts.

Dark strode into the conference room. Three men were sitting at the table, and two more standing by the window. One of these was Thorne, who peeled away from the other man and walked towards him.

"Ah, good of you to join us, Dark. Everyone, this is Luke Dark. He will be your team leader. Dark, meet West Danton, Griffin Williams, Slate Williams, and ... Ash Gunner."

Thorne was clearly daring him to say something, daring him to make a scene. But that wouldn't help—not if they all had to work together.

Dark looked purposefully at the three men by the conference table. The first one to stand up was West Danton. Except for the fact that the stone-gray eyes behind the black-rimmed glasses were the same, it was hard to put this man together with the gaunt face in the file Dark had been given. Around six-foot-tall, with the broad shoulders and slim hips of a swimmer, this man looked to be the picture of health. He wore his hair long, tied in a knot at the back of his neck.

“Nobody calls me West,” he said. “Call me Rogue.”

“Rogue. Good to meet you,” Dark said.

He then shook hands with Griffin and Slate Williams. In person, the brothers looked even more alike. Two things set them apart: their eye color, since one of them had green eyes and the other one blue, and the fact that one was a couple inches taller and had fifty pounds of muscle on the other one.

“Slate,” the larger man said, showing white teeth.

The former Navy SEAL.

The second man followed his brother's lead, but his look was more cautious.

“Griffin.”

Dark could see himself in the man's cautious speech pattern and in the pallor of his skin.

He's like me.

He just got out of prison.

“What should we call you?” Slate asked. “Boss? Leader?”

Dark shook his head. He'd been a captain once, but now ... now he wasn't anything.

“Dark is fine.”

“And what do we call you?” That question was addressed to Thorne.

“Mr. Thorne will do,” the man said, his voice clipped.

Rogue snorted. “Fair enough. That’s what I get for asking.”

And then it was impossible to ignore the elephant in the room—the man standing by the window. He was still a handsome asshole—a few years older than he’d been in the picture, his skin still tan but no longer as swarthy as before. But the main difference was the darkness swirling in his brown eyes.

The man strode towards Dark, his right hand stretched out. “Ash Gunner,” he said.

Dark ignored the hand.

He might have to work with the man, but he couldn’t make himself shake a rapist’s hand.

The man’s lips clamped together as he realized Dark knew about him. The hand retreated, going into the man’s pocket.

The five men stood there, staring at each other. Thorne hadn’t said anything about each other’s backgrounds, so Dark wouldn’t, either. He’d focus on key competencies, instead, and the men would have to trust that he had what it took to lead them.

Trust.

Looking around the room, he didn’t see much of that—probably something they’d need to work on.

“So. What now?” That was Griffin, in his clipped, quiet voice.

“Now you go get settled in. Pascale will show you to your rooms. Dark and I need to have a chat, and we’ll all meet together again at oh—at nine p.m.”

Civilian, my ass.

Dark waited until the men were out of the room.

“Who are you really, Thorne?”

“Who I am doesn’t matter. All that matters is that I’m going to help you get what you need done.”

“We’re going to need a few weeks to train together. Most of us are probably ...rusty. And we need to get to know each other. We’ll start tomorrow morning.”

“Start today. You’ve got two days, Dark.”

“Two days? That’s impossible.”

“None of these men are newbies. Despite their personal ... trouble ... each of these men is the best at what they do, Dark. That’s why I selected them.”

“It’s still impossible. If we’re to work together as a team, we need—“

“Get to know each other. Do whatever it is you have to do. This won’t work unless you can get those men to behave like a team. But you all need to be ready to leave by Saturday morning.”

The man’s words gave him pause.

“What’s happening on Saturday?”

“We’ve identified your first person of interest. Arseny Kvyat. His name might sound familiar. He’s one of the great Russian oligarchs.”

Dark shook his head. He’d never worked in the region, and until two days ago he hadn’t seen a newspaper in years.

“He’s recently risen to the top of our list for several reasons ... and we just found out he and his family are spending the winter in Gstaad.”

Dark didn’t even know where that was.

“That’s less than a three-hour drive from here,” Thorne clarified. “The perfect place to cut your teeth as a team, so to speak.”

“You say he’s risen to the top of your list. Why?”

“Kvyat has always been involved in shady deals but, until now, his friends were mainly other Russian oligarchs. Now

he's gone from cozying up to his usual friends to speaking to the Iranians. From the chats we've been able to infiltrate, he's planning something together with them. We need to take him down, by any means possible, before that happens."

"And when you say take him down ..."

Thorne's upper lip curled into a sneer. "You need a fucking map, Dark? Take him down, and make sure it doesn't come back to you. Or I won't be able to help you."

Big surprise.

Dark pointed at the folders on the table.

"Is that all the intel?"

Thorne nodded. "Five copies. Everything we have on Arseny Kvyat and his family. So you see why you have until Saturday. We've rented a house for you in Gstaad. It's not a cheap place, so make good use of it." The man turned to leave the conference room. "Oh, and you all have a medical check-up at eight a.m. tomorrow. The doctor will meet you in the medical bay, in the basement."

Dark picked up the five folders, weighing them in his hand for an instant, before going off to find the rest of his team.

His team.

The words felt thick in his mouth. It'd been a long time since he'd had a team. He wasn't even on speaking terms with people from his old team—same as with his sister, there'd been no sense in dragging them through the shit his life had become.

Now, of course, he couldn't even reach out to them. He'd signed away the right to contact anyone from his old life for the duration of his contract. And yet, the thought that five years from now he might get to see his sister again ... it was something he hadn't dared imagine just a week earlier.



Dark

Not a cheap place.

Understatement of the year.

One day in Gstaad had been enough to understand that everything in this town was understated palatial. Houses, stores, eateries ... hell, the streets themselves, with those dainty white lights that seemed to celebrate *excess*, rather than any particular holiday.

“Why are the lights still on?” Slate had asked as they first drove by the town. “Wasn’t Christmas weeks ago?”

“Didn’t you read the file? Russian Christmas was only a couple of days ago. And this town is chock full of Russians at this time of year,” his brother had replied.

That had been a day earlier. It’d taken them all day to organize their equipment. They were traveling as a group of TV writers on holiday together. Anything that couldn’t be explained away as something such a group might have, had been locked up in the ski room.

“Jesus. The ski room shelves are heated, to make sure ski boots are kept warm and toasty. Make sure you don’t turn that switch on, or you’ll fry half of my equipment,” Rogue said.

Dark shook his head.

Heated shelves.

What a fucking joke.

Though a ways out of town, the entire house was opulent. He didn’t know what he’d imagined, when Thorne had said he’d rented them a house, but it certainly hadn’t been this monument to pale wood and stone.

The main floor was a single, open space that encompassed the living, dining and kitchen areas, opening out to a deck with a sunken hot tub big enough for eight.

There were four ensuite bedrooms on the top floor, and one in the basement, along with the ski room, a wine cellar, and a games room with a heavy table tennis table, now converted into their operations center.

Ash had quickly claimed the bedroom in the basement, and Dark hadn't argued. The less he saw of that man, the better. It was doubly uncomfortable, because Dark considered himself an excellent judge of character—it was one of the things that had made him great at his job—and he wasn't picking up any kind of negative vibe from Ash Gunner.

Which makes him even more dangerous.

The man was silent most of the time—seemed hyper-aware of the fact that Dark hated his guts. But he'd been nothing but supportive of their mission from the first moment.

Wednesday morning, they'd all queued up for the medical check-up, which had really been an excuse to put a tracker inside their bodies. Dark touched his biceps, where the tracker had gone in. Although he understood why Thorne wanted them tracked—and though it made no difference to him, since he wasn't going to run—the thought of being tagged like an animal rankled.

After the check-up, they'd all been unsettled, the air thick with their feeling of helplessness. When Dark had suggested they go down to the gym, get to know each other's strengths, Ash had been the first one to follow, seemingly eager to hit things.

As his file was suggested, the man had proved to be an expert in close quarter combat—strong, fast, and agile. Though Dark had a couple of inches on the man, and considered himself to be a proficient fighter, he wondered if he would be able to take Ash on one-on-one, if it came to that.

More surprisingly, Ash had also proved himself to be a considerate sparring partner—careful not to hurt his teammates, and willing to teach them new moves—moves they all knew he'd worked years to learn.

Time and time again, in the last few days, Dark had had to remind himself of the man's unspeakable crime.

He raped a young woman.

Ash Gunner's presence might be easier to tolerate than Dark had feared, but he wasn't going to extend friendship to a man who was clearly hiding such a Hyde inside of him.

Dark realized he'd completely zoned out, had missed most of what had been said in the last few minutes. Across the table from him, Ash's brown eyes stared down at him, as if he could read Dark's mind.

"Want to know how the run went?" Slate asked, pointing his finger at the first set of pictures from the ones he'd spread out on the table. "I've never taken that many selfies in my life."

"I didn't even realize you knew that word," Griffin drawled.

"Asshole. I know many words."

Dark nodded. That morning, Slate had dressed up like a hobby jogger, in a red-and-black outfit with color-coordinated running shoes and a fanny pack. Dark had feared the vein in the man's temple would pop when he'd first seen the fanny pack. But, past that first moment of shock, Slate had taken on the role with gusto, taking hundreds of pictures of himself and the surrounding area over the course of the ten-mile run.

The pictures spread out in front of them now mapped out almost the entire neighborhood where Kvyat was renting his house. Dark glanced through from left to right.

Lots of big, ostentatious houses.

That, Dark had expected already. From what they'd read about him, Kvyat was not one to deny himself any luxuries. Then he realized there were dozens of pictures of one particular house.

"Are you serious? Is that Kvyat's chalet?" he asked.

Slate smiled broadly, the smile transforming his serious, gruff face. "I got lucky. There was a fucking Amazon delivery

van parked in front of the house, with the driver yelling into the intercom. I swear he must have yelled ‘package for Mr. Kvyat’ three or four times before the security team finally came over to meet him. Don’t worry. They didn’t notice me.”

“I guess even billionaires order from Amazon these days,” Rogue said in his relaxed Australian accent. He sounded almost disappointed.

“I’ll be damned,” Dark said. “Good job, Slate. I thought it would take us days to find him.”

“So this is the house. And these are two of the security team.”

“They look Russian.”

Griffin picked up the original folder they’d been working on. “Yup, here they are, the same guys, photographed at an event at the Hermitage Museum, in Saint Petersburg that Kvyat attended last year.”

“Were there others?”

“I only saw these two.”

“I’ll pull out the layout of the plot and the house,” Rogue said, his fingers flying on the laptop in front of him.

Moments later, the land register’s website appeared on the projector screen they’d installed along one wall. Dark imagined there’d be hell to pay with the landlord when they left, but that wasn’t his problem.

And then, with complete and apparent ease, Rogue logged on, gaining admin access to all properties in Gstaad.

“Won’t alarms be ringing in some office somewhere?” Slate asked.

Rogue rolled his eyes in a who-do-you-think-you’re-talking-to way. “This is a Swiss canton’s land register’s office, not the Pentagon.

The way Rogue said *not the Pentagon* made Dark wonder if the man had hacked into the Pentagon before.

“Even if they end up detecting the fake login—which they won’t—they’ll never know it was us. When we’re done looking at the things we’re interested in, I’ll make sure it spends some time clicking around at other things. Trust me.”

And it was hard not to trust him, when he seemed so confident.

Soon, they were staring at an image overlay of Kvyat’s property and the neighboring houses.

“The house doesn’t look that well-protected,” Ash said. It was the first thing he’d said all morning, and maybe that’s why everybody stared at him. “Look at those overhanging branches between him and his neighbor. They’d block the cameras, if they have them.”

“Who do those two houses belong to?” Dark asked. Ash was right. One of the best ways of getting to Kvyat might be by going through his neighbors.

“Forget about the house on the right,” Rogue said. “That belongs to a long-time Gstaad resident—bit of a hermit. Looks like he never leaves the house.”

“How the fuck did you find that out so fast?” Slate asked.

“And on the left?” Dark said.

“That’s a possibility. It’s a rental. I’ll find out who the place is rented to.”

“What about the people in the house with Kvyat? Anybody we could use?”

“Those two security guys will likely be loyal to him. But we can figure out if he’s hired anybody else,” Slate said. “Or maybe they like to drink and we could get to them that way. But it’s a risk.”

“I agree. We don’t want to alert them.”

“What about the cook? I was listening to old interviews he’s given, and he mentioned he always travels with his personal cook,” Rogue said.

“Must really like Russian food,” Slate piped up.

“Or he doesn’t trust easy,” Griffin said, shrugging his shoulders lazily. “He wouldn’t be the first oligarch to die under strange circumstances.”

You and your CIA friends would know.

“It’s an option,” Dark said cautiously.

“What about the housekeeper?” She was in one of the pictures, an older, ruddy, heavy-set woman with very fair skin.

“Forget her. She brought up Arseny and is now doing the same with his son, Nikolai Kvyat. I think we’ll find her loyalty unbreakable.”

“Well, there’s always the son,” Ash said through clenched teeth. He was only pointing out the obvious, but Dark’s stomach heaved at the thought of involving a twelve-year-old boy in something like this. Though of course, if they succeeded in their mission ... if they brought Arseny Kvyat down ... the boy’s life would change forever, no matter how much they tried to keep him out of things.

“Not necessarily the boy,” Rogue said. “I’ve seen their travel documents. They came into Switzerland with an American tutor.”

“A tutor?” That sounded promising.

“Alexia Miller. Thirty years old. If you give me a bit of time, I can find out more about her.”

“Do that. What about the wife?”

“Looks like she’s living in London now. They had a fallout a few months ago. May be why Kvyat is here.”

“We’re lucky, if so. I’ll bet the protection he has here is nothing compared to that of his place in Moscow,” Rogue said.

“He probably feels safe here,” Dark agreed, looking at the pictures. “This is Switzerland. Safest country in the world. And nobody knows him. He’s not even the richest person in town.”

It was a few minutes later that Rogue came up to him. “Could I speak to you in private for a minute, Dark?”



He followed Rogue to the sun deck. As soon as they were outside, Rogue lit up a cigarette, looking apologetic.

“I don’t smoke indoors,” he said quickly.

“It’s fine,” Dark said. He remembered some of the things he’d read in the man’s file. If cigarettes helped him keep his demons at bay, Dark wasn’t going to begrudge him that.

It was chilly out here. Dark stuck his hands in his pockets.

Rogue ran his hand along his hair, leaving it just as messy afterwards as it’d been before. Dark waited patiently until the man was done retying his ponytail.

“I’m going to investigate Arseny Kvyat.” His voice picked up speed. “And I understand what Thorne said, that it’s none of our business, that all we need to know is that he’s a problem and ... how did he put it ... *take care of it*. But I—I can’t do it. I thought I could, and I’ve tried to leave it be, but I ... I need to know if he’s truly as bad as Thorne says. I need to know we’re not being used.”

Dark opened his mouth to speak, but Rogue raised his hand, stopping him. “Let me finish. Please. So I’m going to investigate Kvyat and the Iranians, see what I find. I’m not asking for permission, but I didn’t want to do it behind your back. I will take full responsibility, though. If this comes back to bite my ass, I won’t involve you or the rest of the team. But as team lead, I thought you should know what I’m doing.”

He stopped and looked at Dark, his stone gray eyes steady.

And hell if Dark didn’t respect the hell out of the man at that moment.

He took a moment to regroup. It’d been a long time since he’d felt like part of a team.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“What?”

“I said, go ahead. Thorne will burst a nut if he hears of this, but I will stand behind you. I think we all need to know.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’m serious. Find out as much as you can about Kvyat and the Iranians. See what we’re up against. Just try not to leave any tracks.”

Rogue’s lips stretched into a smile. “I won’t.”

Neither of them said anything else until Rogue finished the cigarette. He ground the butt carefully beneath his boot, then picked it up and placed it in a baggie in his pocket.

“Smoking’s bad for your health,” Dark said lightly.

“You think this *job* is good for our health?”

Dark shrugged, and together they walked back inside to meet the others.



Alexia

Alexia was exhausted. But so was Nikolai. She could see it in his eyes, even though the boy hadn't uttered a single complaint.

He'd keep practicing his present perfect tenses until he was blue in the face, if that's what she asked, because he was so eager to please, and so afraid of anything else getting back to his father.

In the past, she'd tried to reassure him that the relationship between them was exactly that—*between them*—and that it didn't have anything to do with his father or anybody else from the household, but she could see the boy still wasn't convinced.

Give him time.

Most of the day, the two of them had free run of the house. They usually started off on the large island in the kitchen, doing some math together while Mrs. Babanin put away leftover breakfast items.

The first day, the woman had explained to her that Arseny Kvyat didn't do leftovers. Everything had to be cooked fresh for him. But he never came into the kitchen, so he didn't know how creatively leftovers could be engineered into a completely new food. Mrs. Babanin didn't like to throw anything out.

Usually, she offered Nikolai a small snack.

Then they began their slow excursion around the house, sitting down to work wherever Yelizaveta, the maid and Nikolai's nanny, wasn't cleaning. When she arrived in the living room, vacuum in hand, they left for the dining room, and when she followed them there, they often took a break and went for a swim in the huge, indoor swimming pool in the basement.

Sometimes, if the weather was nice, they sat out on the large deck. Nikolai would take off his socks and shoes and dangle his feet inside the jacuzzi, which was kept only just

below boiling, for some unfathomable reason. Alexia wished some of that heat could be shared with the rest of the house.

They avoided the upper floor, where the bedrooms were, since that was also where Kvyat's office was. The man spent most of the day in there, even having lunch brought inside for him—and when he did come out, he locked it carefully with a key he kept always on his person. Alexia knew that because she'd tried the door handle several times, hoping one day he'd forget to lock it.

Today, however, Nikolai was particularly restless. Maybe it was the topic in question—Alexia worked hard to make classes fun for the child, but there was nothing fun about the present perfect.

“Let's go out,” Alexia said suddenly.

“Out?” Nikolai asked, his eyes round.

“You said you always wanted to learn how to sled. I've seen several sleds outside, in the garage. So let's do it. Go put on your ski clothes and some warm boots.”

It would take the boy a few minutes to get ready. In the meantime, she went to speak to Kvyat's security team. She knew better than to take the son of a billionaire out on her own, even in Gstaad.

She took a deep breath. She didn't like the cold, dangerous vibes Kvyat's security men gave off, so she usually avoided them. It was lucky that they avoided her as well, most of the time acting like she wasn't even there.

Of course, maybe the reason she didn't like them was that their existence reminded her just how much she was playing with fire. If Ilya and Dmitri found out why she was really here, they were the kind of men who could kill her and make her body disappear.

She shook her head.

Sledding.

Focus on the sledding.

“Where do you want to go?” Ilya, the burliest of the two, all but snarled.

As long as she’d been here, Alexia hadn’t been able to figure out which one of them was the boss. Both men seemed, to her, to work in perfect tandem together.

“Not far,” Alexia said, squaring her shoulders. She knew just the right place—a slope that was steep enough to provide a challenge for Nikolai, but not so steep that he’d be frightened. “We can walk, or you can drive us. It will just be an hour or so. We’ll be back for lunch.”

The one called Dmitri spoke for the first time.

“And this is part of ... English class?” he said, in his thick Russian accent.

“It is,” she said. And she might be stretching the truth a little bit by saying they needed to go out, but these two weren’t going to show her how to teach. She’d been teaching kids for a decade now, since her sophomore year in college. “If you don’t like it, I can speak with Mr. Kvyat—“

“*Nyet*,” Ilya said quickly.

Alexia almost smiled. She’d known already that they wouldn’t want to bother their boss.

They spoke amongst themselves in Russian for a minute, while Alexia waited patiently.

“Okay,” Dmitri finally said. “I will take you. Ilya will stay here. But only one hour.”

“One hour,” Alexia nodded. “Thank you.”



Alexia lowered her eyes to her watch. It had been more than an hour already, but Dmitri hadn’t said anything yet.

Maybe he has a little heart, after all.

At first, she'd found it really unnerving, this feeling of being watched by Kvyat's security team. But, just a few weeks into the job, she'd learned to live with it. Even when she couldn't see anyone, she knew Dmitri or Ilya were always somewhere nearby, watching.

And it should have made her feel safe, but she was starting to know her boss, and knew the guards were there as much to keep bad things out as to keep her and Nikolai in. Or at least, monitored every minute of the day.

She took a deep breath and reminded herself of the long game. There was a reason she was here. She just had to be patient.

She turned to look at Nikolai, who was reaching the top of the highest slope. He'd picked up sledding quickly—not surprisingly, perhaps, for a kid who'd had private lessons since the day he was born. Tennis, swimming, fencing, skiing ... if Alexia could think it, Nikolai had done it. At least, all individual activities. His father didn't seem inclined to let Nikolai play with others, which was maybe why the boy had never been sledding.

Alexia, on the other hand, had grown up sledding. Her family didn't have money for skiing, not that there were so many places one could ski in upstate New York, but sledding, on the other hand ... she and her brother had become experts at it.

Thinking of Rob brought a fresh pang of pain, much as it had every time she thought of him since his death, four years ago. But at least now she was doing something about it.

“Are you coming up, Alexia?” Nikolai shouted, his face pink from exertion, his light gray eyes bright with excitement. She was amazed at how much the little boy looked like the pictures of his mother she'd seen all over the house.

“I'm going to take a break, Nikolai, but I'll watch you from here.”

Alexia was exhausted. They'd been up and down the slope ten times, and the boy gave no signs that he was even remotely

tired. But Alexia was exhausted. Exhausted, and tremendously pleased to see him enjoying himself so much.

She looked behind her, realized Dmitri had moved towards the black hybrid Porsche Cayenne. He was on the phone, and for once not looking at them.

Never mind him.

“Are you watching?” Nikolai asked.

“I’m watching,” Alexia confirmed. It was good to know some things remained constant with children all over the world. Whether in upstate New York or Gstaad, all children wanted to be watched.

Nikolai put both feet on either side of the sled and lifted the front, as she’d shown him. Then he pushed off.

He picked up speed, slowly at first, then faster and faster, and Alexia realized the boy was leaning to the right, veering away from the course they’d traced together and towards the steeper part of the slope.

Lean back.

Slow down.

But Nikolai apparently had a different idea. His slim body leaned forward on the sled as he could go, willing it to go faster.

And then disaster struck. The sled hit a hidden rock and flew up into the air.

Alexia’s stomach flip-flopped. Her hand went up to her mouth.

“Nikolai!”

The boy miraculously kept his seat on the sled, but now he was going fast—way too fast, and heading towards the road below, where there were cars and a truck approaching.

“No!”

Alexia ran to intercept the sled, even though she knew she’d never be able to make it in time. And then she realized

there was a man standing there—a man who hadn't been there seconds earlier.

Her first instinct was to shout at him, too. Because if the sled hit him at this speed, it could hurt him. But he was also the only thing standing between Nikolai and the truck.

The man stood very still. And there was something about the way he was standing, about the way he was staring at the boy, that made her think he knew this, too.

And then there was no more time for thinking, because although the world seemed to have gone on slow motion for an instant, things suddenly sped up again.

The sled was about to strike the man, and Alexia wanted to close her eyes, but couldn't. Then, suddenly, when the collision was imminent, the man moved—fast. He lunged, plucking the boy off the sled. And even though he counteracted the boy's momentum with his own mass, there was still too much momentum, and the man toppled, flipping onto his back at the last instant so his body would be the one to hit the ground first.

Without the boy's weight, the sled careened sideways, slamming into a tree just inches away from the road.

Alexia's heart thumped. She heard a sound a lot like a whimper, and it took her an instant to realize she was the one making the sound.

Nikolai.

Go to Nikolai.

She raced clumsily across the snow, towards the figures lying so still on the ground—dropped onto her knees beside the man, who still cradled Nikolai against his body.

“Nikolai? Nikolai!” she shouted.

The man scrunched his eyes at the sound of her voice, but she didn't care if she was shouting in his ear.

And then Nikolai sat up in the man's arms—and laughed.

“That was amazing! That was—“ He stopped as he saw Alexia’s stricken expression, then turned to the man. Stopped laughing and visibly shriveled up, making himself smaller, awaiting punishment.

Alexia felt a fresh burst of hatred for Arseny Kvyat—a man who’d taught his son to fear contact and to expect punishment.

The boy had almost died, and he thought they were going to punish him, when all she wanted to do was bring him into her arms and squeeze.

“Are you okay?” the man asked calmly in a deep, low voice. Alexia finally looked up at his face—and felt something catch inside her. He was, if not the most handsome man she’d ever seen, certainly one of the most striking, with penetrating, light blue eyes, a hard, square jaw, and thick lips that looked—

Jesus.

Get a grip, Alexia.

You’re just feeling grateful because he saved Nikolai’s life.

That’s all.

The man loosened his hold now, his arms still supporting Nikolai, but leaving him some room to move. The boy moved his arms and legs, scooting over until he was sitting on the snow next to the man.

“Take it easy,” the man said. “Does anything hurt?”

Nikolai shook his head. He still looked afraid, but maybe less so than he had moments earlier.

Not because of you.

Alexia forcefully relaxed her facial muscles so the boy wouldn’t misinterpret the fear in her expression for anger.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked, running her hands along the boy’s arms. “You scared me, Nikolai.”

“I’m fine,” the boy said, but didn’t stop her from fussing over him. “I’m sorry,” he said, looking at the man.

“It was an accident, is all,” the man said, sitting up. “Everything’s okay.”

He seemed remarkably calm for someone who’d almost been run over moments earlier. Alexia wondered if things had happened as she remembered them, or if she’d made it up—but no, that image in her mind, of the man timing it just right and then plucking the boy off the sled ... it’d really happened.

A real-life hero.

“Thank you,” she finally said.

The man shrugged—and winced, staring down at his left shoulder.

Shit, is he hurt?

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” he said, in a tone that brooked no argument. But he didn’t try to move his shoulder again.

“You sure you’re okay, buddy?” he asked Nikolai, and she liked that his deep, gruff voice was softer when he spoke to the boy.

She stifled a smile. She was pretty sure Nikolai had never been called *buddy* before.

But Nikolai took it in stride and nodded once again.

The man stood up—and he was huge, over six feet tall, and muscled all over ... still on her knees, Alexia realized she was staring right at the crotch of his jeans, and looked quickly away.

Way to make a great first impression.

He would remember her as the crotch-gazer.

Why does it matter what he thinks of you?

You’re never going to see him again.

She stood up, leaving an imprint on the snow where her knees had been.

She was going to offer Nikolai a hand up, but the man beat her to it, grabbing the boy’s small gloved hand in his own huge

hand and pulling him up easily, until the boy was standing, not letting go of him until he was sure Nikolai could stand on his own.

“That was pretty fast,” Nikolai said. Nikolai might not have all the words in English, but Alexia knew what he meant.

“It *was* pretty fast,” she agreed, ruffling his hair. “Please don’t do that again.”

She felt somebody staring at her, and looked up, and up—he was huge, taller even than he’d seemed when she was on her knees, more than a head taller than her—to meet the man’s gaze. His eyes were the penetrating blue of a mountain lake in summer.

He hesitated for an instant, then finally seemed to make up his mind. Those alluring, masculine lips opened, and he spoke.

“I’m Luke,” he said, offering her his right hand. “Luke Dark.”

Alexia filed the name away. It suited him. There seemed to be a toughness to him, a kind of darkness. But there was light as well. And she’d spent enough time recently with a truly dark man, to not recognize the difference. Dark had shown nothing but kindness to the boy.

“Alexia Miller. And this is Nikolai,” she replied, knowing better than to share the boy’s last name. “Thank you, Mr. Dark,” she said, again. Because it didn’t seem like she could say it too many times.

He didn’t try to shrug this time, but nodded. “I prefer just Dark.”

“Dark.”

“I’m glad you’re okay, Nikolai,” he said.

The boy blushed, was about to say something else, when suddenly Dmitri ran up. He shouted something in Russian, and she didn’t need to understand the language in order to understand the tone—or the way Nikolai froze, once again, like a deer in headlights.

Alexia positioned her body subtly between Dmitri and the boy. She didn't think the security man would dare touch Nikolai in anger, but she wasn't about to risk it.

"What the hell happened?" Dmitri asked her.

"We almost had an accident, but this man helped us," Alexia said.

Dark stood by—he'd moved closer to her shoulder, without her noticing, and though his expression was neutral, his body was tense. But he didn't say anything, and for that Alexia was glad.

"Are you okay, Nikolai?" Dmitri finally asked, his voice gruff.

The boy nodded quickly. "I lost the sled," he said.

Dmitri nodded. "Come. I see it. Let's go find it, and I'll drive you home." They headed off together, for a moment forgetting about her.

She knew she had to go, but inexplicably found herself wanting to look into his eyes a little while longer.

"I have to go," she finally said, unnecessarily.

"You're American," he said.

She smiled. "So are you." She'd been able to hear it in his accent. From somewhere in the mid-West, most likely.

"I just arrived in Gstaad a couple of days ago," he said.

"It's a beautiful town," she said, noncommittally. And it was. The bits she'd been able to see, at least. She was allowed to go out in the evenings, once Nikolai was done for the day, but most days she was too tired to go out.

"The boy. He's ... you're ..."

"Not my son," she said, laughing. She could see where his thoughts were going. "I'm his tutor. I teach him English and math."

Dark nodded. He looked behind her, in the direction in which Dmitri and Nikolai had gone, and she realized they

must be back by the car. “They’re waiting for you,” Dark said. There was a pregnant pause, and then he spoke again. “Can I see you again?”

She looked at the car, and at Dmitri, who was glaring at her. She really had to get going. “I’m working.”

“Later, then.”

And it’d been so long since she’d done something for herself—truly for herself, but she found herself nodding. “I’d like that.”

“I don’t know any place in town,” he said. “Name somewhere.”

She didn’t know what kind of place he had in mind, if he meant a restaurant, or somewhere else, somewhere less formal.

Less formal is better.

“The Starbucks,” she said. “There’s only one. You can’t miss it. I can be there tomorrow night at eight.”



Dark

Fuck.

That was unexpected.

Dark had been shadowing the pair to see where they went, but hadn't been planning on making contact. In fact, they'd agreed Rogue would be the one to make contact with the American tutor—because he was closer to her in age and because, with his longer hair and slimmer build, he looked a bit like one of her college boyfriends.

Dark shook his head, thinking back to when Rogue had first projected the woman's face on the screen. He'd thought her pretty and fresh-faced, then. And it'd felt wrong to spy on a woman who hadn't done anything wrong, but they needed an in, so Rogue had gone digging. It'd taken him less than ten minutes to find his way into her old Instagram account—which hadn't been logged into in the last few years—and into those of her friends. That's how they'd found the ex-boyfriend. Nothing was private in today's day and age, at least not when someone like Rogue was looking for it.

Pretty and fresh-faced.

He wanted to laugh, now. How could he have been so wrong. In person, even terrified out of her mind as she'd been by the incident with the sled, Alexia was nothing short of magnetic, with her heart-shaped face, framed by a cloud of auburn hair.

And her eyes ... her eyes were the most beautiful green he'd ever seen—green with flecks of gold. Looking into those eyes, he'd had this impression of ... infinity.

And he could see, also, a kind of goodness in her, in the way she'd spoken to the boy, and the way she'd spoken to him.

And fuck, he should have left her alone.

He'd been tempted to leave her alone.

Fuck the mission.

Fuck everything.

But it wasn't just about his own freedom anymore, even though he wanted it so badly he could taste it. He had a responsibility to these men, now. They had to complete their mission, and getting to know Alexia Miller could be the key to that.

So he'd asked her out, telling himself it was the most logical solution.

But you also wanted to do it.

You want to see her again.

Fuck, yes.

If he were honest with himself, after meeting her, there was no way he could have let any of the other guys get close to her.

He drove using his right hand, glad that this was an automatic car. He'd learned to drive manual, since those had sometimes been the only vehicles available in the countries where he'd been stationed, but he much preferred automatic cars. He rested his other hand on his knee. His left shoulder was killing him.

He parked the car on the street and walked up the short driveway to the house.

Everyone, except for Griffin, was in the basement. Rogue was typing away furiously on one of his laptops, while Slate pored over some documents. Ash was hunched over his travel chess pieces, seemingly unconcerned by the fact that he was playing against himself.

"Change of plans," Dark announced. No sense in delaying the inevitable.

"What happened?"

Does it show on my face?

"You've got blood on the back of your hand," Slate pointed out.

Dark looked where the man pointed. He must have scratched his hand against the sled when he'd plucked the boy off.

"And you're holding yourself funny," Slate continued. "Ribs, or shoulder?"

Dark reminded himself the man was a medic, not psychic.

"Left shoulder. But never mind that." He sighed. "I made contact with Alexia Miller."

"I thought Rogue was going to do that?" Ash asked slowly, without looking up from his game.

"Yes. This wasn't planned. Kvyat's kid got in some trouble with his sled ..."

"And you swooped in like a knight in shining armor to save the day?" Rogue asked, arching an eyebrow.

Dark held his stare. He wasn't going to fucking apologize. "I've made contact, and that's what matters. I'm meeting up for coffee with her tomorrow night."

"Coffee?" Again, that eyebrow.

"Coffee."

"Where's Griffin?" Dark asked, just as the man walked into the room.

"I'm here," he said. He looked at the empty chair beside his brother, then pointedly walked around to the other side of the table tennis table, even though there were no chairs there and he had to perch on the edge.

The silence lengthened, the seconds stretching uncomfortably, making the room felt smaller than it was.

And then Slate stood up abruptly. "When the fuck are you going to forgive me?" he growled, gripping the edge of the table.

"You really want to do this now?" Griffin asked, his voice deceptively soft.

“It’s not like they can’t see how you treat me,” Slate said angrily. “Answer the damn question. When are you going to forgive me?”

On the other side of the table, Griffin stood up to his full height, which was still a couple of inches shorter than his brother.

“For throwing away your life after I worked so hard to give it back to you?” he snarled.

His words were like a needle, deflating Slate’s anger, leaving only intense sadness behind.

“You’re an asshole, Griffin. You might have the highest IQ in this room, but you don’t understand anything,” Slate said. “Sorry, guys, I need a bit of fresh air. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Rogue and Ash exchanged a look.

“I’m going upstairs to grab some food,” Rogue said.

“Me too.”

Moments later, Dark and Griffin were alone in the room. Griffin stared at him defiantly, as if daring him to say something.

Dark cleared his throat. The bad blood between the brothers obviously had something to do with the redacted part of their files. Something had happened to Slate in Kabul. Whatever it was, though, he couldn’t let it fester, not when the team was so new and trust was still so shaky between them.

“I’m not going to claim to understand what’s going on between you and your brother,” Dark began.

“You’ve probably read about it in our files.”

“Some. But most of it was heavily redacted.”

Griffin snorted. “Yeah. It would be.”

“I can fill in some of the blanks. I know whatever you did that landed you in prison happened around the time your brother was imprisoned in Kabul. That’s quite a coincidence.”

“Is there a question there, Dark?”

“Tell me what happened. Help me understand. Hell, maybe you’ll feel better if you talk about it,” Dark said gently.

“Confession is good for the soul, right?” Griffin said, his green eyes mocking. “I’ll place my bets that you were a boy scout. Yet you look like you’ve also seen the inside of a prison. What did you do? You didn’t sell enough chocolate bars?”

Dark took a deep breath. He knew Griffin was looking to rile him up.

Not going to work.

“Yeah, that’s why I ended up in Fort Leavenworth for twenty years,” Dark said calmly. “We all have our darkness, Griffin. But I can’t let yours affect the team. You understand that, right?”

A look of intense shame crossed Griffin’s expression.

“Come on. Help me understand.”

“When Slate was captured, I... everything I thought I knew about myself changed from one day to the next. I’d always put my country first. *Always*. And so had he. We didn’t know that much about each other’s roles, but hell, we were brothers. And when I saw his name on that list... and then realized we were going to leave them to rot in that hell-hole... something just snapped inside of me.”

“So you took it upon yourself to rescue him.”

Griffin looked straight into his eyes.

“You might as well know.” He took a deep, shaky breath. “I won’t excuse my actions. There was a particular insurgent everybody was looking for at the time. I purposefully made up intel placing him in that prison, then made it seem like there was additional intel that I could only confirm on the ground. So when a SEAL team was sent in to capture the insurgent, I was there as well.”

“And your brother was rescued.”

“What was left of him, yes. Him and two other men. The only ones left alive. They’d been tortured to within an inch of their lives.” He ran his hand through his short hair. “Fuck. It was a miracle nobody died during the extraction. I could have ended up killing all those men.”

“And then they discovered what you’d done?”

Griffin shrugged. “I hadn’t covered my tracks particularly well. I just wanted to get my brother out.”

“So you went to prison.”

Griffin nodded, his green eyes harsh. “I’d been in prison for a few years, minding my own business, when Thorne came. He offered me my freedom. I thought it was my deal to make. But it wasn’t. Slate also had to give up his life, join the team, for me to get mine back.”

“And that’s why you’re angry with him.” The pieces of the puzzle finally clicked into place. “You think he should have left you in prison.”

“Yes. Because that’s where I deserved to be.”

“But you didn’t leave him in prison.”

Griffin waved Dark’s comment away. “It’s not comparable. I was in the United States, in prison for a crime I committed. My brother was being tortured in an Afghan prison. So I’m sorry if you feel you can’t trust me, Dark. I deserve to be in prison.”

Dark couldn’t completely stifle a shaky laugh.

“So do the rest of us, Griffin, so do the rest of us. I can’t give you the absolution you’re looking for. But I can tell you, this hatred you’re holding on to, won’t help you or your brother. Right or wrong, you’ve been given a new chance to reconnect, and you’re squandering it by holding on to this anger.”

Griffin stared at him, but the stare was slightly less hostile than it’d been earlier.

“Yeah. We’ll see. Maybe next time you can tell me what you did, Dark.”

Dark swallowed, hard.

“Maybe,” he said noncommittally. But he already knew he didn’t want these men to see him for what he really was.

A killer.

“In the meantime, you should let my brother take a look at that shoulder. You look like shit.”



Alexia

That night, she dreamed of Rob.

This wasn't unusual, in and of itself. The therapist she'd seen back at home, in the months after they'd buried Rob, had said dreaming of loved ones who were gone was the mind's natural response to grief, and a chance to hold on to the good memories.

But Alexia's dreams weren't those kinds of dreams.

In her dreams, people died. Most often Rob but, sometimes, she was the one standing on the bridge, unable to move out of the way as the yellow Lamborghini accelerated towards her, the distinctive, triangular headlights growing bigger and bigger, like a bat's wings, before the car hit her, her body flying up into the air before coming back down and disappearing under the car's tires.

Rob had had a closed casket burial. Her parents had never let her see his body. But she'd read the police report, and that had given her more than enough material to imagine what her brother's death had been like.

Her little brother.

Technically, Rob was her half-brother on her mom's side, but he'd been her brother in all ways that mattered since the day he'd been born, when he'd first looked at her with those big blue eyes, his hand tightening around her finger.

She'd been four at the time, but she remembered. She remembered the way he'd changed from a baby into an unsteady toddler, the way he'd reached for her hand as he took those first steps. The way they'd always been there for each other.

Except you weren't there for him.

Not at the end.

He'd only just turned twenty-one and was starting to spread his wings. He'd wanted to be an artist, so the chance of

a summer internship in the Hermitage museum in Saint Petersburg had been too good to pass up.

Alexia hadn't been there for him. She'd been busy studying for her master's degree, hadn't even found the time to drive him to the airport. One month later, he was dead, his body showing clear signs of having been hit and dragged by a low sports car.

A car that, in one initial report, was traced back to Arseny Kvyat.

Then the report disappeared, just like the car, until it seemed neither had ever existed.

Nothing was ever done, and Alexia had watched this slowly destroy her mother and stepfather. They'd never fully resigned themselves to not getting justice for their son, had promised to fight for him for the rest of their lives.

Which turned out to be a short time, since they'd both died in a car crash a year later.

Alexia would never know for sure what happened to them. But she *knew* what had happened to Rob—she knew it, and she hated Kvyat for the way he'd refused to take responsibility for it.

She'd finished her master's degree and had taken a role as a teacher in a prestigious prep school in New Hampshire. She'd resigned herself to the loss of her brother and her parents, resigned herself to never knowing justice, until, six months earlier, an anonymous message had appeared in her school email account, with a subject line that had caught her attention.

What if we could bring him down?

There had been no message inside, only a job posting for a private tutor role for an uber-wealthy family of Russian origin traveling in Europe during the winter.

The next day, she got another email. Again, same subject line, but this one contained a phone number as well. And that same number had called her, at night, when she was alone in her apartment, a mechanical, distorted voice that seemed to

know a lot about her, and even more about Arseny Kvyat. A voice that claimed to want justice as much as she did, and that they could take advantage of the fact that she and her brother had different last names to get this justice—that, together, they could expose Kvyat's crimes.

After much deliberation, she'd decided to apply for the role, never expecting that she would end up being offered the job.

Her mystery contact was clear. All she had to do was observe, and report back on anything of interest, any shady deal she witnessed, any strange happenings. He would take care of everything else after that, and make sure Kvyat paid.

What Alexia hadn't expected was that she'd come to care for the boy as much as she had in just a short few weeks, but then Nikolai was as different from Arseny as night from day.

As for Arseny, he was still the same monster that had populated her nightmares for years, but he was also more real to her, now. Loud and boisterous, yet fearful. Eager to be seen, yet locked up in his office all day, afraid to go out without his security team. Alone now, after his third wife—Nikolai's mother—had moved to London and served him divorce papers.

Had Kvyat been anyone else, Alexia would have felt sorry for him—or as sorry as one could feel for someone who single-handedly polished off a huge jar of caviar every night, often feeding the leftovers to his cat—but to think that the man she had breakfast with every morning was the same man who'd run Rob over, leaving his dead body on the road like it was trash ... it was almost more than she could bear, and she was glad she wasn't seeing that much of him, though of course that also defeated the point of her being here at all.

At least Kvyat hadn't tried to come on to her. Probably because, although she was two decades younger than him, Alexia was a head shorter and a good twenty pounds heavier than any woman he'd dated in the last twenty years. Maybe also because he was still in love with his estranged wife. In any case, that was a good thing, since she was pretty sure

puking all over her employer would have ended her job quickly.

Alexia sobbed, clutching the duvet tighter around her body, unable to stop the shivers, which this time around had nothing to do with the temperature of the bedroom.

It wasn't yet five in the morning but she knew she wouldn't be getting any more sleep, so she bundled herself in her workout clothes and headed to the gym at the end of the hallway—one of the perks of staying in one of the downstairs rooms.

The home gym was incredible, better than anything she could ever have imagined, and she considered herself a pretty imaginative person. One entire wall was lined with top-of-the-line cardio equipment, including a ski erg, a Peloton spinning bike, and a strangely shaped rowing machine. There was also a large screen that she imagined could be used to stream live classes, though she'd never seen anyone use it, and a larger area with a CrossFit training rig.

Alexia didn't need all that—the treadmill was enough for her. She wasn't a particularly strong runner. Half an hour later, she slowed the machine down and stood on trembling legs, breathing hard—having momentarily succeeded in chasing her demons away.

She stepped off the machine and put her sweatshirt back on, then made her way back to her room, where she showered and sat down to write out her lesson plan for the day. Regardless of what she might think of Arseny, she took her job teaching Nikolai seriously.

And as she wrote, in the back of her mind, was the awareness that once the day was over, she'd be meeting Luke Dark again. And for the first time in years, the flutter in her chest wasn't pain but rather excitement. She was looking forward to seeing him again.

And though a voice inside of her told her she should be thinking of Rob, not cavorting with a man she knew nothing about, another voice told her she could give herself this moment, if nothing else.



Dark

“Thorne was right,” Rogue said.

Dark took in the pallor of the man’s face. He looked exhausted, and Dark was pretty sure the clothes he was wearing were the same ones he’d been wearing the night before, when they all went to bed and left him there, claiming he needed *just a few more minutes*.

“You never made it to bed, did you?” Dark asked.

Rogue gave a by now characteristic never-mind-that wave with his hand.

Griffin and Slate walked in, bringing cups of coffee for everyone. Dark decided to take that as a good sign, that they’d made coffee together. He knew heavy things like what the two men had gone through couldn’t be fixed from one day to the next, but if they’d at least reached an *entente cordiale*, that was a start.

“You look exhausted, Rogue,” Ash said. Dark hadn’t even noticed him walk in.

“Whereas you all look fresh-faced and rested, right?”

“Fresh-faced?” Slate laughed. “You’re going to give us ideas if you say that.”

“Ideas?”

“Yeah, you know. You swing for that team, Rogue?”

Rogue’s hands clenched into fists. “I don’t, but what if I did? Would it be a problem?”

Slate raises his hands. “Relax. I was just kidding. It wouldn’t worry me none.”

“It wouldn’t worry any of us,” Dark said.

Rogue held Slate’s gaze for a few seconds longer. “Sorry,” he finally said, his shoulders relaxing. “My sister’s married to a woman. I’m sensitive about the topic.”

Jesus, there were minefields everywhere, with these guys.

It was barely eight a.m. and Dark already had a killer of a headache.

“Just tell us what you found, Rogue.”

Rogue nodded, clicked twice until the image appeared on the large screen.

“I had to dig around all night, but I managed to identify and crack the encrypted comms between Kvyat and the Iranians. It’s worse than we thought. They’re talking about exchanging something they refer to as *the masterpiece*.”

“The masterpiece?”

“It’s not just vague conversations. They’re scheduling a time to meet.”

“Here?” Dark asked. “Shit. Can you get Thorne on the secure line?”

Rogue nodded, clicked away. A few seconds later, Thorne appeared on the screen.

“I see you’re all still alive,” he said dryly.

“Good to know we have your vote of confidence, Thorne,” Dark said. “We found something. Kvyat is looking for a time to meet with the Iranians. They’re going to exchange something they refer to as *the masterpiece*. Does that ring any bells?”

“Who told you that?” Thorne asked coldly.

“I traced and cracked their private communications,” Rogue said.

There was silence on the line, Thorne’s face so still on the screen, it might have been a frozen image. Then he exploded. “Did I ask you to do that? Did I tell you to act as private investigators? I thought I made myself clear. You lot are enforcers. I tell you to take someone down, you do it. No questions asked. No research needed,” he spat out.

Blunt instruments.

Dark sighed. It was what they'd agreed to.

But it's not that easy ... nothing is ever that easy.

Thorne's sharp voice cut into his thoughts. "You're not Ethan *fucking* Hunt. Your job is simply to take Kvyat down."

Silence stretched in the room. Four pairs of eyes looked at Dark. He realized he had a choice. He could still stay silent. Or ... *not*.

"No," he said.

"No?" Thorne sounded incredulous.

"If all you wanted was Kvyat dead, you could have hired a sniper." He pointed at the surrounding room. "You certainly have the resources. You didn't do it, because you wanted something else. You wanted subtle. You wanted creative. You wanted *us* on it. And you knew we were going to look into this, Thorne. So don't bullshit me now."

Thorne's expression remained frozen for an instant, then relaxed, his lips stretching into something that almost looked like a smile.

"I see. So you want to talk about this *masterpiece*, then."

"Did you know about this?"

Thorne nodded. "We did. But we've had a team of senior analysts working on this for months. I'm surprised you were able to find this out." He paused for a second. "We think the word refers to the plans for an experimental nuclear reactor of Russian origin. I don't have to explain to you gentlemen how dangerous that would be in the hands of the Iranians."

"And you didn't tell us..."

"I didn't tell you because it wasn't relevant."

"Iran has been stockpiling enriched uranium for years, without any credible civilian justification, exceeding all international rules and limitations," Griffin said.

"So take Kvyat down, and solve the problem. Have I made myself clear, gentlemen?"

Again, everybody deferred to Dark for the answer.

“Crystal clear, Thorne.”



Alexia

Candlelight glimmered between them, making Dark's blue eyes appear even brighter.

They'd moved on from the Starbucks to San Rocco, a little Italian restaurant right around the corner. Although on the outside it looked like your typical Swiss chalet, walking inside the restaurant was like stepping into Venice, minus the canals. There were gondolas, chandeliers, and lots and lots of candles.

"I didn't realize this place would be so ..." Dark paused, as if looking for the right word.

"Romantic?" she finished, laughing.

Dark color filled his cheeks.

"I guess." He shrugged. "I asked around, and the pizzas are supposedly amazing. I don't want you to think I ..."

"I'm not thinking anything. I'm waiting for my pizza."

"Okay. Okay. Good."

Alexia sipped her red wine, taking a moment to study him. He'd changed into dark blue jeans and a casual white shirt that looked expensive and fit him like a glove, the sleeves rolled up to reveal strong, thick forearms. She'd been sneaking glances at his forearms and at those hard, rugged hands ever since they sat down, and each time she looked, it seemed to her the temperature in the room went up by a few degrees.

"Do you live nearby?" he asked.

"Yes. In one of the houses by the telecabine." She paused. "It's not mine. I'm staying with my employer," she finished. For some reason she couldn't explain, she didn't want Dark to think she was a trust fund baby. Not that she looked like a trust fund baby.

"The boy I met?"

Alexia nodded, took another sip of her wine. She needed to stop doing that, or she'd be drunk before the food came.

“He’s not in school?”

She shook her head. “The family is in Gstaad for the winter. That’s why they hired me. I was teaching at a prep school in New Hampshire, and I thought this would be a new experience,” she finished vaguely. Although it was all technically true, something about the way she was skating around the truth didn’t feel right.

“He seemed like a nice kid,” Dark said vaguely.

“He is. He’s very different from—“

Dark’s eyebrow came up. “From ...”

“Just different,” she finished lamely, relieved when he didn’t ask any more questions.

The waiter came back with a wooden board laden with antipasti—black and green olives, ham, salami, and several cheeses of dubious color.

“Not a fan of blue cheese, I take it?” Dark asked, looking amused.

“I prefer my food when it doesn’t have stuff living inside it,” she said.

“Have the ham. I’ll eat the cheese. I’m sure I’ve eaten worse things.”

Alexia hesitated for an instant. “What do you do, exactly? When you’re not saving little kids on sleds, I mean.”

“I’m a writer. For television.”

She dropped the piece of ham she was trying to stab with her fork.

She didn’t know what he’d expected him to say, but it wasn’t that.

“Really?”

He nodded. “Why? I don’t look like a writer?”

“Ah, no, that’s not ...” She stopped, suddenly, stared straight into his piercing blue eyes. Decided to come clean.

“Actually, you don’t.” She raised a finger. “You look really fit, for one.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Really fit. Not that I’ve been looking. But I couldn’t help but notice ...” She waved vaguely towards his front, as if he would obviously know what she meant.

“Okay ...” he said gamely. “Anything else?”

She pulled up a second finger. “You don’t look at the room like a writer. You chose the seat by the wall, and ever since we sat down, you’ve looked up every time the door has opened. So, either I’m really uninteresting, or—“

“I’m sorry,” he said, looking contrite. “I might have been distracted by the door, but I don’t want to give you the impression I don’t want to be here with you.”

Her third finger went up. “Third, you said you’ve eaten worse things.” Her nose wrinkled. “I don’t see where you could have eaten something worse than that,” she finished, in a hushed tone, so the waiter wouldn’t hear.

Dark stared at her for a moment, before his harsh expression softened and he cracked a smile. “I didn’t always write for television,” he admitted. “I was in the Army. But that was a long time ago. The staring at the door thing is a habit that’s hard to break.”

“The US Army?” she asked, wide-eyed.

Dark nodded. “It was a long time ago, as I said. Now, why don’t you tell me a bit about yourself?”

“Uh, there isn’t that much to say. I’m probably the most boring person you’re likely to meet in Gstaad.”

“I doubt that very much.”

Something shone in his eyes, and it felt a lot like ... appreciation. It’d been a long time since she’d been looked at this way—maybe never. And though his eyes stayed on her face, she could see how much he wanted to look down, and she was suddenly glad she’d taken the time to change into her favorite outfit, a black silk blouse and a pair of tailored black

pants that highlighted her curves and made her waist look smaller than it really was.



Dark

Dark was feeling extremely proud of himself. He'd managed to keep his eyes on Alexia's face all through the appetizer, when everything inside him was calling to him to take another look at her breasts.

Then the pizza came.

He watched Alexia fold her slice in half, like a pro, and take a healthy bite. As she chewed and swallowed, she made a little sound of appreciation that was somewhere between a whimper and a moan.

Whatever it was, it wasn't helping him relax.

Moments later, her tongue came out to lick a spot of tomato sauce off her lips.

And fuck if he didn't want to do that for her.

Fuck if he didn't want to *be* the tomato sauce, to learn what those rosy lips of hers tasted like.

His own slice lay limp in his hand—and it might be the only thing that was limp, because his cock was certainly standing at attention. Dark was glad for the table between them, so she couldn't see.

Her beautiful green eyes caught his across the pie. She smiled, looking half-embarrassed.

“This is really good. Almost as good as the pizza back in New York. I've really missed it.”

“Is the food not good at your employer's place?” Dark was careful not to use Kvyat's name, since she hadn't mentioned it.

She seemed cautious with details about her employer's family, and Dark appreciated that. She wasn't naïve—she understood she was working for an uber-wealthy family.

But there was something else. Dark could tell Alexia was hiding something. When she'd spoken of the job, saying she'd taken it looking for a new experience, he'd sensed she wasn't

telling the complete truth. But he was pretty good about gaging people, and whatever she was hiding seemed ... personal ... in nature.

Maybe she's running from a bad breakup.

He was determined to find out.

“The food’s okay,” she said, taking another bite. But some of the light had gone out of her eyes, as if the thought of her job—or something about it—bothered her.

She swallowed, then spoke again. “The food’s very good. They have a private chef. It’s just too rich, too ... luxurious, I guess, for my taste.” She gave a little self-deprecating laugh. “That probably sounds ridiculous, right?”

“Not ridiculous at all,” Dark said, taking a bite out of his own slice. “But it *is* interesting. Most people in your place would savor these luxuries. I imagine it’s one of the perks of your job. And yet, you don’t seem impressed.”

Alexia shrugged. “I’m impressed by other things.”

And though he had no right to them, he found himself wanting to know about those things.

“Like what?”

“People who work to make their world a better place.”

Her answer took the wind out of his sails.

He’d tried to be that man, once—the kind of man who strove to make a positive impact on the world and the people around him.

Then Syria happened.

And now, he was so far from that. Like day and night.

He heard Thorne’s voice in his head.

You’re a blunt instrument.

It was a good reminder that he shouldn’t get close to her, no matter what, but Alexia was looking at him like ... like he might still be that person. And he realized her impression of

him was colored by the risk he'd taken to save the boy. She didn't know how calculated that risk had been.

She didn't know he was poison.

"So," she said. "Tell me a bit more about yourself. What's it like, to write for television?"

In the days before they'd left for Gstaad, Dark had prepared for precisely this question. They all had. And he'd been trained in the art of deception. He knew how much detail to add to make the lie credible and engaging. But he kept the answer as short as possible, because it felt shitty to lie to her.

As keen an observer as she'd shown herself to be earlier, Alexia didn't seem aware that he was lying. She listened eagerly and seemed genuinely interested in learning more about him.

The next time he took a bite from his pizza, he tasted chalk—the taste of his deception.

"Are you okay?" Alexia asked.

She seemed concerned for him, which made him feel even worse. Dark shrugged, forgetting his bruised shoulder, then made things worse by wincing.

"You're hurt," she said, her green eyes widening.

Damn, those flecks of gold.

Her hand grazed his arm across the table, then pulled back. He felt the loss keenly and steeled himself against it. He couldn't afford to feel this.

"I'm okay. It's just a bruise."

When they finished their pizza, the waiter came around, offering them all the typical Italian desserts, along with brownie and apple pie.

His earlier lies still beat heavy against Dark's heart. The word *no* played on his lips, until he saw how Alexia's eyes shone at the mention of *tiramisu*.

"Would you like to share something?" he asked.

She nodded, then laughed. “Anything except the apple pie.”

“You don’t like apple pie?”

“I used to make it with my mom,” she said, and a trace of sadness entered her voice. He saw how she took that sadness, controlled it, and put it away. “No apple pie can compare to that one.”

“I know what you mean.”

Dark could almost classify the stages of his life by the apple pie he’d been served. In all family gatherings when he was young, his aunt always showed up with fresh apple pie and a gallon of vanilla ice cream. Later, when he was deployed, he’d get those little over-baked, brittle apple pie pockets. In recent years, it’d been those cold squares of mush, served on Sundays in the prison cafeteria. A testament to the mess he’d made of his life.

“Something I said made you sad,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

He shook himself. “How about the *tiramisu*?”

Her expression brightened. “It’s my favorite.”

Dark watched her savor the dessert, only pretending to dig his spoon into it a couple of times, pretty sure he’d never derived this much pleasure from watching another person eat.

“Let me take you home,” he said, signaling the waiter for the check.

“I should get this,” she replied, “to say thank you. For helping Nikolai yesterday.” He detected a touch of sadness in her voice.

“No,” he said firmly. “I wanted to take you out to dinner. I’m sorry I’ve ... made a mess of things. One of my friends is going through a rough time, and it’s affecting me as well,” he said. “Please, allow me.”

Lie upon lie.

But he couldn’t bear for her to think that his behavior had anything to do with her.

He paid the bill, and they walked outside together.

“I’d like to walk you home.”

“We can walk together until the telecabine,” she said, making it clear that she wasn’t going to tell him where she lived.

He respected that.

At the telecabine, where they said goodbye, she stopped and looked up at him. Her cream-colored hat made the green in her eyes pop. The pupils widened as she looked into his eyes, until the green was only a ring around the dark pupil.

She feels this, too.

Dark had never wanted to kiss anyone as much as he wanted to kiss her. And it would have been so natural to kiss her. Not just *in character*, though that too, but just ... so right ... which was why he held back.

“Let me take you out again,” he said. He would do his job, no matter what it did to him, but he didn’t want to hurt her.



Dark

“**W**hat the fuck is this? Is this your idea of bonding, Dark?” Griffin asked ironically. “You think we’ll eat from a common pot and magically all become best friends?”

The man had first raised an eyebrow as they’d sat down. Now, twenty minutes later, Dark was just about ready to turn that eye black if he didn’t stop.

“You *do* realize these things are weapons in our hands, right?” Ash said, calmly stabbing a piece of bread with his fondue stick and dipping it into the bubbling cheese. It was the first time he’d spoken. “Between us, I’ll bet we could find a dozen ways to kill a man with one of these.”

“Nobody’s killing anyone tonight,” Dark said.

Unless that someone is me.

“Relax, Dark. You look like you’re going to have an apoplexy,” Slate said. “The idea is good,” he added, looking around. “This is what I imagine a group of television writers would do when on a ski holiday. I just hope you have the budget, Dark. It takes a lot of cheese to keep this body in perfect working order,” he said, flexing his biceps.

Dark sighed, his appetite completely gone.

He’d reserved one of the private rooms in a local fondue hot spot that Carrie and Pascale had suggested a few days earlier. Partly to maintain their cover, as Slate had correctly identified, but also, yes, because becoming best friends wasn’t necessary, but getting to know each other enough to be able to work together, *was*.

And while yes, anybody looking at them too closely might have noticed they were too big, too rough, that there was something that simply didn’t fit right with them ... the fact was, people didn’t look that closely at other people.

“It feels strange,” Griffin said, after swallowing the cheese-soaked bread in his mouth. “To be free, but not really

free.”

He looked up, almost surprised that he'd said the words out loud.

Dark got the feeling it was the most honest thing the ex-CIA agent had shared with them.

The grim expression on Ash's face said he, too, thought of little else. In the dim, yellow light, the scar that bisected the man's eyebrow was even more prominent.

“You were free already,” Rogue said, when Slate nodded as well. It wasn't a question, but then, knowing his skills, Dark figured there wasn't much Rogue didn't know about any of them.

Slate shrugged. “Yeah. I was living it up in the mountains of Wyoming.”

“So why did you join us?” Ash asked, ignoring Dark's glare. “We know it has something to do with the guy glaring at you from across the table. Are you really brothers? You look the same age.”

“Irish twins,” Griffin said, baring his teeth. “I'm a year older. Of course, we didn't both get the same amount of brains.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Slate replied, incensed.

“All of you shut up. You two, that's your story to tell, should you feel like it. Ash, stop goading them. I don't think you want us digging too deeply into your story.”

Ash's complexion paled, making the scar stand out even more.

Fuck.

This isn't going well.

Dark sighed, putting his fondue stick down. He wasn't even going to pretend to be hungry anymore.

“Listen. We all have a past.”

“A sordid past, you mean.”

“A past. Let’s leave it at that.” He kept his voice low, though the door was closed. One of the reasons he’d picked this space was that they’d be able to hear the waiters trampling on the stairs long before they arrived. “That’s one of the reasons Thorne chose us. And it’s one of the reasons we can do this job.” He ran his hand through his short, dark hair, then took a deep breath. “Fuck, I wasn’t sure we could, at the beginning. But now I believe that, together, we have the skills required to bring this man down.”

“Because Thorne told us to?” Rogue questioned.

Dark shook his head. “Because we have the skills, and we find ourselves in a unique position to do it. And because he needs to be taken down. If those plans end up in the hands of the Iranians ...”

“They won’t be using them to build Disney World.”

Dark stared at each of the men in turn. He wasn’t going to back down.

“That’s quite a pep talk,” Griffin said, finally, but something like respect glimmered in the man’s green eyes.

“I was never any good at pep talks,” Dark said, allowing himself a small smile.

“That’s alright,” Rogue drawled. “I was forced to read *Henry V* in high school. Once-more-onto-the-breach and all that. I didn’t like it.”

“I say we drink to your words, Dark,” Slate said, standing up to find a half-full wine bottle standing on a side table. He picked it up easily in one hand and began to pour, filling each wine glass more than Dark was sure was socially acceptable.

When Slate approached Rogue’s glass, the Australian placed his hand over it.

“Not for me,” he said, his jaw tight.

Slate paused. “Can I get you anything else? Tea or coffee?”

“Water’s fine.” Then, as an afterthought, “Thank you.”

Slate nodded and moved on to the next glass.

They raised their glasses, looking each other in the eye as they did so. And in that instant, Dark realized how much he'd missed having a team. He didn't regret the actions that had ended his military career. He'd done what needed to be done to protect his team and the local community. He'd known there would be a price to pay, and he'd been okay with paying it. But here, now, he realized how much he'd missed the camaraderie—how much he'd missed this feeling of ... belonging.

Even if it's tenuous as fuck, in this case.

Dark's phone rang. It was Thorne.

"Dark," he said.

"That restaurant has a great wine cellar. Don't get carried away."

"Jesus, are you following us now, Thorne?"

"Don't flatter yourself. Pascale told me where you were."

"Fine. Here we are. Is that all you wanted? To check up on us?"

Thorne's voice went serious. "There's been another email exchange. One of our Iranian friends is buying a plane ticket."

"A plane ticket? Is he coming here?"

"We're going to need Rogue to help us figure that out. But don't do anything. If the Iranians are coming here, we need to wait."

Great.

The plot thickens.

"Any luck getting close to the nanny?"

"She's the boy's tutor," Dark said automatically, but Thorne didn't pick up on the distinction. "I'm still working on that."

"Good. Stay close to her. She may be our ticket into the house."

Dark's stomach heaved at the thought of using Alexia like that, but he didn't say anything.

"I'll let the guys know," he said, finishing the call.

Four pairs of eyes looked at him expectantly, the cheese pots forgotten.

"Thorne's analysts picked up some additional insight on the Iranians," Dark summarized quickly. "It looks like one of them may be heading this way."

"He'll have to get a visa. That'll take time," Griffin said thoughtfully.

"We're going to need you to look into it, Rogue."

The man nodded. "I'll get on that tonight."

"Not tonight," Dark said firmly. "Tomorrow." He turned to look at Slate. "Is that wine you ordered expensive, Slate?" Dark asked. "Let's order a couple more bottles."

"Now you're talking, boss, now you're talking," Slate said. "To the soon-to-be-fractured friendship between Kvyat and the Iranians," he added, raising his half-full glass and draining it in one large gulp.



Dark

“**S**he’s leaving the house on foot, Dark.” Slate’s voice was loud and clear on the earpiece, as if he were standing right next to him, rather than up in the hills beyond the house.

Dark wasn’t worried that anybody would see Slate. He knew the Navy SEAL would remain in position for as long as he needed to, only moving when it was safe to do so.

Dark put the earpiece in his pocket and started jogging.

He wasn’t worried he was going to hell.

He *knew* it.

And it would be well-deserved.

In the two weeks since the fondue dinner, he’d managed to see Alexia twice, and the more he saw of her, the more he liked her. She wasn’t just beautiful—she was smart, funny, and committed to her teaching role.

He’d found himself wondering why a woman like her would want to spend any time with a man like him—then realized she didn’t know the real him.

The felon.

The murderer.

She was spending time with Luke Dark, the television writer. A lighter, more easygoing version of himself. The man he could perhaps have been if—

But there was no point in thinking about that.

And he got the feeling he wasn’t the only one hiding something within him that caused him pain. Hell, that might even be part of the insane attraction between them—that they’d both experienced pain, even if it wasn’t something they could talk about.

He was supposed to be getting closer to her, and he’d never wanted something more—or less. Because he wanted to

get closer to Alexia—he wanted that more than he wanted his next breath. But not for the reasons he was supposed to want it.

He pushed the bile down and ran faster, knowing he'd need to fake being out of breath by the time he ran into her.

A couple of minutes later he saw her turning the corner. He ran on, his pace steady, waiting ... waiting ...

“Dark? Dark!”

Small steps sounded behind him.

He waited for an instant longer, then turned around, feigning surprise.

“Alexia? What are you—“ He stopped as he saw the thick edition in her hand. “*The Iliad?*”

She waved the book in the air. “Nikolai likes stories of ancient heroes. I’m re-reading it to find the best parts.”

“You think he’ll like it better than Marvel?”

It was meant as a joke, but Alexia took the question seriously. As she thought, her bottom lip disappeared behind her upper teeth in an endearing way.

“I don’t know if he will, but I would like him to be exposed to a world where men can be heroes and also cry.” At his questioning look, she kept going. “The Iliad is full of brave men, capable of amazing feats, but who haven’t forgotten how to cry. And that’s something we’ve forgotten in our days, perhaps. Or at least, something I don’t think Nikolai has been exposed to before.”

And she looked so sad, now. All of Dark’s senses were on high alert. Something was troubling her.

“Is everything okay, Alexia?”

“I just needed a bit of air. It’s been a rough day.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

She looked at him like he was crazy.

Because you’re meant to be writing TV shows, you moron.

But he didn't care. The thought of her in trouble burned a hole through his stomach.

"If you're in trouble, Alexia, let me—"

She shook her head quickly. "No. Not at all. I just ... things aren't always easy." Her look turned wistful. "Even for people who look like they have the perfect life. You know what I mean?"

He nodded. He *did* know what she meant.

"Where were you heading?" he asked.

"To the Starbucks," she said, looking mildly embarrassed. "I know there are other places in town to grab a coffee, but I —"

"You like the Starbucks. I understand. I like it, too. It's a piece of home."

Her eyes lit up. "Yes!"

He didn't want to drop her off at Starbucks.

"Let me take you out to dinner," he said, suddenly.

"I'm not really hungry," she said. Then, more quietly, "Can we go to your place?"

Dark hesitated for an instant. He didn't have a place. That house ... it was just a sham, like everything else in his life. But he could see she needed a place to unwind, and they'd be alone in the house, since Slate was still by Kvyat's house and the rest of the guys were out as well.

"Of course," he said.

A part of him knew it wasn't a good idea. It was hard enough to keep his hands to himself when they were in a public place. To spend time with her alone might require more willpower than he had.

And yet, he might also be able to get her to open up to him. If something was worrying her, he'd get to the bottom of it. He'd help her. No matter what he had to do.

"It won't bother your friends?" she asked.

“They’re out. They went to the cinema,” he lied.

“You didn’t want to see the movie?”

“I needed a bit of space. I’m used to living alone,” he said.

A half-truth.

“They’re good friends, but living with them is ... not easy.”

Another half-truth.

“How long are you here for?” she asked, suddenly curious. “I didn’t realize television writers had such long holidays.”

“It’s more of a working holiday,” he said. “We’re working on a new series.”

“Something you can talk about, or you’d have to kill me if you did?” she asked, laughing.

He tried to laugh, but couldn’t. The bile was back, making him want to throw up.

“I’m just kidding, Dark.”

He shook his head. “Sorry. Got lost for a moment.” He pointed across the street. “My car’s right there,” he said.

“Okay,” Alexia finally said.

They drove in silence until the house. When they arrived, he stopped the car.

“I can wait outside the car, if you’d like to text the address to someone,” he said.

“What?”

“To a friend,” he explained. “So they know where you are.”

Her face lit up with understanding. “Dark, I don’t think you’re a serial killer.”

“A woman can never be too careful.” He paused. “I want you to be careful.”

She shrugged her slim shoulders and got out of the car, stretching her legs. “I trust you, Dark,” she said softly. “I don’t

need to text anyone. I know I'm safe with you.”

Such simple words, but they had the power to drive him to his knees.

How he wished he were deserving of that trust.

He vowed, then and there, to keep her safe.

No matter what.

“Are we going inside?” she asked. “It’s freezing out here.”



Alexia

Though the house Dark and his friends were staying in was beautiful, it was hard not to compare it with Kvyat's house.

Alexia wondered if that might be the case forever, that everything would remind her of these months, her spirit jaded by the excess she'd witnessed in Kvyat's home.

As time went on, she was finding it more and more difficult to live there. Because, though Arseny Kvyat had never laid a hand on his son, she could see how, in every interaction between them, the man worked to erode Nikolai's character. He wanted to take that sweet, sensitive little boy and turn him into a carbon copy of himself—someone who saw the world in black and white. And Alexia wondered how much longer the boy would be able to resist the pull.

Alexia shook her head. She wasn't going to think of Kvyat's cruelty today. She'd left the house to spend some time alone. Bumping into Dark had been ... serendipitous. She'd been planning to call him later, anyway.

She took off her coat and dropped it on the back of a chair in the large, open plan living area. Walking to the window, she looked out at the view of the town of Gstaad—not as striking as the view Kvyat's place had of the mountains, but beautiful nevertheless.

“Can I get you something to drink, Alexia?” Dark asked from what she realized was the kitchen, surfaces and cabinets designed in a striking combination of stone and steel.

“I'm good, thank you.” She paused for a moment. “You're really staying here with four other men? You're all very neat.”

Every surface was clean, except for a side table with an in-progress chess game.

“What, you expected to walk into a frat house, or something?”

Alexia laughed. “I guess that is the last time I saw a group of men living together.”

“I’m thirty-five years old, Alexia.”

“Five years older than me.”

Something simmered in his blue eyes. He strode towards her, stopping less than two body lengths away from her.

“Does that make me a cradle-snatcher?” he asked.

“Does what—“

She didn’t have a chance to finish the sentence before Dark’s head bent down and those firm lips pressed on hers. Her pulse quickened, her initial surprise replaced with a burst of pleasure. So many times in the last weeks, she’d gone to sleep thinking about him, wondering what his mouth would feel like on hers.

Now she knew.

Now she knew, and she wanted more.

And though there was nothing tentative about the kiss, nothing tentative in the way his firm, soft lips coaxed hers open, she recognized, in the way he held himself so still, that the kiss was also a question, that he wanted to make sure she realized she could step back. That he could end this.

But Alexia didn’t want to end this. Her body, in fact, had already moved forward, until her front was plastered to his, close enough that she could feel the heat between them, even through her oversize black sweater and his dark gray henley.

Her arms came up to grab on to his biceps, to make sure he stayed in place.

Dark gave a moan of appreciation and deepened the kiss. His tongue found hers, and this time the little sounds were coming from her, and the kiss lasted forever, a kiss to replace all kisses coming before it. Finally, though, she had to come up for air. Her hands tightened against his arms, to let him know she wasn’t letting him go, that she just needed to breathe.

“You taste incredible,” he said, his voice a low, deep rumble.

“You don’t taste too bad yourself,” she said, trying to keep her tone light. When she went on tiptoes, Dark took the hint and kissed her again. His lips peppered her face with kisses, aiming for her nose, her cheek, the side of her mouth, but she grabbed him and kept him still.

A sudden thought struck her, making her interrupt the kiss.

“You said your friends were watching a movie?” she asked, looking towards the door.

“They won’t be back until tonight.” Dark took a step back. “I’m sorry. I’m crowding you. That’s not what I want to do. I want you to feel comfortable.”

“I do feel comfortable ... with you. I feel ... somehow, I feel like I’ve known you for a long time.”

“Let me make you some food,” he said, moving away from her. He breathed out noisily, as if he needed that distance. He opened the fridge and peered inside, looking for all the world like this was unfamiliar territory for him.

Maybe they order in a lot.

“I could make you a grilled cheese sandwich.”

That was sweet, but she wasn’t hungry.

“I don’t want a sandwich.” She pulled in her own sharp breath. In the past she’d never been very good at asking for what she wanted, but she was damn well going to do so now. “Could we ... could we go to your room?” She hesitated for an instant. “You ... you have your own room, right?”

“I have my own room,” he confirmed. He hesitated for a long instant, and for a moment she was sure he was going to offer her more food, but then seemed to change his mind. He put out his hand, waiting until she placed her fingers in his larger palm before leading her towards the stairs.

Awareness shot through her body.

This felt so ... right.

Before she knew it, they were at the top of the stairs. His room was right off the landing. Decorated in shades of gray and white, it had the same beautiful view as the living area downstairs, and was divided into two separate areas—one half dominated by a white king-sized bed, the other half set up as a small living area.

He closed the door gently.

“This is nice. Television must pay well.”

“I can’t complain,” he said, his mouth tight. She wondered about that tightness. He didn’t seem like the type of man to care about money, but then, he clearly wasn’t hurting for it.

“Sit,” he said, pointing to the sofa, a gentle command, except she wasn’t here to take orders from him.

“What if I don’t want to sit?” she asked, standing up to her full height, which wasn’t very tall, compared to him.

“What do you want, Alexia?” he asked. His hand flew across his hair, the first sign that he wasn’t altogether in control.

She placed her hands on her hips in a confident move she was far from feeling. “I think ... I think I want you.”

“You *think*?” he asked, taking a step forward, almost towering over her.

She shook her head. “No. You’re right. I don’t think. I *know* I want you.”

He pulled in a shaky breath. “You’re killing me, Alexia. Absolutely killing me.”

“I don’t want to kill you. I’d like to ... I’d like to make love to you.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed.

“You’re ... you’re making it really hard to think, but we should talk before we go any further.”

Her brow wrinkled as his words permeated her consciousness. She pulled back to look up into his eyes.

“Are you married?”

“No. Of course not,” he said quickly.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” she insisted.

“No.”

She nodded, reading the truth in his deep blue eyes.

“Then we can talk later,” she said, bringing her hands up to grab the sides of his head to see if his short, dark hair felt as thick as it looked.

Damn, it does.

She pulled down on his head and brought her own face up, until their mouths met in the middle. He took control of the kiss, deepening it, simulating with his tongue what she hoped he would soon be doing to her with his cock. Something clenched inside her at the thought.

It'd been so long since she'd had a man inside her.

Too long.

His hand played with her sweater, pulling it up and off her head. She leaned over to help him, then removed her bra as well, where it joined her sweater on the floor.

While he admired her breasts, she pulled at his henley until that, too, was lying on the same pile. Admittedly, it'd been a while since she'd been with a man, but she was pretty sure she'd remember if men looked like this—so thick and hard all over.

His chest was a chiseled, muscled work of art.

Through this all, they kept right on kissing, and nothing had ever felt as natural or as right.

He was too tall, though—or she was too short—and it was hard to get close enough to him. He seemed to sense this, too. His large hands found her waist and gripped, lifting her easily as her legs naturally opened, wrapping around his hips.

“Yes,” she said, speaking into his mouth. “Perfect.”

“Perfect,” he agreed, his large hands splaying under her ass, holding her right where she wanted to be held. And she loved feeling his strength, the way he held her almost effortlessly and, at the same time, so gently.

Alexia shifted her hips until her core was aligned with the obvious sign of his desire, with only his pants and her leggings between them.

“When I first saw you earlier, I thought I loved these leggings,” he panted, flexing his hips, “I’m changing my mind.”

She felt the same. The pressure on her clit was delicious, but not enough to let her come.

“Take them off,” she begged, her teeth grazing his earlobe.

He groaned and strode towards the bed, setting her down gently, almost reverently. Moments later, his warm hand grazed her midriff.

“Take them off,” she insisted, raising her butt off the bed to help him. “My panties, too.”

“Bossy,” Dark laughed, but began peeling off her leggings and panties. “And soft,” he said, trailing kissed by her belly button, her hip bone, every piece of her that was exposed. “Fucking hell, Alexia,” he groaned, staring straight at her shaved mound. “Can I kiss you?”

Alexia nodded quickly, her hands bunching against the duvet as he breathed gently against her skin.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said reverently, looking at her like he hadn’t seen a woman in years.

His mouth still hadn’t touched her, and already she was ready to combust. She’d never wanted a man’s mouth on her as much as she did that instant.

He began trailing those light kisses right over her mound. And then his tongue was there, gently licking and suckling at her, and she could feel her clit coming out of its little hood, eager to meet that talented mouth.

“Please,” she begged, nearly incoherent with pleasure.
“Please ...”

His mouth stopped for an instant. “Please what?” he asked, looking up into her eyes.

And the sight of this big, strong man between her legs was more than she could bear. “Please don’t stop,” she begged.

“I won’t stop. Not until you’re coming on my mouth, baby. I promise you that.”

Alexia liked a man who kept his promises, and man, did Dark deliver. His tongue alternated between kissing and licking and, just when she was sure she couldn’t take any more, gently penetrating right inside her until she exploded, coming right against his mouth, her hips coming off the bed as she did so.

“Yes! Yes!” she cried out, her hands digging in his hair. And Dark didn’t seem to mind, but continued kissing her gently while she rode the orgasm to completion.

Afterwards, she lay there, completely sated.

“Better?” he asked.

“Much better than a sandwich, thanks,” she said, drawing a quick laugh from him.

She looked down to find he was still wearing his pants, the thick, obvious bulge in the front of them reminding them that one of them hadn’t finished yet.

“Take off your pants,” she ordered, still too limp to do much but wave her hand around his belt buckle. He pulled them off easily and lay back next to her on the bed.

His cock was a work of art, thicker even than it’d looked through the pants, and oozing pre-cum.

Her early satedness left her, replaced with a strange new buzzing. She wanted—no, needed—to feel him inside her.

She opened her legs at the knees, letting him know she was ready. Dark positioned himself between her legs, and there was such intensity in his gaze, she felt like she might combust.

Until he blinked, and something changed in his expression. Now he looked like someone had kicked him in the balls.

“What—“

“I don’t have a condom,” he groaned, sitting up in bed.

“What do you mean, you don’t have a condom?”

“I wasn’t expecting this. I don’t have a condom.”

“But you’re ... you’re a man,” she sputtered. Her mind worked furiously to remember the time of her last period. It would probably be okay, but ... she’d never had sex without a condom before. But she wanted him so badly.

“Hey. Whatever you’re thinking, stop it,” he said gently. “We’re not going to have sex without a condom.”

And she knew he was right. But fuck if she didn’t need to be filled. Her hips rose to meet his cock, and fuck if his cock didn’t jerk against her in response.

“But I ... need ...”

“That doesn’t mean there aren’t other things we can do,” he said in that low, deep voice. Two thick fingers disappeared inside her, the penetration slow and delicious. And while she’d seen his cock and it was much thicker than his fingers, she hadn’t been with a man in a long time, and she couldn’t help but wonder if she would have been able to take his cock.

“You’re so tight,” he said. Again, that strange, almost reverent tone.

Then his fingers curled inside her, feeling for that spot that made her stop breathing. Because breathing was optional, and the only thing that mattered was the pulsing, live wire of pleasure that pulled, and pulled, until she came in a wild explosion.

“Oh-my-god-oh-my-god-oh-my-god,” she panted, as every one of her extremities curled.

“I can feel you coming against my fingers,” he whispered in her ear, and his words only made her come harder.

After a while, she came back to planet Earth.

“This isn’t fair. You ...”

“Don’t worry about me,” he said, his expression oddly tender. Only the bulge against her thigh spoke of his obvious need.

“Maybe I can help you too,” she said, wrapping her hand around his hard-on. And he was deliciously warm.

“You don’t have to do that,” he gasped, closing his eyes in obvious pleasure.

“I want to,” she said, shifting her body to get better access to him.

“Harder,” he begged, wrapping his larger hand against hers to show her how he liked it. She tightened her hold, watching the muscles in his jaw and neck bulge as she began gliding her hand across his shaft, the pre-cum helping her.

His hips pumped in rhythm to her hand, and there was something oddly intimate about doing this to him, and about being able to focus on his pleasure and his pleasure alone.

“I’m going to—“

He didn’t get to finish the sentence before he came, silently spurting all over her palm.

“I’m sorry. Let me get you—“

She wiped her hand quickly against the side of the bed. “Don’t move,” she said, peppering his face with kisses.

“Thank you,” he whispered. His face was in shadow, and she realized in the time they’d been lying here it’d been getting darker.

How long have we been up here?

“I should go back,” she said.

“Stay a bit longer,” he asked, tightening his arms around her body. And she felt so ... safe ... in his arms, so *not alone*, for the first time in forever.

Maybe just for a bit.



Dark

Dark felt the instant Alexia fell asleep in his arms.

But he couldn't sleep. Not after sharing that with her—not after that glorious gift she'd given him.

Dark hadn't thought of sex much while in prison. Masturbating wasn't forbidden, so long as it was done quietly and after lights out, but the thought of constantly being watched was a strong deterrent for Dark. So, other than the few times he'd jerked awake, coming hard into the sheets after dreaming of some sexual encounter in his past, he'd tried not to think about sex.

He looked down and pressed his mouth softly to Alexia's hair, careful not to wake her up. He'd forgotten how good a woman could smell.

How good she smells.

Alexia.

He'd come hard in her hand, but he was hard again already.

Fuck, he was in trouble.

He should be thankful he hadn't had a condom. Otherwise, nothing could have kept him from sinking into her warmth.

And you're enough of a dick as it is.

You should have told her ...

Told her what?

It's not like he could have told her the truth, not without endangering the mission and his teammates.

But he shouldn't have gotten naked with her. Regardless of the attraction between them.

He lay still for almost an hour, watching the sky get darker and darker. He knew he should wake her up. He had no idea what time she needed to be back at Kvyat's place by. But the

thought of her living in the same house as that monster sat like a hard rock inside his stomach, so he delayed.

Eventually, he heard the front door opening downstairs. There were voices, which changed in tone immediately.

They must have seen Alexia's coat and boots.

Alexia stirred in his arms.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” he said softly, angling his lower body away from her so she wouldn't feel how hard he was for her. “I'm sorry to wake you, but you said you had to go.”

“What time is it?” she slurred, still half asleep.

“Nine p.m.”

That seemed to wake her up in one go.

“Shit. I need to get going.”

“What's the rush?”

“Security changes at ten p.m. I need to be in before then.”

“Security?” he asked, pretending not to know.

“Nikolai's father is ... rich,” she said. “He has a round-the-clock security team.”

“Okay. Let me drive you home.”

She held the duvet against her chest like a dress, highlighting her slim, elegant shoulders. “Could you pass me my clothes?”

Dark got up. He was still naked, but naked had never bothered him. He could feel her eyes on him as he walked around the room, picking up various objects of clothing.

“You enjoying the view?”

“I am,” she said. “I've enjoyed a lot of things tonight. I don't usually ...”

“I don't usually either,” he said, finishing her thought.

He picked up those dainty black panties and went back to the bed. “Allow me,” he said. “I helped you take them off. I should help you get them back on.”

Her laugh was light and musical as she took the panties from him. “I won’t be going anywhere if you start touching me again.”

“Maybe I don’t want you to go anywhere.” The truth in that statement took him aback. He wanted to keep Alexia here with him—where she was safe and close.

But he couldn’t do that. He’d built a wall of lies between them, high enough that there was no getting around it.

He pulled on his boxer shorts and pants, then put the wrinkled henley back on.

She was almost dressed now, except for her feet, which were still bare. She began pulling on her socks. They were thin—thinner than he would have expected her to wear, and he wondered why she didn’t have better socks.

Suddenly, she cocked her head sideways. “What’s that noise—“

“My friends got back a few minutes ago.”

“Oh.” She bit her lower lip, as he’d seen her do in moments of uncertainty.

“Relax. I’ll introduce you.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her to him. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her his friends were good men, but he was sick to his stomach of lying to her. “My friends won’t hurt you, I promise. They’re good guys. And I wouldn’t let anybody hurt you.”

He felt her hand relax infinitesimally.

“But they’re going to think—“

“They’re going to think I like you, Alexia. Okay?”

A small smile crossed her face. “Do you?”

Dark nodded.

I like you, and I’ll burn in hell for it.

“I do. I haven’t taken you back yet, and already all I can think of is when I’ll get to see you again.”

He held on to Alexia's hand as they made their way down the stairs. He could feel she needed that support.

In the living area, Slate and Rogue sprawled in front of the TV, watching the news. Ash was in the kitchen, slicing something. Griffin sat in the armchair by the window, a book in his hands.

At least he's holding it the right way up.

Dark knew they were all pretending not to know Alexia was there.

Alexia cleared her throat.

"Hi," she said, uncertainly.

"Everyone, this is Alexia," Dark said. "Alexia, that's Slate and Rogue by the TV, Griffin, by the window, and Ash, in the kitchen."

Those who were sitting down stood up politely and said hello, but didn't make a move to get any closer. It was clear that they could read the discomfort in Alexia's expression just as easily as Dark could.

"I ..." Something flickered in her eyes as she looked from one man to the next. "You're all ... writers?" she asked. She looked confused. Dark sighed. The men's casual clothes did little to hide their muscular bodies, or the intensity in their expressions.

Surprisingly, it was Ash who stepped forward, offering Alexia his hand.

She looked at the scar down his eye, then at the thick, gnarled hand he offered, hesitating for an instant. Ash waited patiently until she made up her mind and shook it. He was careful, gentle even, held her hand only for an instant before letting go again.

Standing behind Alexia, Dark glared at the man.

"You know Criminal Minds?" Ash said easily.

Alexia nodded. "Of course. I used to love that show. Procedural crime drama at its best."

Ash literally puffed up. “We wrote a lot of that.”

Alexia’s expression cleared up, her mind clearly on the show now. “Wow. Okay. I guess I should be asking for autographs or something.”

“Hardly,” Ash said.

“We’re working on a new script now,” Rogue said, coming to stand beside Ash. “Writing a part for Hugh Jackman.”

Dark just about slapped his forehead with his hand.

Hugh Jackman?

“That’s ...” Alexia laughed. “I’m sorry. I don’t know anything about television scripts, but I know who he is, of course. That sounds huge.”

“It is,” Rogue agreed, letting his Australian accent come through.

“You hadn’t said anything,” Alexia said, turning to Dark.

“Right. Still confidential. The guys shouldn’t be talking about it.”

“You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

“Of course not,” Alexia said. She looked like she was about to say something else when Dark interrupted.

“Let me get some shoes on and I’ll take you home, Alexia.”

She nodded quickly. “Yes. Thank you. It was good to meet all of you.”

“You too, Alexia. Any friend of Dark’s is our friend,” Rogue said easily.

In the car, Alexia turned to look at him. “Are you guys like famous, or something? Should I recognize you?”

Dark shook his head. “Not famous. Actors are famous. Directors are famous. We’re ... mainly invisible, and we like it that way.”

She nodded. “May I ask you something?”

“Of course,” he said. Inside, he hoped it wouldn’t be something that forced him to lie to her again.

“Is Ash the friend you mentioned was in trouble?”

Dark hadn’t expected that. He kept his eyes on the road.

“Why do you ask?”

“The way you stared at him when I shook his hand. As if he was... as if there was some kind of bad blood between you.” She gave a small, self-deprecating laugh. “I’m making things up, aren’t I?”

She was more intuitive than he’d given her credit for.

“Not at all. You’re right. Ash and I ... he did something I can’t condone, and it’s been hard for me to find a way forward with him.”

“I hope you’ll find it,” Alexia said quietly.

“Me too,” he said.

Me too.

And there was so much he wanted to say to her, but of course he couldn’t share any meaningful truth.

They’d only just gone past the telecabine when she asked him to stop.

“I’m not going to drop you off here in the middle of the night, Alexia.”

“It’s okay. There’s a path from here heading straight up into the house.” She shrugged gently. “I don’t want to have to explain myself to the security team, alright?”

Dark had to acquiesce. It’s not like he wanted to be seen by Kvyat’s security team, either.

“I’ll wave to you from the top of the steps.”

“And you’ll send me a message when you’re inside.”

“Yes, Dad,” she said, but she was smiling.

“I’m up for that if that’s your kink, baby,” he said, watching the blush spread from her neck all the way up her

cheeks.

“What? No!”

“Just kidding,” he said, giving her a quick peck on the lips. “But don’t forget to send me that message.”

He waited, in the dark, long after her shapely figure had waved at him from the top of the steps. Waited for that text message. And he’d thought things were complicated before, when it was just the mission to contend with. But now ... now Alexia was caught in the middle as well. And Dark was beginning to imagine a future he had no right imagining, and no right wishing for.



Dark

“I hope you had a good time last night, boss,” Ash said, his voice dripping with sarcasm, as Dark walked into the house after a morning run that’d done little to refresh him after a sleepless night.

Dark closed the large terrace door carefully and counted to five.

He could feel his control about to snap.

Ash continued calmly spreading butter onto a croissant.

And there was something in his gaze ...

Disgust.

The fucking rapist was looking at him with an expression of disgust.

Dark’s control snapped.

“Shut the fuck up,” he said. “We’re going downstairs to the gym. Now”

Ash put the butter knife down. He calmly picked up the croissant he’d been buttering and took a bite, chewing and swallowing before replying.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing, Dark?”

“Drop that pastry before I shove it up your—“

“Don’t the rest of us get to play?” Griffin asked, a wolfish expression on his face.

The gym, located right next to the games room, was huge. They’d discovered that was something a lot of Gstaad houses shared—huge basements. Because building regulations were so strict, but underground rooms didn’t count towards the total built space, home owners often ended up building huge sprawling areas underground.

Rich people living like moles.

Dark was glad for the huge space now. He pointed to the blue mat.

“What’s this about?” Slate asked, poking his head in. “A sparring session?”

“Looks like it,” Rogue replied carefully.

Dark couldn’t have cared less about the audience. The other guys could watch, or not, as long as they didn’t try to stop him.

Ash took off his T-shirt, flexing his arm and shoulder muscles. And the man was ripped. Nobody said anything while they bandaged their hands and put on their gloves.

“I have to warn you, Dark, my specialty is close quarter combat, and I didn’t stop training in prison.”

“I imagine. I’ve heard your type of man has a shit time in prison,” Dark goaded, furious.

Griffin and Slate’s jaw went slack. Rogue’s expression didn’t change. He’d already known.

“Fuck you,” Ash said, launching into an attack. Dark moved sideways, narrowly avoiding the first punch. Ash’s second punch, however, connected firmly with Dark’s jaw, turning his head sideways.

Fuck, the man could hit.

He jumped backwards, looking for some space.

Dark recognized he wasn’t just angry at Ash. He was angry at the entire situation—at being in Gstaad, shoved together with a group of men who weren’t really a team, who might never be a team, not when they were all holding so many secrets close to their hearts, and it seemed any of those secrets could blow them all up.

Dark and Ash danced around the blue mat while Griffin, Slate, and Rogue watched from the sidelines.

Dark tasted blood. He wiped his split lip angrily, leaving a bloody trail on the glove.

Dark threw a hard punch, his glove connecting with Ash's shoulder. The man spun, as Dark had hoped. He followed with a hard punch to the kidneys—the kind of punch that could fell a tree, leave a man pissing blood for days.

Dark waited for Ash to fall, because nobody could take that hit and remain standing. And he almost felt bad, because never, in his entire life, had he hit someone from his own team with such a degree of violence.

Shame mixed with the anger he'd been feeling, dampening it.

Ash will fall, and we'll end this.

But Ash didn't fall. The man gritted his teeth and locked his knees, retaliating with an uppercut punch to Dark's jaw. And though Dark was too slow to move out of the way, the blow, when it landed, felt softer than it should have.

He's holding back.

He doesn't want to hurt you.

Dark was still coming to terms with this when an insistent beeping from the sidelines caught his attention. It was coming from the tablet in Rogue's hands.

“I'll be damned!”

Dark and Ash stopped mid-fight. Griffin and Slate weren't looking in their direction anymore. They were staring at Rogue, who'd gone pale like a corpse.

“Rogue? What is it?”

“I just caught an email exchange between Kvyat and the Iranians.” He paused for a second, then continued in the next breath. “I know what they're planning.”

“The Iranians are coming here? To Gstaad?”

“No. They've hired a fixer.”

“Do we know who it is?”

Rogue shook his head no. “But I know when and where the exchange is going to happen.”

“Are you fucking serious?” Dark asked.

Knowing the when and the where is even better than knowing the who.

Rogue nodded. “It’s here, black on white. Three days from now. Did you know Kvyat was going to throw a party?”

“You think they’re going to exchange the plans for a nuclear reactor at a party? Here? In Gstaad?” Slate asked doubtfully.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Rogue’s hands were shaking around the tablet. “We need to get this to Thorne’s analysts.”

And, suddenly, their job didn’t seem so bad. Because if they could stop that exchange from happening and recover those plans ...

Dark smiled, the skin around his torn lip pulling. “Are you all thinking what I’m thinking?”



Alexia

Alexia hesitated at the front door.

She shouldn't be here.

Dark was on holiday with friends.

They were probably busy.

Normal people didn't pop in to see people they'd basically just met.

But she didn't feel like they'd only just met.

And it was too late to leave, anyway. Someone was looking at her from their living room window.

She pushed her hair back, drying the sweat from her forehead. She'd taken the bus, but had ended up having to walk almost a mile uphill to get to the house. That was one of the problems in Gstaad—at least for the few souls who, like her, didn't own an enormous gas-guzzling vehicle—almost everything was up or down the hill, while buses stuck to the main roads.

Before she had a chance to ring the doorbell, Ash opened the door.

He must have been the one watching.

The scar bisecting his eye stood out in stark relief, white against his otherwise tanned face.

“Alexia,” he said. “Hello.”

“Hi. It's ... Ash, right?”

“That's right,” he said, standing to the side to let her through. She squeezed by his tall, imposing form, not half as scared of him as she'd been the first time they'd met. She walked past him and into the kitchen, eyeing the tap. She could do with a bit of water. He seemed to read her thoughts. “I'll go tell Dark you're here. Can I get you something to drink first?”

“A glass of water would be great, thank you,” she said, taking off her puffy coat.

“You walked here?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Bus. Then walked.”

Ash reached over with a tall glass of water, just as Dark walked up the stairs from what she assumed was the basement, wearing black workout clothes and wiping his face with a small white towel. As he got closer, she saw the bruise on one side of his jaw.

“Dark? What happened to your—“

But Dark wasn't even looking at her. His expression was fixed on Ash, and on the way their hands almost touched around the glass of water.

“Get away from her,” he growled.

Ash waited until he was sure she was holding on to the glass, then took a step back. He looked at her with a strange expression in his eyes—almost apologetic, it seemed to her—then disappeared up the stairs.

Whatever it is between them, they clearly haven't solved it.

“Dark? What was that about?” Alexia asked. “I don't understand—“

His voice was softer now that the other man was gone. He took a step closer. “Is everything okay, Alexia? What are you doing here?”

“I ... yes ...” She shook herself. “Where are the rest of your friends?”

“Downstairs, in the games room. Working on the script.”

His gaze ran down her body, starting with her thick cream sweater, down her dark jeans and chunky brown boots. She wished she were wearing heels—something to elongate her figure, make her taller, but even in heels she'd be half a head shorter than him.

Heat shone in his blue eyes.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

He was close enough now that she could smell his clean, masculine scent. He smelled as good as she remembered. Good enough that it made her forget everything.

Almost everything.

“I’m sorry I came without calling you first. I have the afternoon off.”

“You’re always welcome here,” he said. “Is everything okay?”

Alexia took a sip from her water, moving away from him, closer to the window.

“I don’t know. Things are getting ... intense at my employer’s house.”

Dark moved so fast, she didn’t even see him move. One moment he was by the kitchen, the next he was standing beside her.

“What do you mean?”

“I think he was trying to fix things with his wife, and it’s not working out for him. And he’s *really* nervous about this event he’s hosting a couple of days from now. I’m sorry. This isn’t your problem. I don’t even know—“

“What kind of event?”

“Some charity thing.” She shrugged lightly. “I guess there’s a lot of money in Gstaad. It’s good that some of it should go to charity.”

“Has he done anything to make you worry?” Dark’s voice was gentle—careful, even—but she could see his shoulder muscles bunching under the black T-shirt.

“Not to me personally, no,” she said quickly. She didn’t want to give Dark the wrong idea. “It’s just the atmosphere in the house, and the way he speaks to his son, it feels ... wrong,” she finished lamely.

Dark’s square jaw tensed further.

And she wasn't sure why she'd come here. What had she expected Dark to do? Sweep her off her feet and take her away? That wouldn't solve anything. She'd come to Gstaad for a reason. And maybe that's all it was ... the guilt, getting to her. She'd never been good at deception, and there had been so much deception in the last couple of months.

Even today.

She hadn't come directly from Kvyat's house. She'd stopped at an internet café in town and fired off an email to her mystery contact, telling him about the charity event. It wasn't much—not much to show after months of living in Kvyat's home. But she hadn't actually *seen* anything. Kvyat hadn't done anything illegal in her presence.

It was just an impression of evil that followed him around, and she didn't even know if she was making that up.

If there was anything to see, it would be in the upstairs office Kvyat spent most of his time in, or in that small metallic briefcase he often carried between the office and his bedroom.

They weren't areas of the house she'd ever been invited to. And a part of her told her she was playing with fire. If Kvyat found her spying ... getting fired might be the least of her troubles.

Dark's hand grazed her shoulder gently.

“Alexia? Where did you go just now?”

“I'm sorry. I was just ... thinking.”

“You should leave,” he said, and she didn't need to ask him what he meant. “Leave that house.”

Of course, he would say that.

It's not like she hadn't thought of that herself.

She thought of Nikolai. She couldn't leave him without warning.

“I only have one month left on my contract,” she said, shrugging lightly. She couldn't tell Dark about her other reasons for staying.

“What do you need?” he asked, and damned it her heart didn’t go pitter-patter at that. None of her previous boyfriends, back before she’d given up on relationships, had ever asked her that. If one of them had, back when she was struggling with the loss of her brother, for example, things might have been different.

He’s not your boyfriend.

No, Dark wasn’t her boyfriend, but he was asking her what she needed.

“I just need to relax a bit. Could we ... could we take a walk together, maybe?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Let me grab my coat. I’ll let the guys know we’re going out,” he said.

She looked around the room, struck again by how neat the house looked. There wasn’t a glass or plate in sight, and all surfaces looked like they’d been recently wiped down.

Then Dark was back, wearing a black coat. “Okay, I’m ready.”

He held her coat out for her to put her arms through.

Soft puffy snowflakes landed on her blue jacket as soon as she stepped outside. It’d started snowing again. Alexia tightened her scarf and pulled on her hat and gloves.

“Come,” Dark said, taking her hand in his. She noticed he hadn’t bothered to put on his gloves yet. “I want to show you something.”

He led her up the hill, matching her pace, though she knew with his longer legs he could have gone much faster. At first, they walked on the road, but eventually took a turn towards a smaller, snow-covered trail, surrounded by beautiful trees on either side.

“I come running here every morning,” he said.

“All the way up here?” she said, trying not to huff and puff.

“I enjoy the quiet, and the ... the sense of space.”

“You don’t have that back home?” She realized she’d never even asked where home was. “Where do you live, actually?”

“Kansas, for the last few years,” he said quietly. “But my friends and I have been offered a new job, in Switzerland.”

“Are you going to take it?”

“Probably. It’s the only thing I’m good at.” He shrugged his massive shoulders. “But enough about me. Tell me about yourself. You said you have a month left in your contract. What happens then?”

“Nikolai will probably go back to Russia,” she said. The thought of not seeing the boy again made her sad. “And I’ll ... I don’t know what I’ll do. I should go back to New Hampshire. I have a job waiting for me there.”

The thought of going back to New Hampshire didn’t thrill her. She took a deep breath. Nothing about her life thrilled her. As if everything she’d done, every decision she’d made the last five years, had precipitated from the same instant. From her brother’s death. And maybe it was time to start living a different way, before her entire life passed her by.

“Or maybe I won’t go back,” she said, voicing the thought out loud for the first time.

“A moment of change for both of us, then,” he said. His blue eyes glittered with an unexpected intensity. He opened his mouth to speak—just as the shrill sound of his phone pierced the afternoon’s silence.

He looked down at the screen, then back at her apologetically.

“Sorry. I need to take this,” he said. She moved back a few steps to give him space, heard him listen, then answer several questions with monosyllables before hanging up.

“Everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. The guys are going out for dinner. They just wanted me to know they’ll be back late.”

“Really? Are they ... like ... giving us space?”

He smiled. "I think so."

"Maybe we should go back to your place and make good use of it, then."

"Is that what you want to do?"

"I know it was my idea to go out for a walk, and it's beautiful out here, but I can't feel my fingers and my toes anymore, I'm so cold."

"Shit. Sorry. Let's get you inside." He took her hand in his, pulling her gently forward. "Come. It's quicker this way than the way we came."



Dark

Shit, he hadn't realized how cold she was.

He pulled her inside, turning the dial of the underfloor heating up to the max as he walked by, then sat her down on the over-sized couch.

He picked up a blanket from the side of the couch and covered her with it, then helped her take off her hat, her coat, and her gloves, holding her hands in his larger, warmer ones.

"Your hands are freezing."

"I'm okay," she said. "Not hypothermic or anything, don't worry. I grew up in upstate New York, remember? I know all about cold."

"You should have told me you were cold."

She nodded. "I could have. But I was enjoying the walk too much."

"Okay, let's get your hands properly warmed up," he said, lifting his sweater and T-shirt and placing her hands against his skin, gasping from the cold and from the intensity.

"That feels so good," she said, moaning in appreciation. And damned if a different part of his anatomy didn't perk up at the sound.

Then her fingers began stroking the hard muscles on his belly.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"My feet are still cold."

"I may be able to help with that," he said, reaching over for her boots.

"Ah ... could we go upstairs? I really don't want to end up half-naked on your couch when your friends—"

"Are you going to end up half-naked?" he asked, his lips curling into a smile.

“Or I could leave,” she threatened, lightly, “if you keep making fun of me.”

He pulled her up into his arms, bringing her tight against his chest. Alexia squealed, her arms coming to grab at his shoulders.

“Relax,” he said, taking the stairs two by two. “I’m not going to drop you.”

“I know,” she whispered, leaning her face against his shoulder.

He was wowed by her trust—and suddenly determined to earn it.

He pushed the door to his room open and strode to the bed, intending to set her down gently, except instead of letting go, she tightened her hold on his neck.

“Hey,” he said, placing his arms on either side of her body to avoid crushing her.

“Come here. I brought you a gift.”

“I like gifts,” he said, nuzzling her neck. “Where is it?”

“In my back pocket,” she whispered.

“I’ve seen your back pocket. There’s no way you can fit —“ His hand found her pocket, touched a little square foil wrapper.

Fuck.

His cock stood to attention, recognizing the object.

“I wasn’t sure you’d had time to go shopping,” she said.

He hadn’t. He’d jerked off to the memory of her in his bed a couple of times, but hadn’t really dared think about a repeat. And yet, here they were.

“I’m not sure one will be enough,” he said.

“Complaints, complaints.”

“Who said I’m complaining?” Dark raised her clothes, baring her midriff. “I’m actually,” he said, punctuating each word with a kiss to her stomach, “very grateful for this gift.”

“Grateful enough to take your top off?”

Dark sat up and took his top off, glad at the way her eyes widened when she saw his body.

She leaned up, balancing herself on her elbows, mumbled something unintelligible.

“What’s that?”

“You’re as hot as I remember.”

“Good to know. Now, your turn.”

He pulled off her sweater and undershirt, kissing his way from her smooth, soft belly, all the way up to her breasts.

Alexia moaned, her back arching off the bed, making it easy for him to unclip her bra.

“So beautiful.”

He pulled one of her nipples into her mouth, suckled gently, then did the same with her other nipple while he massaged her breast. With his other hand, he popped the button on her jeans.

“Is that your way ... of saying thank you?” she asked, her voice suddenly hoarse.

“No.” He opened the zipper and pulled her jeans and panties down and off her legs, then pushed her legs open at the knees, bringing his face to her pussy. “This is.”

He licked gently against her folds. She tasted like she smelled, clean and sweet—a taste he knew he’d never tire of.

Suddenly, her knees pushed against his hands. Dark stopped, looking up at her questioningly.

“Take off my socks,” she hissed. “I keep looking at my socks.”

He laughed but rolled off her thick woolen socks, then pushed her legs open again. “Don’t move. Let me feast,” he demanded.



Alexia

Nothing, in her entire life, had ever felt this glorious.

And then Dark lifted her hips, easily taking on her weight as he brought her closer to him. And the feel of his mouth on her was magical as he licked and sucked and worshipped her.

Alexia went lightheaded with pleasure.

The man was an oral sex god.

And she wanted to ask him where he'd learned that technique, but she was too far gone to do much.

Except beg.

Apparently, she could still beg.

"Please." She was so close she could almost touch the orgasm, her belly, her fingers, her toes, tingling.

"Please what?" he asked, his voice low and deep, so close that she could feel his breath on her skin.

"Please ... don't stop."

"I'm not going to stop, baby." Then he went back to business. And her pleasure rose, and rose, and it was like being in a roller coaster, the anticipation thick and sweet in her mouth, until she finally came in a rush of pleasure deeper than anything she'd ever experienced before.

She cried out, and it was as if all the tension she'd been feeling was suddenly released.

Dark seemed to know exactly what she needed as he moved up to hold her in his arms, and she didn't know what this was, but she knew she'd never felt so safe and sated before.

"You're so beautiful when you come."

"Give me a second to recover," she said, smiling, "and we can do it again."

In the end, it took a lot more than a second, but slowly, ever so slowly, she became aware of his thick length lying against her leg.

“Is that for me?” she asked, her hand reaching out to touch him.

“All for you, baby,” and he looked so serious, almost like he was in pain. Which he probably was, if he’d been hard all this time.

“Come here,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t know if I can come again,” she said honestly, “but I’ll enjoy trying, anyway.”

He didn’t need any further encouragement. He quickly split open the foil wrapper with his teeth and rolled the condom roughly over his thick cock.

Maybe I should have bought the extra-large.

“How do you want me?” he asked, suddenly looking strangely hesitant.

“Inside me,” she smiled, pulling him in against her. Tonight, with Dark, she wanted—needed—to feel his hard, solid weight on her. His fingers opened her up, readying her for his cock.

“You’re so wet for me,” he said.

She was. And though she’d only just come, already she wanted him so bad. His cock, his attention ... she wanted all of him.

And it *was* selfish, this *wanting*, but she hadn’t been selfish in so long, and she was tired of denying herself.

His fingers left her, and she was empty for an instant before he positioned the head of his cock at her entrance. His eyes were on her face as he pushed forward, and he was so large, and it’d been so long for her, it was almost uncomfortable.

“Are you okay, Alexia?” he asked, stilling inside her.

Deep inside her.

She gripped his shoulders and willed him to keep going. “Don’t stop. Please.”

He didn’t stop, but began moving his hips in shallow thrusts.

“Relax. You’re so tight, baby. Let me in.”

And slowly, so slowly, she found herself relaxing, taking more and more of him—and he was so big and so thick—until he was in to the hilt.

Dark stopped moving. His lips found her forehead and kissed her gently.

“Give me a second,” he said, his voice shaking. “I’m about to come.”

Already?

She was nowhere near ready herself. But she was a big girl. And she’d already come once.

“It’s okay,” she said.

“Don’t. Move. A. Muscle.” His voice was a ragged groan. “Particularly not any of *those* muscles.”

She almost laughed, but held it in at the last instant, knowing that probably wouldn’t help him.

She raised her face to meet his lips. They kissed, and there was something altogether so intimate about kissing while being joined below, Alexia felt tears come to her eyes.

“Alexia?” he asked, his expression concerned. He looked like he was about to leave her, and she couldn’t stand the thought of that, so she gripped his biceps with all her strength.

“Stay. Please. It’s just so much ... so much pleasure.”

And she knew she wasn’t going to win any poetry awards for that, but it was the best she could do.

“It is,” he said, nodding. His hips started making small circles, and his cock was touching her in ways she was sure

she'd never been touched before, the pressure growing inside her, getting her closer and closer to that point of no return.

“I’m close, Luke. Don’t you dare stop now,” she begged.

His eyes seemed to darken at her use of his given name.

His thrusts grew deeper, and it was all pleasure now, as if her body were made for his and his body for her. “I want you to shout my name as you come,” he said.

And she did.

She cried out his name again and again, her inner muscles contracting around his cock so hard, she didn’t even feel the moment he finally came. But she saw it, the way his entire body tensed around her, then stilled, his face coming down to meet her shoulder as his entire body shook with the force of his release.

“I’m coming,” he said, and his voice was almost a sob.

And Alexia knew, somehow, without him having to say anything, that he needed to be held just as much as she did, so she wrapped her arms around his thick shoulders and pulled him close.



Dark

He felt tears come to his eyes and blinked them angrily away.

Not because he believed grown men shouldn't cry—he'd cried plenty of times himself and had seen men around him cry, too. Men cried just like anyone else.

But normal people didn't cry after sex.

Not even the first time they have sex in almost five years?

He couldn't say that to Alexia, because then he'd have to explain the reason behind his long celibacy.

I spent the last four years in prison for murder.

I would still be in prison, except I've been recruited by a shadow organization to take down people like your boss.

There was no good way to say it.

"That was incredible," Alexia said into his chest, her voice husky. He remembered how she'd cried out his name as she came. He didn't think any woman had ever done that before—he'd certainly never asked them to. But with Alexia, it'd felt so right ...

"It was. You're pretty incredible," he said.

"Is it okay if I take a short nap? I don't have to be back until ten p.m."

"Of course. I need to get rid of this, and I'll be right back," he said, pulling the crisp, white duvet around her slim body.

"I love how warm it is here," she said.

He didn't tell her he'd turned the heating on as far as it went, just for her. The guys would probably bitch at him all night, but they could sleep outside on their balconies, for all he cared. If Alexia was happy, that was all that mattered to him.

He stood up and walked over to the ensuite bathroom. After the last four years, he'd never take such luxuries for granted again.

He took off the condom and washed his hands, looking down at his wrists. There was nothing there—no mark on his wrists to indicate where he'd been or what he'd done. And yet, the handcuffs were still there. They might not be visible, but that didn't mean he was a free man.

Dark walked back to the bedroom and looked at Alexia. The bed covers rose and fell softly with each breath she took. She looked like she'd fallen asleep.

And he wanted to get under those covers with her and hold her—wanted it so badly it hurt, right in the center of his chest. But something stopped him.

You're not a free man.

You shouldn't be going around acting as if you were.

In another life ... in another life, he might have been the right kind of man for her. But in this life, he wasn't free to pursue a relationship.

He steeled himself against the pain. He wasn't free to pursue a relationship with Alexia, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to do everything in his power to protect her. To make sure that, whatever happened, she wasn't hurt.



Dark

“**W**hat are you thinking about, Dark?”

Alexia.

“The charity event,” he answered automatically.

“Pascale and Carrie are working on getting us tickets,” Rogue said.

“Still?” Griffin grumbled.

“It’s not the kind of thing you pick up on Amazon,” Rogue replied.

“Indeed, it’s not,” a voice said behind them.

All of them, except for Griffin, jumped a mile high. Dark cursed out loud as Thorne came into the games room.

“Jesus, Thorne, have you ever heard of knocking?”

“I had a set of keys, and didn’t think it’d be worth interrupting your work,” the man said. He was wearing dark blue jeans and a jumper with little skiers on it. The jumper might be a better disguise if he weren’t holding himself so stiffly.

“Nice jumper,” Griffin said, snorting. “Will we be getting matching ones?”

“Finish the job and I’ll get you all the jumpers you like.” His eyes roamed the games room. “Improved your game any?” he asked, pointing at the table tennis table.

“Fuck off, Thorne,” Dark said. “You know we haven’t been playing games.”

Thorne sighed. “I know. I brought you your tickets,” he said, giving an envelope to Dark. “Courtesy of the International Children’s Charity.”

“You came all the way here to deliver these?” Dark asked, his tone harsh. He held Thorne’s gaze, trying to figure out what the man was really doing here.

He doesn't trust us to get the job done.

And then, just as Thorne lowered his eyes, it hit him. Thorne wasn't here because he didn't trust them—he was here because he was jealous.

He wants to be part of the team.

He filed that information away for future reference and opened the large, white envelope, let out a short whistle.

“We're Gold donors, apparently.”

“I won't even tell you how much I had to pay to make this happen,” Thorne said, wrinkling his brow.

“But it's going to the children,” Slate said wryly.

“Yeah. Let's hope so.”

“Excuse me if I don't think too highly of an NGO that associates themselves with Kvyat,” Ash said.

“Only two tickets?” Dark said, looking at the thick cards.

“We're lucky I even managed that on such short notice. No offense, Rogue,” Thorne added, sparing a glance in Rogue's direction. “We were lucky you found out about the exchange at all.”

“It wasn't luck,” Rogue said. “I think you need better analysts on your team.”

“Carrie and Pascale are good. Maybe you could train them to be even better, once this is over.”

“Maybe,” Rogue said.

“So,” Thorne asked Dark. “Who's going inside and who stays outside?”

“I'm going inside,” Dark said. And he was saying it for the right reasons—because as a team leader he'd never led from the back, he'd never shirked danger. But he knew himself well enough to know there was another reason he wanted to be at the party. A personal reason. He had to make sure Alexia was okay, had to make sure none of this shit splattered her. “And I'll need Rogue there with me.”

Rogue nodded quickly.

“So. What’s the plan?” Thorne asked, in his clipped English accent.

Again, that eagerness.

He wishes he were one of us.

He clearly has the experience.

Why isn’t he one of us?

One day, he’d ask Thorne. But not today.

“Sit down, Thorne, and we’ll take you through it. There’s still a lot of work to be done between now and then.”



Alexia

Parties were apparently another thing the uber-wealthy did differently.

Alexia wasn't sure what she'd imagined when Kvyat had told her he'd be hosting a charity event. But it certainly wasn't this.

All day, there'd been a steady flow of trucks coming and going from Kvyat's property. Including, and these were just the things she and Nikolai had seen: an entire truck full of silk screens, chandeliers, candles and other decorative items, dozens of cases of champagne, and a green-and-silver five-tier cake that had apparently been flown in all the way from New York for the occasion, together with the baker and her assistant.

And don't forget the orchids.

Three entire vans filled with white orchids.

Alexia shivered. She wasn't a big fan of cut flowers in the first place, but the cloying, sweet smell of the orchids was making her think of sadness and death. Even now, from her bedroom in the basement, she could smell them.

The words over-the-top didn't even begin to cover it.

Now, even with her bedroom window closed, she could hear one of the security guys shouting at someone who'd apparently parked their van in the middle of the driveway. She smiled ruefully. She didn't envy the security men their job today—they must be losing their minds over this.

Now, just an hour before the event was due to start, hundreds of lanterns lined the driveway and the outside of the house, giving it a magical, fairy-tale feel.

Alexia reminded herself there was nothing magical about what was happening here. This was just one more example of Kvyat flexing his wealth. And though she didn't doubt the charity whose logo and banner were tastefully displayed in

several spots around the room did important work with children, she hated the fact that the cost of this party would likely exceed what the charity would raise for the children.

And that poor Nikolai was part of it.

Alexia had been told about the party several days earlier, when Kvyat had decided Nikolai was to play the piano at the event.

And Alexia hated him for that—for treating the boy like a show pony, for forcing him to do something that he so clearly didn't want to do.

Alexia didn't know much about music, but it didn't take any specialized knowledge to see that Nikolai was a talented pianist. The boy's long, delicate fingers flew across the keys, drawing rough and poignant sounds from it.

Unfortunately, Alexia could also see, in the straight, narrow lines of the boy's back and in the tightly held breath, how much the boy hated it.

He'd been practicing the song almost non-stop for forty-eight hours, together with his piano instructor, who connected via video call and seemed to have no other commitments or desires in life, except to see this song performed to perfection. Alexia had been forced to intervene in order to get the boy to stop long enough to eat and rest.

They spoke in Russian together, or rather the man spoke and Nikolai listened, so Alexia couldn't understand the words, but she understood the tone the older man was using, and didn't think it was a tone anyone should be using when speaking to a child.

For the hundredth time, Alexia wished she could take Nikolai away from here.

She shook her head.

There wasn't any point in thinking about that.

She wasn't going to kidnap Nikolai. Even if she wanted to, she knew she wouldn't get far.

She walked up the stairs to the main living area. And though she'd been expecting the change, it was still a shock to see how in the last couple of hours the living space had been transformed into a sparkling green and silver forest.

As she reached the top step, she ran smack into Arseny Kvyat. He was flanked by the same two women he'd spent all day with. They were dressed in black, young and slim, and each one carried a thick clipboard that seemed to weigh as much as she did. Alexia imagined they were party planners.

And it made perfect sense to her that Kvyat would have hired people to make sure the event went off without a hitch. What she didn't understand was why he looked so nervous.

Even now, dressed in a custom-made tux designed to highlight his broad shoulders while hiding his slight pot belly, the man radiated a nervous energy.

Tonight means something to him.

But she had no time to ponder what that something might be, because he was speaking to her, and she realized he must have said the same thing several times.

"You're not dressed, Miss Alexia," he said, his eyes darkening with disapproval.

She fought the urge to cower.

"I'm going to make sure Nikolai is ready, and I'll go get changed."

He nodded, looking momentarily appeased. "Please do so." There was a pregnant pause. "If my son needs to practice some more—"

"No," she said quickly. "He's ready."

She wondered about her choice of words when she went upstairs to Nikolai's room and found him sitting on his bed.

The boy was *ready*, in the sense that he was dressed in a smart black tux, looking like a miniature version of his father.

He was most certainly *not ready*, in the way he was wringing his hands together, his body rocking lightly from side

to side.

“Hey,” she said, closing the door gently behind her.

The boy’s light gray eyes, so different from his father’s dark orbs, met hers. And his eyes were completely dry, and somehow that struck her as worse than if he’d been crying.

“Are you okay, Nikolai?”

He nodded absently, staring down at his hands. There were bruises on the pads of his fingers, from all the playing he’d been doing the last couple of days. Alexia swallowed her concern.

“You’re going to do great, Nikolai.”

The rocking had stopped, but the boy was now shaking like a leaf.

“You think so?” he asked, his voice thin and thready.

“I know so,” she said, smiling. And she wanted to tell the boy that it didn’t matter, that his father would be proud of him anyway, but of course she couldn’t say such a thing. Because she’d seen Arseny Kvyat’s expression, and was pretty sure that wasn’t the case. But there *was* something she could say. “Your father’s guests are all going to think you’re incredibly brave, Nikolai. You’re going to wow them, just by being you.”

The boy took one deep breath, then another.

“Okay.”

“Let’s grab the sheet music and get you downstairs, Nikolai. Your father’s waiting for you.”

“And you’ll be there with me?”

“I’ll be right beside you,” she promised, resisting the urge to ruffle the boy’s hair. “But I need to go to my room and get changed first.”

“Okay.”



Alexia

It took Alexia two point two seconds to realize she was completely under-dressed for the occasion.

That was the time it'd taken the first woman she'd seen to shake her head, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

The woman herself, around the same age as Alexia, if she had to guess, looked delicate and waif-like in a shimmering, silver sheath that Alexia could never have hoped to fit into.

Alexia looked down at herself. The simple black dress she was wearing was the only semi-formal dress she'd packed in her suitcase. It was the kind of dress her mother would have said could take you from the office to a funeral, by which she'd meant it could be worn anywhere.

Of course, her mother had never been invited to a Gstaad charity event.

The knee-length black dress, with its boat neckline and simple straight cut, might have been perfect for a funeral, but called attention to itself as the poor sibling in a sea of colorful, shimmering bespoke gowns.

A tall woman in a pale, asymmetrical gown with floral embellishments walked by, sparing Alexia a quick, pitying glance.

Despite herself, Alexia looked down in embarrassment. Then she forced herself to her full height. She wasn't here for herself, and she didn't care about any of these people.

She was here for one reason, and one reason only—to support Nikolai.

And to keep an eye on Kvyat, in case there's anything to report.

As far as she could see, guests at the event fell cleanly into one of two types: young or rich.

That's not fair.

Some seem to be both.

She walked over to Nikolai, who stood with his father at the front of the room, welcoming guests. To anyone who didn't know them well, the man's hand on the boy's shoulder might have been taken to be a touch of support and encouragement.

Alexia knew better.

Arseny was making it clear that Nikolai belonged to him.

Even though every cell in her body told her to run in the other direction, Alexia walked towards them. When he finally recognized her, Arseny paused, blinking a couple of times.

Like a reptile.

"You look lovely tonight, my dear," he said.

Alexia felt her hands go clammy. If there was one man's interest she was hoping to avoid, it was this one.

"Thank you," she said politely, pushing her hair back from her face. "Nikolai, you should probably go to the piano. We don't want to start late." Kvyat had been very clear on the fact that he wanted Nikolai to start playing at exactly eight p.m.

The boy looked up at his father, who removed his large hand from the boy's slim shoulder. "Yes. Go get ready, my boy."

The boy nodded, looking almost relieved.

Alexia turned to follow him, but Kvyat stopped her. "Miss Alexia," he began.

"Yes?"

"You really do look lovely tonight. When Nikolai is done, the housekeeper will escort him up to his room. I would like you to stay and ... enjoy a glass of champagne."

Rage simmered inside her.

So your friends can laugh at me?

But she lowered her eyes and nodded quickly. "Of course. Thank you, Mr. Kvyat."

“Maybe you should call me Arseny.”

Alexia pretended not to hear that as she stepped off after Nikolai. Her heart was beating a mile a minute.

Not going well.

This is not going well.

“Are you ready, Nikolai?” she asked softly, making a show of preparing the sheet music that the boy didn’t really need.

The boy nodded. “One way or another, it’ll be over in fifteen minutes.”

Alexia nodded, struck once again by the boy’s maturity, and saddened by it. The boy’s instructor had shortened the piece from thirty to fifteen minutes, not out of concern for Nikolai, but rather because Kvyat had requested fifteen minutes of entertainment.

A few days earlier, Alexia wouldn’t have been able to tell you who Sergei Profokiev was. But it didn’t take an expert musician to see how technically challenging his *Second Sonata* was.

How inappropriate for a child with small hands.

Nikolai started playing. The haunting, drawn-out notes from the beginning of the piece drew people to their side of the living area. Soon, fifty or sixty people stood there, staring silently at the boy.

The music moved towards the rapid-fire octaves that would exhaust a grown pianist. Alexia clenched her hands as Nikolai worked through them. The music changed again, then, to something fanciful and dramatic, and it seemed to Alexia that the entire room held their collective breaths.

Her eyes were suddenly pulled to the far side of the room, where two tall men walked through the door, elegant in their classic, black tuxedos. The taller one smiled at something his colleague said, but the smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. She knew that, even from this distance, because she knew exactly what those blue eyes looked like when he smiled.



Dark

Fuck, she was beautiful.

Like a wild dandelion loose in a field of plastic orchids.

He wasn't the only one who had noticed. Of the people crowding the piano pretending to look at the boy, half of the men and some of the women were staring at Alexia.

Dark could see why. She was dressed in a simple black dress that showed off her beautiful shoulders and the nape of her neck. Her hair was out of her face, done up in a simple, classy ponytail. And while the dress's neckline was much less risqué than most, the rest of the dress, down to her knees, molded itself to her curves in an intoxicating promise. She'd done something to her eyes, to make them dark and smoky—something that made the green stand out, like emeralds.

Dark wanted to rush to her and stake his claim.

Make it clear to all the men in the room that this was one treasure they couldn't have.

Mine.

All mine.

He breathed in and out several times to get himself back under control.

“Your girl's popular,” Rogue said lightly from his left side. Even though he wasn't carrying a gun, Dark didn't like having anyone on his right.

Dark turned to look at Rogue. The man cleaned up nicely. He'd taken the time to comb his hair for once, tying it back neatly at the back of his neck, and looked suave and in control, like a man used to wearing a dinner jacket.

It was hard to focus with Alexia so close, even though he'd known he was going to see her at the party.

Dark forced himself back on the job. He had two objectives tonight. To get the job done, and to make sure

Alexia was okay. To make sure whatever went down didn't hurt her.

The music boomed to its final crescendo, the boy's hands moving faster than Dark would have thought possible, then finally descended into complete silence.

For a moment, the room was a silent tableau. Then, everybody erupted in applause. Alexia, standing beside the boy, clapped the loudest.

The boy stood up, a blush spreading up his neck and all the way past his cheeks and his ears. He looked up at someone standing in the first row, and there was such fear and worry in the boy's gaze, Dark didn't need to ask himself who he was looking at.

Kvyat.

He elbowed Rogue gently.

"There he is. In the first row."

"You take care of it?"

Dark nodded. "You head upstairs, find the office. Whatever happens, it'll most likely happen there."

Rogue had managed to download plans of Kvyat's house from the municipality. They knew the office was on the second floor, right next to the master bedroom—wealthy people apparently liked to be close to their secrets.

Dark made his way through the room, not quite elbowing his way through, but using his bulk in a way that made people make space for him. A hand skimmed across the back of his thighs and he tensed—looked back to see a slender older woman in a white dress, wearing a diamond choker that looked like it could keep an orphanage going for a few years. She caught his eye and smirked, unrepentant. And she looked like she was going to say something, but Dark kept right on walking.

The stench of money in the room was getting to him.

Finally, he had his target in his direct line of sight.

It was Kvyat he should be looking at, but for a moment Alexia was all he could focus on. She stood very close to the boy, shoulder to shoulder, and she could see in the lines of her body how much she was holding the boy up, sharing her strength with him.

She's okay.

She's okay.

Dark turned his eyes to Kvyat. And he didn't know what he'd expected to see, but the man just watched his young son perform in a room full of strangers, so he'd expected some measure of pride and delight. But Kvyat's expression was cold and cruel, as if something had disappointed him greatly.

Alexia took a small step forward and said something to him, her voice too soft for Dark to hear the words. The man's attention went from the boy to the woman, and he barked out something at her that made her cringe. But she didn't step back.

She's protecting the boy.

Dark watched the way the man towered over Alexia and the boy, and he wanted to keep walking and show him what it was like, when someone bigger than yourself towered over you, and made you feel small.

And he was tempted to do exactly that. Fuck the mission, fuck everything, because if that man touched Alexia—

He's not going to touch Alexia.

This was Kvyat's party. He'd invited all these people here. He wasn't going to do anything in front of them.

But after ... would the boy be safe? Would Alexia be safe?

Dark forced himself to relax. Despite the fact that people saw what they wanted to see, people were also conditioned to detect danger. He had to pretend he was simply one more rich asshole pretending to help children in need.

He picked up a glass of champagne from a passing server, brought the glass to his lips, and kept walking.

Alexia's eyes looked beyond Kvyat—and straight at him. There was no surprise in her gaze, but he hadn't expected it. He knew she'd noticed him earlier, when the music was playing—she'd seen him as soon as he'd walked through the door.

Dark lowered his eyes, hoping she wouldn't say anything. And he should have talked to her earlier, made up some excuse as to why he would have been invited to this party. But he hadn't been able to—hadn't been able to make himself lie to her again, even though she could get him killed if she said something that raised Kvyat's suspicions.

But she didn't say anything. Her full attention was back on the boy, the two of them offering the perfect distraction.

So Dark did what he had to do. He walked up behind Kvyat, stumbling lightly, the champagne glass in his hand sloshing on the man's dinner jacket.

“So sorry,” he slurred. “So sorry.”

His hands came up to wipe awkwardly at the other man's jacket, only succeeding in spreading the liquid on the rich fabric.

Kvyat's expression froze, then stretched into a thin smile as he removed Dark's hands from his body. “Leave me,” he requested, his voice that of a man used to being obeyed.

And one of Kvyat's security guys was there immediately, his large body coming between him and Kvyat, who was already walking away.

“So sorry,” Dark repeated dumbly, letting his body go loose as the body guard shoved him back into the crowd.

It didn't matter now where Kvyat went, because on the inside of his lapel was a tiny microphone. And with Rogue hiding upstairs, they should be able to hear and record anything that happened in that office.

Dark let himself look back at where Alexia and the boy had been standing. Except neither of them was there anymore. They were heading up the stairs together, her hand on the boy's shoulder.

Dark followed them with his eyes until they reached the first-floor landing, unable to tear his gaze away from her shapely behind.

He wondered if she'd be coming back down afterwards.

Better if she stays upstairs with the boy, away from this crowd.

Dark didn't know what Kvyat's contact looked like. It might be anyone. The elderly woman who'd touched his ass earlier. The successful startup founder. The businessman parading around with his trophy wife. The young American heiress whose face he'd seen multiple times in the news.

Dark knew better than anyone the darkness people could hold inside.

Any of them, given the right incentive, could be working with the Iranians.

"Shit." Rogue's whisper sounded loud in his ear.

"What's going on, Rogue?" Dark hissed, barely moving his mouth.

"Kvyat's upstairs. He just stepped out of the elevator."

Where the fuck is the elevator?

He found it, now, camouflaged behind the same dark mahogany paneling as the wall. Dark had been too distracted by Alexia's presence on the stairs to even wonder where Kvyat was doing.

"Where's he going?"

"To his bedroom, it looks like. I'm hiding in the linen cupboard."

"Sounds cozy."

"Fuck off, Dark."

Dark walked around the room, looking for anyone who looked even remotely out of place. Even with the terrace doors open, the sheer number of bodies in the room generated an inordinate amount of heat.

He kept an eye out on the elevator—until his eyes were drawn back to the stairs again.

Alexia.

His heart nearly stopped when, instead of coming back down the stairs, she walked right past the landing, towards Kvyat's master suite and office.

He blinked once, twice. And there was something calm and purposeful about the way she moved, but also stealthy.

She doesn't want to be seen.

The realization was like a punch to the stomach.

It couldn't be Alexia.

Please, God.

Don't let it be Alexia.

But so many pieces of the puzzle were suddenly falling into place. Her decision to quit a stable job and cross the ocean to spend a few months in Gstaad. Her unwillingness to leave, even though Kvyat's parenting style clearly bothered her.

You knew she had secrets.

No.

She wouldn't knowingly hurt anyone.

Through sheer force of will, he forced his lungs to engage again—breathed deeply two or three times.

“Dark,” Rogue whispered. “Your girl just walked into Kvyat's office.”

“Is he there?”

“He's still in his bedroom. I don't—“ Rogue paused for a moment, as if looking for the right way to say this. “From the way she was acting, I don't think she wanted anyone to see her.”

What the hell are you doing, Alexia?

“Let me know if she comes out.”

“Too late. Kvyat is on the move, walking towards his office. And he’s changed out of his dinner jacket. It’s blue now.”

Fuck me.

We’re not going to hear anything.

And Alexia’s in there with him.

“Is anybody else there?”

“No,” Rogue said, his voice suddenly very heavy. “Just the two of them.”

Dark shared the heaviness. Because if there was nobody else there, and this was where the meeting was taking place, then Alexia was the fixer.



Alexia

Alexia's shivers had nothing to do with her short-sleeved dress.

She'd messed up.

She wasn't a secret agent.

She was a teacher from upstate New York.

She should have said goodnight to Nikolai and headed back downstairs to the party—or, even better, down to her room in the basement.

Under her covers sounded good right around now.

But the hallway had been empty when she'd come out of Nikolai's bedroom. She'd made it all the way back to the stairs before realizing Kvyat's office door was ajar.

That had never happened before, in all the weeks she'd been here.

She hadn't been able to help herself. Taking a quick look around to make sure she really *was* alone, she'd gone to the office door and knocked softly, her mind running a hundred miles a second, trying to figure out what she could say to Kvyat if he came to the door.

But Kvyat didn't come to the door, and Alexia breathed a sigh of relief.

A strange feeling came upon her, then, as if she were being observed, but once again, there was nobody there.

She didn't think Kvyat had any cameras in the house. She'd never seen any, and the man valued his privacy too much for that. Besides, if there were cameras, she was already in trouble. She might as well go all the way.

Go inside.

Just a quick look.

If there was nothing there, she was going to email her contact and let him know she was done. She couldn't keep living like this.

Tonight, when she'd seen Dark coming in, she'd wanted so badly to go to him. He'd seemed surprised to see her standing there, and she realized he still had no idea where she lived.

Because you kept it a secret from him.

She wondered how he'd scored an invitation. He'd been with one of his friends—the guy with the ponytail and the intense gray eyes. Maybe they were more famous, or richer, than she'd realized. It made no difference to her, but she didn't want to keep hiding things from him. Not if there was a chance that—

Focus, Alexia.

Focus on the office.

The corner office was large, the space dominated by two windows—each facing a different part of the mountain range—and an enormous wooden desk in varnished wood. Unlike in the rest of the house, however, there were Asian influences here—a child-sized sitting Buddha bronze statue near the window, an antique Japanese screen in the opposite corner of the room, a shelf full of oriental-looking figurines. It was so different from the rest of the house, Alexia wondered vaguely whether Kvyat had brought these objects with him.

And then, resting on the floor against the desk, Alexia noticed the shiny silver briefcase.

Kvyat's briefcase.

The one he carried to and from his bedroom every day.

She held her breath.

If there was anything to find, it'd be there.

She just *knew* it.

But if Kvyat found her looking in his briefcase, there would be nothing she could say. Being found in his office would be bad. Being found peeking into his suitcase could be

... deadly. She'd be lucky to be fired. This was the man who'd killed her brother. And she knew him now, knew him well enough to know he wouldn't hesitate to kill again.

But the house is full of people.

The city was full of people, too.

That didn't save Rob.

A sudden calm filled her. She had to do this. Rob deserved some justice. She could do this one more thing—look in the suitcase. If there was nothing incriminating, she would leave. Go back to her life. Or maybe go back to Dark. She would have done everything she could.

She moved as carefully as she could, wishing she'd thought to take her high heels off. But it was too late now.

Keep going.

It's now or never.

She was standing in front of the desk, close enough that she could touch the briefcase, when she heard the sound.

Footsteps.

Out in the hallway.

Heading this way.

No.

Please.

She waited for a miracle, for whoever was on the other side of the door to turn away.

A shadow appeared under the door.

Suppressing a cry, Alexia did the only thing she could—she ran to the Japanese screen in the far corner and crouched behind it, making herself into a tight ball.

Her heart beat hard against her chest. Disjointed thoughts flashed through her mind.

Can he hear my heartbeat?

Please, please don't let him hear my heartbeat.

I want to live.

I want to see Dark again.

There's so much I didn't say, because I was afraid.

And a part of her wanted to stand up and run. But it was too late. Kvyat—and she knew it was him now from the sounds he was making as he talked to himself in Russian—closed the door behind him and moved towards his desk.

You'll never make it out before he catches you.

You have to stay still.

That's the only way you're going to survive this.

Making a sound would be the quickest way to get him to find her.

Stay quiet and live.

Kvyat spoke to somebody in rapid-fire Russian. She couldn't see him from where she crouched, but heard him sit down heavily on the leather chair. Then the telltale click of the briefcase being opened.

Kvyat began humming a little, happy song.

In her corner, Alexia shivered. Because she didn't know what kind of thing could make a man like Kvyat hum like that. But she wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

There was a quick knock at the door, and Alexia felt her hope soar.

Please get him out of here.

Please ask him to go downstairs.

Kvyat interrupted his song.

“Come in, come in,” he said in English. The door opened and closed again, and Alexia heard soft footsteps making their way into the room.

Flat shoes.

A man.

“Great party,” the newcomer said. The *r* was a thick sound coming from the back of his throat.

“You’re late,” Kvyat replied in a haughty tone.

The other man sighed loudly and theatrically. “Do you know who I am?”

“Of course,” Kvyat said. And there was something new in his voice now, something that sounded a lot like ... fear.

And Alexia didn’t want to be here, didn’t want to know this man who inspired fear in Kvyat.

“Then you’ll speak to me with respect.”

Kvyat huffed. “Of course. I was simply stating a fact.”

“Do you have it?”

“I do,” Kvyat said quickly, shuffling some papers.

“No,” the newcomer said softly, and Alexia marveled at the way he’d taken control of the conversation—taken control of Kvyat. “I do not need to see it. Not now.”

“You don’t—“ Kvyat sputtered.

“We’re not doing this tonight.”

“You don’t have my money,” Kvyat said shrewdly.

The newcomer clucked his tongue. He still sounded completely relaxed. “Not on me, I don’t.”

“We said we’d do this today. Tell your friends they’re not the only people interested.”

“Is that a threat, Kvyat? It sounds a lot like a threat ... which is interesting. Nobody has threatened me in a very long time.”

“It’s not a threat,” Kvyat said quickly, and there was a whining tone to his voice Alexia had never heard before. “I want my money today.”

“You’ll get your money ... when we’re good and ready.”

Alexia’s calf muscles were cramping so badly, she didn’t know how long she could hold this position. But something

about the newcomer's smooth voice made her think Kvyat wasn't the biggest danger anymore.

Suddenly, there was a loud crash—it sounded like it came from the room next door.

“What the hell is that?” The newcomer was already by the door. Through the crack between the screens, Alexia caught sight of polished black shoes, slim black dress pants and curly blond hair.

Instants later, they were gone.

Alexia held the position a moment longer, then stood up, her leg muscles crying out for relief. She hobbled towards the desk—just as a shadow appeared by the window.

Alexia jumped back, forgetting her legs were in no shape to hold her. Her left leg crumpled, throwing her against the desk. Alexia raised her hands to protect her face, but the corner of the desk rose too fast, smacking her in the temple.

She saw a shadow beside her, and then she didn't see anything else.



Dark

“What the fuck is happening, Rogue?” Dark asked, fairly vibrating with fear. He’d locked himself in one of the downstairs bathrooms, since he couldn’t very well stand out there talking to himself.

Sheer will kept him in the bathroom, when every instinct he had was telling him to bulldozer his way upstairs and storm into Kvyat’s office. Sheer will, and the knowledge that he could get his team and Alexia killed.

But he had to get Alexia out of there.

“Wait, Dark. Wait.”

And he recognized the wisdom in Rogue’s words.

Wait.

Because if Alexia’s the fixer, then the only thing you’ll manage by running in there half-cocked is to get yourself and your teammates killed.

Dark dug his nails into his palms.

No.

It was getting hard to breathe.

She’s not the fixer.

She can’t be.

And then Rogue’s voice was back. “Something’s happening, Dark.”

Dark didn’t even bother articulating the question. Rogue knew he was listening.

“Kvyat’s main security guy just led a man up the stairs and into Kvyat’s office.”

“Fuck.” That was Griffin’s voice, coming from inside the van they’d parked outside. “Rogue, your facial recognition software just picked up someone. But it’s not possible. It can’t be.”

“Who?” Dark asked. He wasn’t in the mood to play games.

“A ghost,” Griffin said. “Vincent Lemercier. A man who’s been dead for years. I think we found our fixer, Dark.”

“Tall and slim? With curly blond hair?” Rogue asked quietly.

“Bingo,” Griffin replied.

“That’s the man I just saw walk into Kvyat’s office.”

And Alexia is in there with him.

What did you get into, baby?

Dark’s head throbbed. They didn’t have eyes or ears in the room. The exchange could be happening as they spoke, and they’d have no idea. Or those men could be hurting Alexia.

“What do you want me to do, Dark?” Rogue asked. And Dark recognized his teammate’s willingness to run into danger. But this wasn’t his battle.

“Hold your position, Rogue,” Dark said. He looked out the window at the candle-filled yard outside. If the floor plan he’d studied had been right, he was standing right below Kvyat’s corner office. And he wished there were fewer candles, and a bit more darkness. Wished he had better shoes, as well. But he’d have to make do.

“I need eyes on the south side of the house,” Dark said. “Let me know when the security guards are coming. I’m going to climb up to them.”

“Are you nuts?”

Maybe.

Probably.

He pushed the thought of Alexia in danger to the back of his mind, and waited for Griffin and Slate to give him the okay.

“Guard just walked by. You have maybe sixty seconds before the next one comes around, Dark,” Slate said.

Sixty seconds is more than enough.

Dark opened the window and sat on the windowsill. He grabbed on to the top of the window, pulling his upper body up and out, and began climbing.

An icy wind blew on him, but Dark wasn't worried. He'd be back inside long before the cold could do any damage.

Every few feet, he slipped. His dress shoes were the worst possible choice for this exercise. But he wasn't going to fall. He couldn't fall.

"You've got thirty seconds," Slate said, his voice calm and steady.

For this next part, Dark gave up trying to find purchase with his feet and pulled himself up on the strength of his arms alone. Finally, he could see into the office window. He held the pull-up, keeping himself immobile, knowing any movement coming from the window would be easily detected from inside.

There were two men in the room—he recognized Kvyat. The other one, looking young, handsome and jaded in his tux, had to be Lemercier.

As Dark watched, a thin, ugly smile played on Lemercier's lips. He said something to Kvyat that made the large man recoil. He moved closer to his desk, standing protectively next to a hard-shelled silver briefcase.

"Don't move," Slate's voice whispered in his ear. "The guard's right beneath you."

Dark's arms were beginning to cramp, his shoulder still achy from when he'd hurt it in the incident with the sled, but he forced himself still until Slate told him he could move again.

Even then, he didn't let himself move.

He had to get his hands on that briefcase.

And then, his eyes were drawn away from the briefcase, and away from the two men.

When Dark had first looked into the room, his eyes had glanced past the Japanese screen in the corner. Now,

something made him look again. Because from where he was, he could see the dark corner behind the screen—and the small figure huddling behind.

Alexia.

The blood froze in Dark's veins.

She's no innocent.

And yet, she was hiding from the two men, her slim body shaking. Even from outside the room, Dark could sense her fear, potent enough that he wondered how the two men hadn't realized she was there.

It was only a matter of time until they did.

And the briefcase, which had been top of his mind moments earlier, all but disappeared from his radar.

He had to get Alexia out of there.

Slowly, since there was nothing under his feet anymore, he shifted sideways along the cornice, holding on by the strength of his fingers alone, looking for the next window.

“Rogue. Alexia needs help. I'm going to create a distraction in Kvyat's room, see if I can get them out of the room.”

“Understood. I'll be ready.”

Dark finally found purchase with his feet, standing up on the small balcony that he knew looked right into Kvyat's master suite. It was dark inside, but he could just about make out an enormous king-sized bed.

He stretched out his arms gratefully.

Fuck, that hurt.

But he couldn't stop. He hefted a small, solid-looking flower pot in his hand—hefted it and slammed it on the glass.

It broke on the second go, the crash louder than he'd expected.

Perfect.

Dark didn't wait. He pulled himself up on his arms again, making the same journey in reverse.

"They're both running towards you, Dark," Rogue said quietly.

But Dark was no longer there. He was on his way to the office once again.

Back to Alexia.

"I'm going to the office," Rogue said, correctly interpreting Dark's silence. "I'll open the window for you."

Dark didn't bother replying.

It was harder this time—because his arms were tired, and his fingers half-frozen—but he finally made it to the window, pulled himself up on his elbows. And at least he didn't have to be as careful to stay silent this time around.

He had one leg up, getting ready to push against the window—break it, if necessary—when Rogue opened the window for him from the inside.

Dark clambered inside ... and saw Alexia's prone body on the ground.

No.

Something in his gaze got Rogue talking—fast. "I didn't do anything to her. I saw her fall and hit her head against the desk, Dark," Rogue said, rushing his words. "She's breathing."

Dark was on his knees beside her in an instant, checking for himself.

And though his fingers were shaking hard, her pulse came through, strong and steady. He moved her head gently and saw the bruise forming on one side of her head.

Dark pulled in a harsh breath. He had to get Alexia out of here. But there was still a chance to save the mission.

"The briefcase," he told Rogue. "There was a silver briefcase on the desk."

Rogue shook his head. “It’s gone now. Kvyat had it in his hand when he ran away.” He licked his lips. “I’m planting a bug under the desk. We might get lucky, if they don’t sweep every day. We need to get out of here, Dark.”

Dark nodded. There would be guards all over the house in a matter of minutes—if they weren’t there already. And they couldn’t exactly walk downstairs with an unconscious woman in their arms.

“Do you have a rope?”

Rogue nodded, bringing out a thin piece of cord from his pocket. “Always.”

“Help me get Alexia on my back. We’re going out the window,” Dark said, pointing to the window on the other side, away from the bedroom window where Kvyat and his guards were probably standing right now.

Rogue didn’t hesitate. The man was cool under pressure.

Between them, they easily lifted the unconscious woman onto Dark’s back, then Rogue passed the ropes around her legs and shoulders, securing her.

They were almost done when Rogue spoke again.

“Are you sure about this, Dark?” There was a pregnant pause. “What was she doing here?”

“We’re about to find out. Tell the others to get the van ready.”



Alexia

It was the ringing in her ears that woke her up—a clanging loud enough that she opened her eyes to check where it was coming from.

She regretted it immediately and clenched them shut again, took a moment to orient herself. The pain was worse on the left side of her head. She brought up her hand to check—or at least tried to.

Her hand didn't move.

She tugged harder.

By this time, the pain quickly took second place to her fear.

She opened her eyes again, squinting. She was sitting on a chair in a darkened room, her arms tied behind her, surrounded by shelves and bottles.

A wine cellar.

What am I doing in a wine cellar?

She tried to breathe, but her lungs refused to inflate.

This is wrong.

She couldn't remember anything,

What happened?

“Here. Have a sip of water,” a deep voice said beside her. The owner of the voice raised a plastic water bottle to her lips.

Alexia pulled her head away.

She didn't need water.

Her chest still wasn't moving.

She was going to suffocate.

Something changed in the man's manner as he recognized her distress. He pulled the water away and kneeled beside her. “Hey. Calm down. Breathe.”

Surprise made her lungs start working again.

She recognized him.

“You’re ... Luke’s friend ...” she said, confused.

Griffin nodded. From a table next to them, he pulled up a photograph.

“Who is this man?”

“I don’t know,” she said, not looking at it. She pulled at her bound wrists, but there was no give.

“Please look at it,” Griffin said. His voice was still calm, but there was something sharp in it that made her look up at him, and at the picture.

“I don’t know,” she repeated.

“You *do* know.” And his beautiful green eyes seemed suddenly full of darkness. “Tell me.”

“Where are we?”

Silence met her question.

Alexia whimpered. “I was hiding behind the screen. I only saw his face for an instant.”

Griffin’s face lit up into a wolfish smile.

“You were hiding. Yes. Tell me about that.”

She didn’t like his smile. “Where’s Luke? I want to see Luke.”

“You think Dark will help you?”

“I don’t think he’ll let you hurt me,” she cried.

Griffin blinked.

Then the door burst open.

“Get the fuck away from her,” Dark roared, striding into the room.

He’s here.

He came for me.

Alexia tugged at the ropes binding her wrists together. “Please. Please help me,” she cried.

Then Griffin blocked her sight of Dark.

“You need to wait outside, Dark.” Though Dark had a couple of inches on him, the man seemed completely at ease. “This is what I do.”

Three more men walked through the door.

Alexia looked at the five of them together.

They're not friends.

How could you have been so stupid?

She remembered the scars on Dark's naked body. His quiet intensity. The muscles on his body.

“Who are you?” she asked.

She'd been so stupid. To believe the story that they were television writers. To believe that a man like him could be interested in her.

It'd all been a lie. Everything between them—a lie.

That last thought was the one that really hurt.

Alexia sobbed. Snot rolled down her face.

“Untie her, Griffin,” Dark said.

Griffin sighed, then brought out a knife. Alexia tensed as the knife reached her skin, but Griffin's own hand went between her skin and the ropes. He tugged twice, and then she was free. She touched the side of her head—wincing at the lump she felt there.

Dark handed her an ice pack and a kleenex. Alexia took both without thinking, and then it was too late to give it back, even though she didn't want anything from him.

“Are you okay?” Dark asked.

“We didn't just bump into each other,” she said, thinking out loud. “You engineered it.”

Dark looked as if she'd slapped him, and a part of her wanted to slap him—wanted him to feel some of the pain she was feeling.

“I wasn't the one supposed to make contact, but yes, I was tailing you.”

She was on her feet in an instant—wobbly, but she didn't need to go very far. Her hand came up. She slapped him as hard as she could, hard enough to turn his face sideways—hard enough that she could see the red imprint of her palm on his cheek.

“I didn't want to hurt you, Alexia,” he said thickly.

And wasn't that hilarious, but a part of her wanted to comfort him.

Ha. Ha. Ha.

Dark turned around and walked out of the room, followed by the other four men. Griffin was the last one to leave, locking the door carefully behind him.

Alexia wavered on her feet, barely made it back to the chair before her legs gave up on her.

And now what.



Dark

Dark made it all the way down the hallway and into the games room before losing his tenuous thread on reality. He punched the wall, opening up the plaster. His hand throbbed, but it wasn't enough, so he did it again.

Then he turned to find Griffin, strode up to the man.

"You tied her down," he said. He was still seeing red. He'd gone upstairs to get some ice for her, and come back down to find Griffin interrogating her.

Griffin shrugged.

"Somebody had to do it."

Dark's fist closed as he prepared to strike.

"It wasn't him, Dark," Ash said, coming up beside Griffin. "It was all of us. We all knew it had to be done."

"We need to know what she knows."

"Maybe she doesn't know anything," Dark said.

But even as he said it, Dark understood how unlikely that was.

"So she just ended up in Kvyat's office at that precise moment in time? Don't forget, I saw her sneak inside," Rogue said.

"Dark, please. I know she means something to you, but you can't let your feelings—"

"Don't you dare tell me what I can or cannot do."

"There's something else," Rogue said slowly.

Something else?

How much more can there be?

"She was at an internet café in town yesterday."

"So?" Dark asked defensively. And he knew he was being an asshole, knew none of his teammates deserved this, but he

couldn't help himself.

"She fired off an email. I printed out a copy, if you want to read it."

Dark didn't want to read it. He wanted to close his eyes and go back in time.

But that wasn't really an option.

He held out his hand for the paper, scanned it briefly. It was a short email, didn't take him long to read. And by the time he was done, it was hard to argue Alexia might be an innocent.

She was tracking Kvyat as well.

"Who did she send it to? Who is she working with?"

"That's what we need to find out," Ash said.

"If you can't do it," Griffin said, "let me speak with her. She'll tell me the truth."

Dark placed himself between the men and the door.

"No."

"No?" Slate asked, straightening to his full six-foot-five. "You don't think we deserve to know? She could bring us all down."

Dark considered his next words carefully.

The situation was damning, for sure, but he *knew* Alexia—knew her in more than just a Biblical way. Whatever else was going on, he knew she wouldn't willingly do anything to hurt people.

"I'm not saying that. But I know her. She's not our enemy. And I won't let you touch a hair on her head."

"You'd take us all on?" Griffin asked, and again, there was that undercurrent of threat in his voice.

"If that's what it takes."

For her, he'd take on the world, and damn the consequences. Damn the mission. He'd go back to prison. For the rest of his life, if that's what it took.

“She wouldn’t even know you were willing to die for her,” Ash said.

Dark bared his teeth. “She doesn’t need to know, because I’m not going to die. But none of you are getting through this door.”

“Okay,” Ash said, taking a step back.

“Okay?”

“If you’re so sure, Dark, we’ll do it your way,” Ash said.

Dark looked around him, unsure of what was going on, but already he could feel the tension in the room dissipating.

“What?”

Griffin nodded in agreement. “We’ll do it your way, Dark. But, for the record, I wasn’t going to hurt her.”

“Wait till we go back in there,” Rogue said, smiling. “She’s probably going to throw half the wine cellar at us.”



Alexia

Dark strode back inside, alone this time.

Alexia tightened her hand around the broken bottle, holding it like a weapon between them. Red drops fell onto the tiled floor, making her feel queasy. She wished she'd chosen a bottle of white wine, so it wouldn't look like someone was bleeding to death next to her.

"I'm not going to tell you anything," she said. She was trying to be brave, but her teeth chattered from cold and fear. Somewhere between the house and here she'd lost her shoes. Icy cold came up into her body through the soles of her feet.

"Nobody's going to hurt you, Alexia. I swear to you."

"You swear to me?" she asked, and she heard the notes of hysteria in her voice but didn't care. "Do you hear yourself? Do you even realize how little your word means?"

His blue eyes were full of pain.

"Put that bottle down, Alexia, before you hurt yourself."

"I'm not going to hurt myself," she said. "But if you come closer, I might hurt you."

"I swear to you, I'm not going to hurt you."

"You'll get your friends to do it instead?"

They both looked down at her reddened wrists.

"I'm sorry, Alexia. But you need to tell me what you know. You've been speaking to someone about Kvyat," he said, "and I need to know to who."

She shook her head. "I'm not going to tell you anything. You lied to me, just as much as I lied to you. None of you have ever worked in television. I know that now. All that shit about Hugh Jackman ..."

"You're right," he admitted. He spread his hands in front of him. "We have never met Hugh Jackman. We came here to

take Kvyat down.”

“Take him down?” she asked on a sharp inhale. She felt like she’d slipped down some rabbit hole.

Is he talking about killing someone?

“Your boss is not a good man,” Dark said.

“Thanks. I kind of figured that out for myself.”

“Who are you spying for, Alexia?”

“I’m not spying,” she said, her voice shaking.

“Is Alexia even your real name?”

“Yes. I’m Alexia Miller. I’m a teacher. Everything I told you is true ...” A small whimper escaped her. “But I did promise to keep an eye out in case I saw Kvyat do anything illegal. Anything he could be prosecuted for.”

“Why? What do you get out of it? Money?”

She laughed wryly. “No.” She took a deep breath. “Five years ago, Kvyat killed my twenty-one-year-old brother—ran him over in his yellow Lamborghini, then managed to cover it up.”

Dark’s face went pale.

“God. I’m sorry, baby.”

“Don’t you fucking dare *baby* me. You and your friends locked me up in a wine cellar.” She sighed. “I’d resigned myself to never getting justice for my brother. Then, several months ago, a journalist contacted me. He wants to see Kvyat in jail as well.”

Dark shook his head.

“He told you to spy on him. Jesus, Alexia, if those men had found you in that room ... they would have killed you.”

He closed his eyes, as if struggling for control.

Alexia raised her jaw defiantly. How dare he act concerned now, after everything he’d done, after all the lies he’d told her. “It’s my life, in case you haven’t noticed, Dark.” She paused for a moment. “Is Luke Dark even your real name?”

He flinched as if she'd slapped him. "It's my real name."

"I don't know what I was thinking," she admitted softly. "I was so scared they would find me ..."

"Did you hear their conversation, Alexia?"

"You're looking for it, too, aren't you?"

"It?" he asked slowly.

He still doesn't trust me.

And why would he?

You've both been lying to each other the whole time.

"Whatever it is that was in that briefcase. The man with the French accent wanted it. Kvyat kept talking about an exchange, like he expected it to happen there and then, but the Frenchman told him it would happen when he was good and ready."

"So the exchange didn't happen." Dark nodded, and Alexia realized that was somehow important to him—realized also that he wasn't going to share any more detail about it with her.

"I want to go home," she said, then realized she didn't have a home to go to. Kvyat's place wasn't home, but neither was ... wherever it was they were. Probably the basement of the house the men were staying in.

"I took you out the window," he said, his voice completely matter-of-fact. "Nobody knows you're missing. Kvyat probably thinks you went to your bedroom after dropping the boy in his room."

Out the window?

We could have died.

Alexia took a deep breath. This would be funny, if it wasn't all so pathetic and if it didn't hurt quite so much.

She lowered the bottle. Her fingers were cramping, and there was no point in pretending she might hurt him with it. She wouldn't.

“Tell me what you want to do, Alexia,” Dark said, his eyes glittering darkly. And she had the sudden feeling that, if she told him she was afraid, he would get her out of here. No matter what it cost him.

“I want to know who you really are.”

Dark’s expression shuttered.

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Then we don’t have much to talk about. Get me back to Kvyat’s place before he notices I’m missing.”

“That’s probably for the best, if you want to go back. But you don’t have to, Alexia. I can get you out.”

“You want me to trust you, yet you can’t tell me who you really are,” she mused.

“I can get you out,” he repeated stubbornly. “Back to the US, or wherever you want to go.”

Wherever I want to go ...

Only a few days earlier, she’d thought of going away with him.

So naïve.

So stupid.

And she was angry. At herself and at him, for having made a fool of her, for having let her make a fool of herself.

“I was your way into Kvyat’s life. None of *this* ... none of this was real. You let me think it was, but it wasn’t real. Did they pay you extra to have sex with me?” she said, and it was impossible to keep the pain from her voice.

Dark’s jaw clenched hard. “It wasn’t like that, Alexia. That’s not why... that’s not why I slept with you.”

She laughed darkly.

She knew that.

She’d been the one throwing herself at him.

“I’m not your problem anymore, Dark. Call me a cab, or get out of my way.”



Dark

“Are you okay, Dark?” Slate asked, his tone compassionate. They were back in the games room, sitting around that damn table tennis table once again.

If he closed his eyes, it was almost as if the previous night hadn’t happened. But it had happened.

Dark swallowed thickly. He had to stop worrying about Alexia. But to think of her back in Kvyat’s house ... if the man suspected her of spying on him, he’d kill her.

And Dark couldn’t live with that.

No matter what happened, he couldn’t live with that.

His stomach felt like he’d swallowed an entire box of aspirin, and the acid was drilling through the walls.

Rogue handed him a cup, and he took it with shaking hands.

“Tea, with a splash of milk. Drink it.”

Dark didn’t understand why they were all being so kind to him, when he might have single-handedly fucked up the entire op.

“Thorne’s calling. Should I put him on speaker?” Rogue asked.

“Sure.”

No reason to delay the inevitable.

“What happened last night?” he asked without preamble.

Dark was about to respond when Ash stood up.

“We know who the fixer is. Are you sitting down, Thorne?”

Thorne’s face crinkled impatiently.

“Get on with it. Who is it?”

“Vincent Lemercier.”

Thorne's eyebrow raised almost comically. For once, he seemed at a loss for words.

“Impossible,” he finally said. “He’s dead. He’s been dead —“

“Yeah,” Griffin said. “We know. But it was him, Thorne. Alive, and well, and working for the Iranians.”

“Lemercier is ...” Even Thorne seemed out of words. “Does he have the plans?”

“The two men met last night, but the exchange didn’t happen,” Ash said. “We’ve got a bug in place in Kvyat’s office, and we’re waiting to hear.”

“Do you need help? I’m in France at the moment, but I could be there the day after tomorrow.”

“If you’re in Lyon, maybe you could ask your friends at Interpol about Lemercier,” Rogue said calmly. “Figure out how he’s managed to stay under the radar for so long.”

“My friends at Interpol?” Thorne sputtered.

Rogue rolled his eyes.

“Come on, Thorne. I thought we were all a team.”

Ash threw Rogue an irritated glance. “We’re good for now, Thorne,” he said. “We’ll keep you updated.”

Thorne nodded. His dark eyes zeroed in on Dark, but he didn’t say anything else, and moments later disconnected the call.

Dark leaned back in his chair. Tears prickled at the back of his eyes.

Ash hadn’t said anything about Alexia.

None of them had.

“What ...” He tried again. “Why ...”

“If you believe Alexia’s innocent, that’s enough for us,” Ash explained patiently.

It wasn’t just him. They were all nodding. And he realized they’d talked about it. Maybe when he’d gone in to speak to

Alexia, or when he'd driven her back to the telecabine.

The pressure behind his eyes intensified, but the acid in his stomach had stopped churning.

"We're going to stop them," he said.

Ash nodded. "We'll make sure those plans never get into Lemercier's hands."

Griffin stood up. There was a nervous energy around him—there had been, ever since the facial recognition software had identified Lemercier.

"We need to talk about Lemercier. You need to know who he is. He had the world's top government agencies chasing him at one point."

"Thorne knew him as well," Dark said.

Griffin nodded. "Everybody was after him. And we wouldn't have stopped, not ever ... except we thought he'd died."

"Tell us what you know about him," Slate asked. His mouth was a tight line on his face, and Dark realized the man wasn't used to seeing his brother's distress.

None of them were. Whatever Griffin has seen in his role as an intelligence analyst had shaped him in some way, given him that look of utter coldness and invulnerability.

And yet, something about Vincent Lemercier scares him.

Griffin's voice became nearly robotic. "I can't tell you the details. And the details don't matter. Lemercier is a French national who first came to our attention years ago, during a human trafficking investigation."

Jesus.

"Human and child trafficking, drug trafficking, terrorism ... he was anywhere and everywhere, as long as there was profit in it for him. He's the worst kind of predator." Griffin took a deep breath. "He supposedly died at sea. A lot of agencies out there would like to know he's alive."

"And now he's back."

Griffin shook his head. “Lemercier is a suspicious individual. Our little stint with the broken window must have jarred him.”

“You think he’ll run?”

“Depends on how much the Iranians are paying him. But we need to be ready for anything.”

“The bug’s still in place,” Rogue said. He’d been keeping an eye on the laptop in front of him. “Kvyat is in his office. He’s made a few phone calls, but nothing relevant, so far.”

“Give it some time,” Slate said. “It’s only nine in the morning.”

Nine in the morning.

Dark felt a stab of guilt. None of them had gotten any sleep the previous night.

“Time is a luxury we may not have,” Griffin said. “Not if Lemercier is involved.”



Alexia

She'd tried hard to go back to her normal life, because that was what Nikolai deserved.

It'd gotten easier as the week progressed, but she still remembered the panic of those first few hours, after she'd snuck back into the house, when she still hadn't known if the security team would mention her disappearance to Kvyat.

She'd sat in front of the man at breakfast, her hand shaking, unable to swallow more than a few mouthfuls of porridge.

But Kvyat hadn't asked her anything, nor did he seem interested in her or Nikolai at the moment. His full attention, for the last couple of days, had been on the phone in front of him, as if by staring at it hard enough he could will it to ring.

Alexia knew a little of how he felt.

Dark hadn't tried to get in touch with her.

Not that she wanted him to.

Liar.

And she knew she had to let it go. She'd been a way into Kvyat's life—that was it.

But he let you go.

He didn't know if you were going to talk to Kvyat about him, and still he let you go.

Yeah.

So he may not be a killer.

That's about the most you can say about him at this point.

And still, she couldn't help but wonder what he was doing—and if he was okay.

He'd looked so ... lost ... when he dropped her off.

“The end. Are you okay, Alexia?” Nikolai asked. Embarrassment colored her cheeks—while she’d been off in her head, the boy had finished reading *Lord of the Flies*.

“I’m sorry, Nikolai. I’ve had a lot on my mind, but I’m with you now.” She picked up her copy of the book, as if holding it in her hands could make her focus. And a part of her shuddered, because perhaps they should have chosen a different book to read today, but that would have involved some explaining.

I’m sorry, Nikolai, we’re going to have to pick a happier book to read.

I’m not ready to read about human cruelty and savagery.

Instead, she took a deep breath. “What did you think about the book?”

Nikolai’s light gray eyes turned to her. He bit his lower lip for a second, then seemed to remember how much his father hated it when he did that and let go.

Alexia smiled encouragingly.

“I think,” the boy began carefully. “I think it’s all wrong.”

That seemed like a conventional enough thought on the novel.

“You mean, what the boys end up doing is wrong?”

“No.” Again, that quick bite of his lower lip. Alexia waited, giving the boy time to pull his thoughts together. “I think what the author—Golding—presents here, is all wrong. I think the characters are all ... better ... than he is giving them credit for. I don’t believe this is what they would become. I think they would work together and establish a different kind of society.”

Alexia swallowed hard.

How far the apple has fallen from the tree.

“I think that’s a very interesting thought, Nikolai. Maybe you could expand on that in this week’s essay.”

The boy nodded, diligently writing the task down in his little notebook.

“So. What would you like to do now?” It was nearly noon.

Nikolai looked out the window with longing.

“Let’s go out,” she said, suddenly inspired. “We can ask Mrs. Babanin to pack some lunch for us and eat it outside.”

“Really?” the boy asked.

“Really.”



In the end, they didn’t go very far.

She and Nikolai had walked up the hill, past several clumps of fancy chalets, towards a wide area of snow-covered grassland, and sat on a picnic blanket to eat the delicious food Mrs. Babanin had prepared for them—sandwiches, but also a typical Russian salad of fermented cucumbers, peeled hard-boiled eggs, and some kind of sweet semolina cake.

Alexia had offered Ilya some, but he’d refused the food, as usual, and stood watch from the edge of the field. She was pretty sure he hadn’t moved an inch in the entire hour they’d been here.

“I’m so full,” Nikolai said, patting his little belly. He still had a thoughtful look on his face, and Alexia wondered if he was still thinking about the book, and if she’d done the right thing by encouraging him to read it.

“Let’s make a snowman,” she said, getting up. It’d snowed the day before, so the snow was fresh and powdery—perfect for the job.

Alexia put on her gloves and began packing a tight ball of snow. Within seconds, Nikolai was there as well, helping her.

“Can we make a snow dog instead?”

“I don’t see why not,” she said thoughtfully. “We’ll need to make the legs solid, as a base.”

They worked together in silence, packing the first ball until it was roughly the size and shape of a thick animal leg.

Then something made her look up.

Ilya’s there.

There’s nothing wrong.

But she couldn’t shake off the feeling that they were being watched.

Then, suddenly, everything happened all at once. A tall figure stood up from *under* the snow—no, not from under the snow, he’d been lying on top of the snow, but covered with some kind of white camouflage sheet. The rest of him was also outfitted the same way, making him nearly invisible.

The only speck of black was in his hands—a weapon, pointed straight at Ilya.

“Ilya, look—“

But Ilya was already on the move, running full-speed towards the man in white. And though the burly Russian was a ferocious sight, the man in white held his ground. When Ilya was a dozen feet away, something dark and thin shot out of the man’s hand.

It took her a moment to realize the weapon was a stun gun.

The prongs struck Ilya on the neck. The effect was automatic—Ilya fell on his back, his body shaking uncontrollably, his muscles continuing to shake long after his eyes had rolled up into his head.

Beside her, Nikolai screamed.

The man in white turned towards them, a slow smile spreading across his face. And Alexia recognized him, then, though he didn’t look nearly as elegant as he had the last time they’d met, when he’d been wearing a tux.

It was the same man who’d been in Kvyat’s office a few nights earlier.

The one who wanted the contents of the suitcase.

Run.

We need to run.

But by the time her brain had processed the order, the man in white was already standing next to them.

Alexia held Nikolai tight across her side, realizing her mistake.

“Come with me. You won’t like what happens if you make me run after you,” he said, and his smooth voice, with its French accent, sounded almost delicate.

And a part of her still screamed that she should be running, but her fear was too great. She wasn’t a fighter, and the sight of Ilya’s body, still shaking on the ground, filled her with a raw, primal fear.

She didn’t even see the man move. One instant he was pointing the stun gun at her, and the next he was by their side, one long, strong arm grabbing Nikolai and taking him from her.

“No!” Alexia screamed. She wouldn’t—couldn’t—let this man take Nikolai.

“To the car,” he said, pointing behind them.

And Alexia realized one of the vehicles at the edge of the clearing, that she’d assumed belonged to skiers who hadn’t been able to find a spot closer to the slopes, was his—an absolutely unremarkable dusty white van.

She wanted to fight, but the man had his hand on the boy’s elbow, dragging him forward, and still the stun gun pointed in her direction.

The fight inside of her died.

The man threw Nikolai into the back of the vehicle unceremoniously.

“Get in,” he threatened. “Or I’ll stun you and then throw you in. It’s on maximum power, and you’re a lot smaller than he is, Alexia.”

She nearly lost control of her bladder, then.

He knows my name.

How does he know my name?

The man walked closer to her, and she realized she'd played right into his hands. He didn't need to stun her—he simply grabbed her and lifted her into the back behind Nikolai. The doors shut behind her with a clang, and she heard the sound of the lock engaging.

We're trapped.

She ran to the front of the vehicle, to the small window that separated the back from the driver's cabin—watched the man get inside and quickly turn the vehicle into drive.

And then there was somebody else there.

Two men, running full-speed towards the van.

“Help!” she yelled, even though she knew they wouldn't be able to hear her.

As she looked at the closest figure, she suddenly realized she knew him—it was one of Dark's friends, the large, blond man with the kind eyes.

He was shouting now and raising his own dark weapon.

The man in white pushed on the accelerator. Alexia lost her balance, looked for something to grab on to. The last thing she felt, before her own head hit the van's floor was the thud of the vehicle as it struck the man.



Dark

“We need to get you to a hospital,” Griffin said.

“Relax, Griffin,” Slate smiled. “I’m a medic. I know what a concussion feels like.”

“So you *do* have a concussion,” Griffin said accusingly.

“Maybe.” Slate sighed theatrically. “Stop crowding me. You’re all giving me a headache.”

Dark raised his hand to shut them both up.

“You’re going to the hospital to get checked out, Slate.”

“No,” Slate said, standing up on wobbly feet. Though his coat had protected him somewhat from scrapes, Dark knew the entire side of the man’s body was black and blue. “I can help.”

“Rogue is monitoring traffic cameras,” Dark said, feigning a calm he didn’t feel. Ever since Griffin had called to tell them that Alexia and the boy had been kidnapped, he’d felt like his mind was swimming in a pool of molasses. “We’ll find them.”

“What about the bodyguard?” Ash asked.

“The man was still out cold when I took Slate out of there,” Griffin said. “He never saw us.”

Dark had a new respect for the ex-CIA agent who, as well as carrying his injured brother on his back, had also memorized the van’s plate numbers.

Even though they were probably fake, at least it was a starting point.

“He’s probably recovered consciousness by now, and gone back to tell Kvyat.”

“He’ll get a call from Lemercier soon enough, I’m sure.”

The molasses in his mind grew thicker. Dark wanted to curl up inside it.

This was all his fault.

You should never have let her go back.

You shouldn't have left her alone.

“We couldn't have expected this, Dark,” Rogue said cautiously. “We were expecting them to organize an exchange.”

“Lemercier got scared after the other night,” Griffin said. “He doesn't trust Kvyat. He wanted to up the stakes—make sure Kvyat knows it's not just money riding on the exchange anymore.”

“Tell me everything you know about Lemercier.”

“I already told you.”

“You held a lot back,” Dark said, getting in Griffin's face.

Griffin didn't give an inch. “I told you everything that mattered. He's the worst kind of man, Dark.”

“You think he would hurt an innocent woman and child?”

For a long time, Griffin didn't reply, but the look he gave him petrified Dark.

“He's built his reputation on being willing to do anything and everything to get the job done, and that's not something he can afford to risk now.”

“I'm going after them. Rogue, I need to know where they went.”

Dark would tear this town brick by brick if he had to. He didn't care what happened to him afterwards, or if this landed him in prison again. It would all be worth it if Alexia was safe.

“I'm on it.” The Australian paused for an instant. “You're not alone, Dark. We're all here for you.”

Ash nodded firmly. “We may not have come together the conventional way, and we may have had our disagreements, but we are a team. We're going to get Alexia and the boy back, and stop those plans from getting into Lemercier's hands.”

Dark wasn't sure when they'd become a team. When Thorne had first tossed them together, they'd all been messed

up, and completely the wrong shape for each other. But, somewhere along the way, the spikes and gaps they each brought to the team had started working together, like cogs in a machine. And now, somehow, they were less messed up as a team than they were as individuals.

But Dark didn't want to risk all their futures.

"You should stay on the mission. Focus on Kvyat, and the plans. Alexia is my problem," he said.

"No," Slate said firmly. "Rogue and Ash are right. We're in this together, and we're going to do what's right. If Thorne doesn't like that, he can find somebody else to do his dirty business."

Rogue had put on his earphones and was listening intently to something. He raised a hand to get their attention.

"Lemercier just called Kvyat. We're lucky Kvyat was still in his office, so we could hear the entire conversation."

Dark breathed in slowly.

"Is Alexia alive?" Dark asked, dreading the answer.

"Lemercier spoke of exchanging *them*," Rogue said, his words careful.

He doesn't want to give me false hope.

"This is Lemercier's way of making sure he has the upper hand," Griffin said. "He wasn't sure Kvyat's greed would be enough to ensure the successful outcome he was looking for. Now Kvyat has no choice."

Dark's phone rang. It was Thorne. For a moment, he was tempted to let it go to voice mail, but then changed his mind.

"What's going on, Dark?"

Should he play stupid?

He'd only be delaying the inevitable. And maybe, just maybe, Thorne could help. If he really was with Interpol, like Rogue had implied.

“What the hell’s going on? My analysts tell me something’s happening. Why am I hearing about this from them, and not from you?”

Dark didn’t bother making excuses. “Less than half an hour ago, Lemercier kidnapped Nikolai Kvyat, along with Alexia Miller.” Something caught in his voice as he said Alexia’s name.

He was pretty sure Thorne noticed, but the other man didn’t say anything.

“They ran Slate over as they took off.”

“How is he?”

“Concussed,” Dark said, not bothering to mention the bruising. “But he’ll be okay.”

“What are you doing now?”

“Listening to some of that same chatter your analysts are talking about, apparently. Lemercier just called Kvyat. He’s going to arrange the exchange.”

“The boy and the woman for the plans?” Thorne pondered that for a minute. “You need to get the boy back. And the plans.”

Time to come clean.

“I need to get her back, Thorne.”

“*Her?* Alexia Miller? Tell me you’re fucking kidding me, Dark.”

“If they’re still in Gstaad, I’ll find them. But if he’s managed to get them out, I’m going to need your help.”

“*My* help? That’s rich. You haven’t even completed a single mission, and already you’re telling me ... oh, this is rich.”

“Are you going to help or not?”

Thorne sighed. “I’ll get some analysts on it. But I’m going to need you all to focus on the mission.”

Dark made some kind of noncommittal sound.

He'd focus on the mission.

Even if that mission had changed.



Alexia

Rain pattered somewhere nearby.

It was a soft, relaxing sound, but there was something ... wrong with it. It took her a moment to realize what it was.

She took a quick sniff.

Nothing—no chlorinated smell wafting through from the home spa next door.

She wasn't in her room in the basement.

Fear replaced the puzzlement as she began remembering.

She could still see Dark's friend ... Slate ... as he'd flown over the hood of the van.

What if he's dead?

That thought led to one even more frightening.

Nikolai!

Where's Nikolai?

What did the man do with him?

She forced her eyes open, looked at a naked light bulb dancing on a chain from the ceiling.

Definitely not Kvyat's place.

The room was small and damp and windowless, with stone walls—bare except for two small mattresses on the floor. She was lying on one of them, and Nikolai was lying on the other one.

Though the boy was unconscious, Alexia breathed a sigh of relief as she saw his little chest rise and fall.

She wanted to close her eyes again—drift back into unconsciousness. But that wouldn't help her or Nikolai. Taking a deep breath, she got up shakily, using the wall to help her.

Her head was killing her.

Two blows in as few days.

She held up two fingers in front of her face.

She could see them clearly.

Yeah.

That probably doesn't work when you do it yourself.

She didn't think she had a concussion, but even if she did, now wasn't the time to worry about it.

Get out of here first.

Swallowing a whimper, she made her way to the door. Her hand shook. She knew what she had to do—try the door handle, just in case. But she wasn't brave enough. She wasn't a fighter. She was a teacher from New York.

If Dark were here, he'd—

Dark wasn't here, but she was.

Try it.

Her heart threatened to climb out of her chest.

She took a deep breath and pushed on it.

It was locked.

She bit her lip to stop herself from whimpering. She didn't want to wake Nikolai up.

Think, Alexia.

The curly-haired man with the French accent wanted something from Kvyat. That was clear from the meeting she'd overheard between them.

The same something Dark and his friends were searching for.

Okay.

But why take her and Nikolai?

To prove a point, or to force Kvyat to do something.

It was at this point that she realized she was merely collateral.

Her mind flew to Dark.

Does he know what had happened?

If Dark's friend had survived ... and that was a big *if*, there was a chance he'd know.

But would he come after them?

Probably not, after the things you said to him.

Alexia walked back to the mattress and sat down again. The door wouldn't open, and there was no point in wasting energy on a locked door.

She realized now she hadn't been fair to Dark.

The fact is, she'd been lying to him, too, the whole time—by omission, if nothing else.

And she wished she hadn't been so harsh. She wished she'd given them both more of a chance.

Before coming to Gstaad, she'd thought revenge was all she had to live for. But these last weeks with Dark had made her realize there might be more—and that maybe the two of them, together, could figure it out.

I think I love him.

And she realized how crazy she sounded.

There was so much she didn't know about him.

But maybe that was okay.

Maybe one didn't need to know everything about a person to love them.

Nikolai snored softly from the mattress beside hers, the gentle sound steeling her resolve.

She didn't want to die, and she wasn't about to let Nikolai get hurt—not if there was anything she could do to stop it from happening.

That means you need to be ready for when he comes back.



Dark

“Could you please stop that?” Rogue asked without bothering to look up. There were three laptops in front of him now.

Dark realized the IT specialist was talking to him.

“Sorry,” he said. He’d gotten up to stretch his legs and hadn’t been able to stop pacing since. He rubbed his eyes, gritty from lack of sleep.

“It’s okay. I just need a bit of quiet.”

There had been plenty of quiet in the hours since they’d gotten back to the house.

So much quiet, Dark didn’t know what to do with himself anymore.

He bit his tongue to stop himself from asking Rogue again what was going on. The man had made it very clear, as soon as he had anything to share, he would.

Slate was the only one resting—the blow to his head must have been worse than he’d let on, since he hadn’t complained when his brother set him down on the couch on one side of the games room after cleaning his wound.

“Are you sure you should be sleeping?” Ash had asked.

Slate hadn’t even bothered opening his eyes. “You do know the idea that you shouldn’t sleep after a concussion is a myth, right?”

“I didn’t know, no,” Ash said unapologetically. “But you’re the medic.”

Seconds later, the former SEAL was asleep, his chest inflating gently with each breath he took.

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Griffin said. And he had. Even now, hours later, he was sitting quietly in a corner of the room, cleaning an already-clean Glock-19.

Dark wondered at the man's familiarity with the weapon. He'd worked with several CIA analysts in the past, and none of them had treated weapons like they were part of their family.

Dark was a soldier—or had been a soldier, at least. He knew how important it was to grab some sleep whenever one could. And there'd been nothing for him to do while they waited for their breakthrough. He should have been napping, but hadn't even tried, because the thought of Alexia in pain was more than he could bear, and he knew he wouldn't get any sleep until she was back.

He rubbed at his eyes, looked up at Rogue, whose stone gray eyes were red behind his glasses.

Dark had refilled the man's cup of coffee often enough overnight that he didn't dare do it again. He was going to have to stop him and get him to take a break. But he let the man go a bit longer, out of pure and utter selfishness.

He counted the minutes down on the clock on the wall. In ten minutes, he would force a two-hour break, kick everyone except for Slate out of this room and into their own bedrooms.

"I've got something," Rogue said suddenly. Though his voice wasn't loud, everything stopped around them.

"What is it?" Dark asked, making his way to Rogue.

"I just intercepted a new communication between Lemercier and Kvyat."

"They've organized the meet?" Ash asked, his voice tight.

Rogue nodded, his fingers still typing away. "It's going to be in a private airfield."

"We're in Gstaad. There must be six or seven private airfields in the surrounding area."

"Kvyat seemed to know about this one, about twenty miles southwest."

"I have it," Rogue said. "Rütnerweg Airfield. It looks small—we definitely won't find any commercial flights leaving from here."

“But Lemercier could have booked a private flight?”

“Or it could be a decoy,” Ash said, not blinking. “Maybe he doesn’t intend to fly out at all.”

“Kvyat doesn’t intend to go on his own. He’s fired off several emails already.”

Dark nodded, impressed with Rogue’s ability to get into people’s electronic footprint. One clearly didn’t want to get on the man’s bad side.

“Has he called the police?” Dark asked worriedly.

“No, not the police. I’m guessing he can’t be sure Lemercier won’t find out if he does, and he doesn’t want to risk it. But he’s got people from his security team at home on their way already.”

“What is he thinking? Does he want to get Alexia and his son killed?”

Ash shook his head. “From what we know about him, I’d say he prefers to see his son dead than in Lemercier’s hands.”

The big man didn’t say anything about Alexia, and for that Dark was grateful. Because he knew as well as all of them that Alexia would only be collateral.

“How long do they have?”

“The meet is at eleven. Lemercier isn’t stupid. He’s not going to give Kvyat time to get a team in place.”

“That gives us three hours to prepare,” Dark said. He picked up his glass and took a sip of water—wondered if Alexia was going thirsty, even now. After that thought, it was a struggle to keep the water in his stomach.

If Lemercier hurt her...

“Dark,” Ash repeated, his voice firm but gentle. “We need to know what to do.”

“You heard Thorne yesterday. Getting those plans is your priority.” He held the gaze of every man he’d come to respect over the last weeks. They were all solid. Even Ash. It was starting to be difficult to believe the man could have

committed the crime he'd been accused of committing. "I'll go ahead."

"Ahead?" Ash asked.

Dark nodded. He knew he wouldn't be leading the team after this. Hell, he wouldn't be part of the team at all. He'd be back in prison, which is probably where he belonged. And it was a trade he'd make gladly, if it meant he could get Alexia back, and give her a chance at a normal life. He wanted that so much it hurt—even if that life wouldn't be with him. "You guys get the plans. I'm going after Alexia and Nikolai," he said firmly.

Griffin surprised him by laughing, showing off his very white teeth.

"In your dreams, Dark," the ex-CIA analyst said.

Dark straightened to his full height, which gave him a couple of inches on the other man. But suddenly he wasn't facing one man. He was facing all four of them. Even Slate, pale and exhausted, was standing up.

Dark raised his hands, spread his palms. He couldn't fight them all. He wouldn't fight them all.

"This is getting old," Slate said, his voice hoarse and gritty.

"We told you already, Dark. We're with you all the way," Rogue added.

"We can do our job and get them back," Ash said, cracking his knuckles.

"I'm going to brew some more coffee, and we're going to figure this out together," Griffin said.



Alexia

She wasn't ready.

One instant there was silence, then the door opened, and the man slipped into the room, quiet as a ghost. He'd taken the time to change into dark slacks and a cream-colored turtleneck, and with his blond curls and recently shaved jawline, he looked more like a member of a country club than a kidnapper.

There was no mistaking the stun gun held gently in his long fingers, however. Alexia shivered as she remembered how easily he'd put Ilya down with it.

Alexia jumped up and placed herself in front of Nikolai, who still hadn't moved a muscle. That wasn't normal...

Her heart seized, fear for the boy replacing her earlier panic.

"What did you do to him?" she snarled.

The man looked her up and down before replying. He was tall—not as tall as Dark, but taller than he'd seemed out on the field.

"Take a step back," he said in his thick French accent. "I don't want to have to stun you. You may be useful merchandise."

The word made her shiver, but she held herself stiffly in place, knowing that was exactly what he wanted.

"Who are you?"

"You can call me Vincent, *chérie*."

He looked like a Vincent.

He's giving me his real name.

Alexia dragged in a sharp breath, but her lungs refused to inflate.

As the seconds went on, her eyes began to water. And the man—Vincent—stood there, watching her.

“Relax,” he finally said. “I don’t particularly want to hurt you. Keep your head about you, help keep the boy calm when he wakes up, and this may all be over soon. It all depends on Kvyat,” he said, waving a hand vaguely in the air, as if he wasn’t the one pointing a stun gun at her.

“What do you want from Kvyat?”

“That’s none of your business, *chérie*, and believe me when I tell you, you’re better off not knowing.” He paused for a second, cocking his head sideways, like the velociraptor in the movies Nikolai loved to watch. “Tell me... how much does Kvyat love his son?”

Alexia pondered that for a moment. “I think... I think he loves him.”

“He’d better.” He waved his free hand at the boy. “The drug I gave him should be wearing off soon. Get him ready to leave. If you both do as I say, you stand a good chance of surviving this. If not... you should know I’ve got enough deaths on my conscience, one or two more wouldn’t register.”

And with that, he turned away and left. Alexia heard the lock slam back into place.

She made her way back to the mattress on trembling legs and slid down onto it, keeping her back against the wall.

It was only then she realized the kidnapper hadn’t asked her any questions about Dark’s friend.

He must think he was another of Kvyat’s security team.

He doesn’t realize you know him.



Dark

In the end, they decided to split up.

Several of them would follow Kvyat, while the others lay in wait at the airfield.

Griffin suggested Slate should sit this one out, and was quickly told to fuck off by the huge ex-SEAL. While Dark sympathized with Griffin, he didn't have time to waste.

“Do what you want, but stay out of the way. You don't want another concussion.”

“Sure thing,” Slate agreed easily. “I'll wait at the airport as backup.”

Griffin and Rogue completed that group, while Dark and Ash headed to Kvyat's place.

They parked the car a good distance away, just past the telecabine, and made their way up to the house. Dark was grateful Ash didn't spout any platitudes at him on the way up. Finally, the iron gate to Kvyat's place came into sight. They both crouched, hiding their large frames behind a bush.

“How do you want to play this?” Ash asked, deferring to him. It was the first words he'd said since they'd set out.

Dark looked at the two dark SUVs parked outside the garage.

“Looks like Kvyat's getting ready to go somewhere.”

“Makes sense. It's ten a.m., and it'll take him at least half an hour to get to the airfield. I imagine this isn't a meeting he can afford to be late to.”

“There are only two cars. I think it's fair to say Rogue was right—Kvyat's backup hasn't made it yet, so he's only got his regular security guards. And from what Griffin said, one of them may be injured.”

Suddenly, the gate opened and the first car inched its way out. As soon as it was out, the gate closed again.

Dark recognized the bulldog-faced driver. “Looks like Ilya’s heading out in one car. I’ll bet Kvyat will follow with Dmitri.”

Ash’s dark eyes glinted.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Dark smiled.

The dark SUV had stopped, its engine still running.

“I think Ilya’s lonely, and we should join him.”

So they did.

Dark stood up and half-ran, still crouching, until he reached the back of the SUV. That was one disadvantage of an SUV that size. It had too many blind spots, and Ilya was an idiot to stay in the car and not think of these.

The security guard obviously wasn’t expecting anything. Kvyat must have told them Lemercier was working alone.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Dark crawled to the passenger side. Although modern cars usually locked automatically as soon as the car went into drive, Dark took a bet that Ilya would have forced it unlocked, to make sure Kvyat could get in at any point, should it be required.

Dark readied the Glock-19 that Griffin had given him earlier. Though that wouldn’t have been his first choice of gun, Dark was an equal opportunity kind of guy when it came to weapons. In his career with the Rangers, he’d learned to shoot everything and anything, and knew it didn’t pay to play favorites.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, he forced the passenger door open in a single move and pulled his upper body through, making sure Ilya got a good look at the weapon.

“Keep your hands on the steering wheel,” Dark growled. “If I shoot right now, I’m pretty sure I’ll hit your balls, and you don’t want that.”

He needed Ilya and couldn’t afford to shoot him, in the balls or anywhere else, but the man didn’t need to know that.

Dark had to give the Russian credit. Though his hands stayed on the steering wheel, his gaze didn't waver and he didn't cower at all.

This isn't the first time he's been on that side of a gun.

"I don't want to hurt you. My friend and I just need a ride where you're going."

At the word *friend*, Ilya tensed. But by then, the back passenger door was open as well, and Ash had slid through. At that point, Ilya had two guns pointed in his direction, one at his head and one at his crotch.

"You're Americans," Ilya said, sounding surprised. Fear made his accent thicker. Dark imagined there weren't any American names on the list of Kvyat's known enemies, or Ilya would look even more worried than he already did. "Who are you?"

"That doesn't matter." He took a deep breath. This was the tricky bit. "We don't want to hurt your principal. We're interested in the other man."

"The other man?" Ilya asked, his shoulders tense.

Dark didn't like the way he eyed the gun by his side and the one he could see in the rear-view mirror.

Keep him busy.

Keep him busy or he's going to bolt.

"We know your boss is going to meet someone. We want to see him, too."

He could see the wheels turning in the man's head as he wondered how big of a problem this was going to be for Kvyat.

"Your boss doesn't concern us," he repeated.

Behind them, the heavy iron gate began opening again.

"They're coming," Ash said. "Dmitri's driving, and Kvyat's already in the back."

Dark smiled.

Great.

He'd counted on the fact that Dmitri and Ilya wouldn't want Kvyat out in the open, so they would have arranged for this.

He crouched so he wouldn't be seen from the other car. Even though the back windows were tinted dark, Ash crouched as well.

"I still have a gun to your back. Move, and we'll see if I can hit both kidneys with one bullet," Ash said darkly.

I guess I'm playing good cop now.

"You're meant to tail them, right? Pull out slowly after them." As the man pressed the start button, Dark rewarded him by pulling his gun infinitesimally sideways. He could bring it back in an instant, should he need to, but he wanted to show Ilya that he could be trusted.

They tailed the other car as it drove towards the airfield, moving slower and slower as snow began to fall in earnest. They took the turn to the airfield. Dark was still crouching low, so he had to trust Ash to know they were heading in the right direction. The sky had turned a gritty gray that spoke of evening, even though it was only a quarter to eleven in the morning.

As the car began to slow down, Dark felt a sudden wave of calm pass through him. He leaned into that calm, knowing he would need it if he was going to figure out a way to get Alexia out of this safely.



“**N**ow what?” Ilya growled.

“Are you meant to go out there and help your friend?” Dark asked quietly. He noticed Ilya was leaving plenty of room between him and the other SUV.

Ilya shook his head. It seemed he'd decided his best bet was to tell the truth. "I'm here as backup, in case a getaway car is needed."

Ash slammed the butt of his gun unceremoniously on the man's head. Dark leaned forward, grabbing on to the man's shoulders before his head had a chance to slump forward onto the steering wheel. He set him back against the headrest. Ash already had zip-ties in his hand, which he proceeded to place around the man's wrists and neck, sticking a finger between the zip ties and the skin as he did so to make sure Ilya had room to breathe.

They worked in silence, as if they'd done this together countless times before, and Dark was struck again by how easily they could all read each other's mind.

"He's not going anywhere," Ash said, finally. He spoke into the headset. "All good on your end?"

It was Rogue who responded, his voice loud and crisp, as if he were sitting right beside them in the car. "We're in position behind the small hangar. It's fucking cold here. No sign of Lemercier yet, but we're looking at Kvyat's two cars."

"We're in the second car. We've disabled one of the security guards. Kvyat is in the first car. He doesn't know we're here."

"Copy that."

Dark stared at the vehicle in front of them.

What are they waiting for?

"Where's Lemercier?" Ash asked quietly. "It's almost eleven."

"He's probably somewhere nearby, watching to make sure he's not walking into an ambush," Griffin said.

They heard the sound before they saw the white van.

"That's the van that hit me," Slate said.

"Hold your position," Dark instructed. He stayed low in his seat. Anyone looking into the vehicle would just see Ilya in

the driver's seat.

The white van drove past them, stopping next to Kvyat's car. For the next minute, nothing happened. Dark wished they had eyes and ears inside the other car.

Then two things happened at once. The back door of the SUV opened, and Ilya's phone rang.

Dark ignored the phone. He watched Kvyat step outside the vehicle, leaving the door open behind him.

He's scared.

In his hand, he carried a hard-shell silver briefcase.

"We can see Kvyat. With his briefcase," Rogue said.

The phone was still ringing. Ash reached into the man's pocket and grabbed it. "Da," he growled. Dark blinked. Ash sounded for all the world like he'd grown up on the Russian steppes.

He listened for a moment, then hung up without saying anything else.

"My Russian's rusty," he said. "But I think he told me Kvyat is making the trade, and to be ready."

"Do you really speak Russian?" Dark asked. There was so much they still didn't know about each other.

"I was stationed in Poland, on the Russian border, for a couple of years," Ash said. He didn't provide any further detail, and Dark didn't ask.

Kvyat seemed to be listening to something somebody was saying. He took his phone out of his pocket and dropped it back inside the SUV, then took a step away from the vehicle.

There was movement in the front of the van, and then the front door opened and Lemercier stepped out. He looked elegant and suave and put together, and Dark wanted to run to him, grab him and stomp that high forehead into the metallic emblem on the hood of the van, until the two became one.

"Hold," Ash said, as if reading his mind.

Dark gripped the door handle, watching for any other movement inside the van.

Nothing.

If Alexia and Nikolai are there, they're in the back.

Please let them be in the back.

Dark had done bad things in his life. And the thought suddenly struck him, that if destiny wanted to punish him for all his wrongdoings, taking Alexia from him—watching her rich life snuffed out—would be one way to do it. He wouldn't want to go on living after that.

His nails clenched against his palms.

Please, God.

Don't let her be hurt.

Lemercier said something to Kvyat, then headed to the back of the van. Dark held his breath, praying. Because there was so much that could still go wrong, and he didn't think he could bear it if—

They're alive.

Dark wanted to cry out in relief, but now wasn't the time for crying. And there was something strange about the way Alexia stepped off the van, as if—

“Alexia and the boy look dazed, but they're both conscious and on their feet,” Ash said.

“We see them,” Rogue said. “Dark, let us know where you want us.”

“Hold.” They needed to wait until Kvyat and Lemercier were distracted.

Kvyat reached for his son, but Lemercier grabbed the boy by the neck and pulled him back. Alexia cried out, but a warning from Lemercier had her stepping meekly back as well, her hands raised in the air.

Suddenly, their voices were much clearer, and Dark realized Ash had cracked open both their front windows.

“I just want my son,” Kvyat growled, but there was a note of desperation there that Dark had never heard before.

“Just your son?” Lemercier said.

Kvyat shrugged. “Do what you want with the woman, but don’t hurt my son.”

Dark saw red.

“Maybe I *will* keep her,” Lemercier said. He seemed to be testing Kvyat, as if he wasn’t sure whether the other man was serious or not. “I don’t deal much in merchandise this old, but I admit I like her. She has beautiful eyes.”

Kvyat shrugged, as if uninterested in the details. His large hand, the one that wasn’t holding the briefcase, waved vaguely in the air, giving Lemercier his benediction to do as he pleased.

In his earpiece, somebody gasped.

Whatever else happened, Dark promised himself the man wouldn’t see another day.

“Kvyat is mine,” he growled.

None of his men replied, but Dark knew they wouldn’t interfere.

Alexia still hadn’t moved a muscle. Every so often, her body swayed in the wind. It seemed it was all she could do to stay standing.

She’s been drugged.

“Now let’s get to business,” Lemercier said. His long arm tightened imperceptibly against the boy’s neck. “You know what I want.”

“Please don’t hurt him,” Kvyat begged. “It’s here. What you want is here. Do you have my money?”

Lemercier laughed, then. “I thought all you wanted was your son.”

Kvyat went red in the face. The veins on his nose bulged.

“Relax, Kvyat, I have your money. Our common friends don’t lack money.”

“So why take my son?” Kvyat stammered.

“I needed to be sure you wouldn’t double-cross me. It’s not a good idea to double-cross me, Kvyat.”

“If you hurt my son, I will kill you,” Kvyat said, baring his teeth like a cornered animal.

“You really think a man like you can stop me?” Lemercier asked, laughing. “I don’t think you can. I’ve always been a ghost.”

Nikolai cried out, then. The boy seemed to be waking up, slowly becoming more aware of his surroundings.

Whatever he’s given him, it’s starting to wear off.

“Throw the briefcase my way, and I’ll release your son,” Lemercier said coldly. “Your money’s in his coat pockets, so make sure you don’t put it in the laundry.” He smiled, showing his bright straight teeth, as if pleased with his little joke.

Dark readied himself. As soon as the exchange happened, Lemercier would leave with Alexia.

And if that happened, Dark knew he’d never see her again.

“Fuck. He’s sending Alexia to pick up the briefcase,” Ash said.

Alexia lurched unsteadily to where Kvyat had thrown the briefcase.

“It’s all there,” Kvyat said. “Release my son.”

“Give her the code so she can open it,” Lemercier ordered, still holding on to the boy. A gun had appeared in one of his hands and was currently held tight against the boy’s back. Nikolai cried out in fear and pain. Dark’s heart clenched, but he forced that concern into the back of his mind.

Alexia comes first.

Alexia would always come first for him, and he’d pay the price for that decision in hell, if that’s where it led him.

Her hands were unsteady as she fumbled with the briefcase's code, but finally it was open. She stared uncomprehendingly at the contents.

"Show me," Lemercier ordered her. She lifted the briefcase so he could see. Whatever it was, Lemercier seemed satisfied. He asked her to close it and throw it at him, which Alexia did, her expression still listless. Lemercier leaned down, still grabbing on to the boy, and picked up the briefcase.

His smile brightened.

"Great doing business with you." He pushed the boy towards Kvyat, who rushed forward to catch his son. "Unfortunately, our common friends have lost their faith in you," the Frenchman added.

Shit.

"I'll grab Lemercier," Dark said.

"I'll get Kvyat," Ash replied.

"Copy that. We're on our way," Griffin, Slate, and Rogue replied at the same time.

One.

Two.

Three.

He and Ash pulled their doors open at the exact same instant and rolled out through opposite doors. Dark's boots had barely hit the ground when a shot rang out. A hole appeared in the center of Kvyat's forehead and the large man dropped to the ground like a stone.

"Fuck!" somebody said in the earpiece.

Nikolai screamed, the sight of his father's body seeming to rouse him from his stupor.

And then Alexia began running towards the boy. Still lurching, but moving faster now, as if she was also getting rid of whatever drug was coursing through her system.

No.

Because Dark knew then that Lemercier had been toying with Kvyat. He wasn't planning on letting his son live, either.

And somebody else was running towards Nikolai as well—Dmitri.

Dark's feet pounded on the snow. Lemercier looked up and saw him. The fixer's gaze narrowed. He was still for a moment as he seemed to ponder this new complexity. Dark pushed on, knowing every second counted now. Because Lemercier was going to run.

Then the fixer gave a light shrug. But he didn't run. Instead, he raised his gun, pointing it straight at Alexia.

And Dark realized he'd miscalculated. He should have paid more attention when Griffin was speaking. Lemercier wasn't the kind to run.

Dark's boots crunched on the snow as he pushed himself harder than ever before, already knowing he wasn't going to make it.

Lemercier's left eye closed as he aimed his weapon.

No!

Dark looked on—because he couldn't afford not to look—even as his mind threatened to close down.

And then Ash was there, shoving his body between Alexia and the gun, pulling her to the ground, until Dark couldn't see Alexia's body anymore for the big man curled up around her.

Ash's body tensed.

The shot rang out, instants before Dark slammed head-first into Lemercier.

"Putain," Lemercier let out before the breath blew out of him with a soft oomph.

Dark saw red. Even before Lemercier landed—and Dark made sure Lemercier's body hit the ground hard—he was already punching. He thought of what Lemercier had said about Alexia, and punched. Then again as he remembered the listless expression on her face. And again and again, until the

man stopped moving and the throbbing in his knuckles became actual pain.

He was pretty sure he'd cracked a knuckle.

The man was completely still beneath him, and though Dark wanted to keep hitting, a voice in the back of his mind told him he had more important things to worry about.

Alexia.

Ash.

He got up unsteadily and ran towards them. Ash was still curled up around Alexia, and Dark knew he was anticipating a new burst of pain.

Anticipating it, but not fucking moving out of the way.

Tough asshole.

The back of his dark green jacket was covered in blood, and some of it had splattered onto the white snow beside them.

Dark pulled him gently away. "Ash? It's okay. Lemerrier is down."

Ash didn't say anything, but he uncurled his body from around Alexia, helping her to sit up.

Dark ran his hands up and down her body.

There was no blood on her.

"Is she... is she okay?" Ash asked, his usually rough voice thready.

"I'm okay," Alexia said. "You saved me."

"She's okay, thanks to you," Dark replied, helping the man sit up.

Ash started to say something, then thought better of it and gritted his teeth.

Dark put his hands around Alexia as she started to shake.

And then everyone was there. Dmitri, who threw his body on Nikolai with enough force to squash the boy into the snow.

Slate, Griffin and Rogue, who all arrived at the same time.

“I’ll get the briefcase,” Rogue said.

“Is she okay?” Slate asked, coming to his knees beside them. From the way he moved, nobody would think he’d been run over by a car just hours earlier.

Alexia looked at him and nodded. “Slate,” she said, as if only now remembering his name. “I was so worried when I saw you get run over.” She spoke slowly, her words slightly slurred.

They were going to have to figure out what Lemercier had given her and Nikolai. Dark looked at the unconscious man lying on the snow a few feet away from them and wished he’d pounded him even harder.

“Ash is bleeding,” Dark said unnecessarily.

Slate nodded. “I saw.”

Alexia shivered in his arms. Dark took off his coat and placed it around her slim shoulders.

Physically, she might be okay. Mentally, they’d have to see what she’d been through.

“I’m going to take off your jacket,” Slate said firmly, already shoving at Ash’s sleeve. “This might hurt.”

“Fuck,” Ash said, going a shade paler.

“Sorry, man, but I can’t have you bleeding to death out here.”

Griffin had almost reached Lemercier when Ilya charged. Somehow, he’d managed to free himself from his zip ties.

The Russian was quick, but Griffin was quicker.

“Don’t fucking move,” he said, raising his Glock-19 at the Russian security guard.

Ilya raised his hands. Something strong and dark—*shame*—warred in his expression as he stared at the corpse of his employer, but there was acceptance there, too. An acknowledgment of inevitability.

The Russian security guard looked tired and bruised—his neck red and bloody where he'd scraped off bits of skin getting loose from the zip ties.

Dark relaxed, though he still kept his arms tight around Alexia.

He's not a threat.

“Let me get to the boy,” the Russian said. Nobody stood in his way as he walked to where Dmitri huddled with the boy, both men speaking to the boy softly in Russian.

“We've got it. The plans are here,” Rogue said. Of course, he'd remembered the code Kvyat had called out, and had been able to get the briefcase open.

“Call Thorne,” Dark said. “Tell him Kvyat's dead, that we've got the plans and—“

Something made him look back at Lemercier.

Except there was nobody there.

Only the indentation of a body on the snow spoke of him ever having been there.

“Fuck!” Griffin exclaimed. He kept his gun aimed as he made his way around the white van to make sure the fixer wasn't hiding behind the vehicle. Moments later, he was back.

“Slimy bastard. He went that way. I'm going to—“

“Guys, I need help here,” Slate said. His arm was around Ash, who looked barely conscious. “We need to get him to a hospital.”

“I hate hospitals,” Ash said, but his face was pale and he wasn't arguing.

Rogue's phone started ringing. He listened for a second. “Shit. I'll let you know. Thanks Carrie,” he said.

“The police are on their way. I don't know who called them, but Thorne doesn't want us or the plans anywhere near here when they arrive. Apparently, Swiss police aren't friendly.”

“Right. Because police anywhere would love to find a dead body, several bloody men, and a kidnapped woman and child.”

“What about them?” Rogue asked, pointing at Dmitri, Ilya, and Nikolai. Dmitri stood up with Nikolai in his arms. The boy seemed to be unconscious again.

“Where are you taking him?” Alexia asked, coming out from behind Dark.

Dmitri nodded. “I think he was drugged. We’ll take him to the hospital. I will call his mother to come for him.”

That seemed to appease Alexia.

“You’ll stay with him until she arrives?”

Dmitri’s look was kind. “I promise you. We will not leave him for an instant.”

“And ...” Alexia waved at everything else.

“We’ll take the two SUVs. Nobody will ever know the boy was here,” the security guard said firmly.

“Not from us, either,” Dark agreed. It was a promise that was easy to give.

“He’ll be safe, I promise,” Ilya said, nodding at them and turning to leave.

Griffin looked in the direction Lemercier had disappeared in. Dark saw in the man’s expression how badly he wanted to give chase—waited for him to make his decision.

Finally, Griffin sighed.

“Fuck it. We found that bastard once. We’ll find him again.” He placed himself on Ash’s left side and took some of the man’s weight. Ash moaned once before his square jaw closed again.

Dark didn’t hesitate. He stood up and pulled Alexia easily into his arms, where she curled up as if she’d always belonged there.

Something fierce rose up inside him.

There's no as if.

This is where she belongs.

“Dark?” she asked. Her voice sounded sleepy.

“Tell me, baby.”

“We need to make sure Nikolai is okay.”

“We will. I promise you.”



Alexia

Alexia pulled her feet up on the couch, under the blanket.

One of the blankets.

Dark and his friends—*colleagues*, she supposed—had been coddling her all afternoon, bringing her blankets, water, tea, crackers ... you name it, it was probably on the table in front of her.

They'd also asked her about thirty times if she was sure she didn't need to go to the hospital.

"Are you sure you don't need anything, Alexia?" Rogue asked.

"I'd like to know what's going on."

"Yeah." He smiled ruefully. "Maybe it's better if you have that conversation with Dark."

That was a good idea, except he seemed to have disappeared.

"Where *is* Dark?"

"He went to check on Nikolai."

Alexia's heart warmed. He'd done that for her, because he knew she was worried about the boy.

"Is he okay?"

"It turns out the mother was in Geneva already, visiting friends. She drove up in a car and is already home with the boy. He's going to be okay."

Alexia breathed a sigh of relief. That was good. She couldn't bear the thought of Nikolai afraid and alone, and she knew how much he'd missed his mother.

A few minutes later, Slate and Ash came in, followed by Dark. Ash's left arm was in a sling.

Alexia stood up quickly, almost falling over when the blanket tangled around her feet, but finding her purchase

again.

“What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be in the hospital overnight?”

Ash raised his eyebrow. “I’m fine. It was just a scratch,” he said.

Slate’s laugh boomed. “A scratch with a 9mm bullet inside.”

“It’s not inside anymore. I’m fine,” Ash insisted. “I don’t like hospitals.”

“You saved my life,” Alexia said. “Thank you.”

Ash’s gruff expression softened as he looked at her. His lips curled into a small smile. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Dark walked over. The look in his blue eyes was turbulent.

“May I speak with you, Alexia?” he asked, very formally. “Alone, please.”

Too formally.

Alexia didn’t particularly care for the formal tone, when just a few hours earlier she’d felt completely safe, cradled in his arms.

She nodded, and together they made their way up the stairs.

Once in his room, Dark made his way to the small sitting area, rather than the bed. He pointed to the couch and waited until she was sitting, then kneeled in front of her.

Alexia only barely refrained from sticking her fingers in his hair.

“I need to ask you something, Alexia.”

She nodded.

“Of course.”

He swallowed thickly. “You told us you didn’t need to go to the hospital.”

“And I don’t. I feel fine.”

Dark ignored her. “Are you sure Lemerrier didn’t ... are you sure he didn’t hurt you?”

Lemerrier.

Vincent Lemerrier.

“He told me his name was Vincent.” She looked up and saw the pain swirling in Dark’s blue eyes. “No,” she said, hoping her voice sounded strong. “He didn’t hurt me. He told me to keep Nikolai calm, but basically ignored us.”

Dark let out the breath he’d been holding. He held himself very stiffly for a moment, then slowly let his head fall forward until his forehead hit her lap.

“I was so scared, baby. So scared. Every second you were missing was ... agony.”

“I was scared as well,” she said. “And there was so much I wanted to say to you. I’m sorry that—“

“No. Don’t apologize. Don’t ever apologize.”

This time, she didn’t stop her fingers from doing what they wanted to do. They threaded in his hair, drawing a pleased moan from him.

“Can you tell me what’s going on, Dark?”

He stilled, and looked up at her, then shook his head slowly.

“Fuck. I can’t, Alexia. God knows I wish I could, but I can’t.”

“It’s okay. It’s okay.”

He looked at her like he couldn’t believe she would just accept that. He raised himself higher, his knees pushing her legs apart until he was kneeling right between her legs as she sat on the couch.

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him she loved him, but she held on to the thought.

I’ll show him, instead.

She leaned forward into his mouth, drinking in his low growl as their lips touched. And his lips were firm but also trembling, and she'd never seen him show such vulnerability before. She grabbed on to his head.

“We’re okay,” she whispered. “We’re okay.”

His mouth swallowed her words, and then there were no more words, no more thoughts, just unbelievable toe-curling pleasure as their tongues and lips explored each other. Eventually his hands slipped under her jumper, rough and large and oh so warm. They paused at her stomach, as if determined to caress every inch of her belly, before moving upwards again.

Alexia held her breath as his hands finally—finally—moved up towards her breasts. She arched her back to give him better access.

“You’re wearing too much,” he said. “I want to see you.” He pulled off her jumper and undid her bra, letting it drop onto the floor.

His hands cupped her bare breasts, as if weighing each one, and she'd never known the underside of her breasts could be so sensitive, could feel this much. He kissed each nipple reverently before latching on to one breast and sucking hard.

Her pleasure soared.

A small, mewling sound escaped her.

She reached for his waist, pulling his T-shirt up and off, delighting in how his stomach and shoulder muscles tensed at her touch. Her fingers went quickly to his waist, undoing his belt and the first button of his jeans.

“Hey. Slow down, baby,” he said, his mouth so close to her ear she could feel the vibration of his voice.

She didn't want to slow down. She had the feeling, if they stopped to think, they'd stop this. And she didn't want to stop. Just hours earlier, she'd thought she'd never see him again. But she'd survived. They'd both survived, and she wanted to grab onto that feeling and celebrate.

“Not slowing down,” she said, pulling his pants and boxer shorts down. His cock sprang out, thick and hard for her already, and she felt a rush of power the likes of which she hadn’t ever felt before.

“You’re going to kill me,” he said, pushing her back onto the couch and getting on top of her. His hands made quick work of her cozy leggings and her panties. He inhaled sharply, and she knew he could smell her arousal.

He fished in the pocket of his jeans for an instant and found a condom, put it on roughly.

“How much do you want me, baby?” he asked, his hand caressing her cheek. She pulled his index finger into her mouth, sucking gently, as if it were a different part of his anatomy, delighting in the tremor that ran through him.

He pulled his finger out of her mouth. She realized what he meant to do with it an instant before he did so—his finger went right against her clit. She jumped at the intense pleasure.

Dark spread her legs with his knees until she was completely open to him. Her wetness pulled his thick finger inside her easily, and he began an easy rhythm inside her, her hips raising to meet each thrust. Every so often, his thumb would graze her clit, driving her crazy.

“I’m going to come if you don’t stop,” she panted.

“Good. I want to get inside you just as you’re coming.”

His words pushed her over the edge, her inner muscles contracting around his finger. And then his finger was gone, replaced by his thick, hard cock, which slipped inside her, stretching her even as she came.

“God, you’re tight,” he growled.

He didn’t give her body any time to relax. His cock bottomed out inside her, large enough to take her breath away, and then he began a punishing rhythm. His hand slipped between them, so in between thrusts he was stimulating her clit, and it was the best of both worlds.

This time, she didn't get to warn him before her orgasm exploded, bright colors filling her vision, her arms and legs shaking. Dark's eyes narrowed into slits. He seemed to drink in her pleasure as he drove himself inside her, until he, too, exploded with a roar.

"I wish I could stay inside you until I got hard again," Dark said in his low, deep voice before he left her.

"I don't think I could come again," she said, smiling into his cheek. "Too tingly."

He kissed her gently, then, and the pleasure, now that they were both relaxed and limp in each other's arms, was different.

"I like you," she said, hoping he didn't realize she'd been about to say a different word.

"I like you too, Alexia," he replied. "I'm sorry ... I'm sorry, there's so much I can't tell you."

He'd stopped nuzzling her neck, and he looked so sad, suddenly, that she wanted to say something—anything—to bring the smile back to his face.

"I know you're not the bad guys here, Dark," she said. "I *know* it."

Dark froze. His expression shuttered, and she realized it'd been exactly the wrong thing to say.

"I'm not a good man, Alexia." He jumped out of bed and pulled on his jeans without even bothering with his boxer shorts.

She closed her legs, suddenly feeling incredibly naked.

Dark sat up on the couch, his elbows on his knees, his head between his hands.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice strangled. "I'm sorry."

He doesn't trust me.

Tears built up behind her eyes, but she forced them back. She wouldn't cry. She and Dark had never promised each other anything. If this had just been goodbye sex, that was something she was going to have to learn to live with. She

could read between the lines. He certainly didn't need to tell her twice to get out.

She pulled on her clothes hurriedly, hardly realizing what she was doing, while he stayed in the same position on the too-small couch, his face down by his knees and hidden.

She willed him to look at her, but he never raised his head, even when she pulled the door open with a click and a groan.

Downstairs, Rogue and Ash, his arm in a sling, were engaged in a game of chess together. In the kitchen area, a man she'd never seen before was making himself a tea in a too-small mug. He was tall and well-built, like the rest of them, but some years older, judging by the wrinkles around his eyes and mouth.

"Alexia Miller, I presume," he said. He had a crisp British accent.

She nodded, not saying anything.

"I'm Thorne," he said. "I'm going to drive you to your hotel."

"My hotel?"

"I don't suppose you want to go back to Kvyat's house. I wouldn't recommend it. The police will be there all night and —"

"But won't the police suspect me, if I don't show up again?" Fear rose up in her throat. "I swear I had nothing to do with any of this."

"We know that. And we've already taken care of it with the police. I've got your things in my car. You can go anywhere you like, but I've reserved a room for you in a nice hotel."

Anywhere I like ...

A noise from the staircase had her looking back. Dark had followed her down. He was still barefoot, but had pulled on a navy blue henley that made his eyes look darker.

She looked at him, willing him to say something, but the connection between them seemed to have been severed.

“The hotel sounds fine,” she told Thorne decisively. She turned back to Dark, who still stood frozen by the stairs.

“I guess this is goodbye?” she said, wondering if her voice sounded as strangled as it felt.

She waited for an instant, holding her breath.

Rogue and Ash had stopped their game and were looking at them, as was Thorne.

Please say it's not.

Please say it's not goodbye.

But Dark didn't say a word, and though the other men were still looking at her, none of them said anything either.

Fine.

Fine.

I won't let this break me.

She put on her boots and picked up her jacket, following Thorne to the door.



Dark

“I love this desk,” Slate said, placing his boots on the shiny metallic surface and leaning back. The slate gray office chair creaked but held his weight.

Pascale and Carrie looked proudly around the office, showing off the new furniture, filing cabinets and brand new kitchen area as if they were real estate agents or interior decorators.

“Looks great,” Dark agreed. He was finding it hard to fake some enthusiasm, though it was clear the pair had been working hard to get the office ready for their return.

“At least we have blinds now,” Griffin said. “That’s nice.”

“I’ll be up in my room,” Dark said. “See you guys later.”

Dark had taken the same studio he’d stayed in the last time he was here. The rest of the team had spent some time walking around the first floor, looking at each of the free apartments, then drawn lots to see who got to choose next.

Dark had left them to it. He couldn’t care less which side his room faced.

All he wanted was to be alone.

Alone.

The word had never hurt quite so much.

And a part of him knew he should be happy. They’d just completed their first successful mission and, even though Lemercier had escaped, the plans to the experimental nuclear reactor had been documented and placed under custody.

Thorne was happy with them. He’d bought them a celebratory dinner before leaving Gstaad, even going so far as to open a few bottles of champagne from the cellar.

And you’re free.

Or not in prison, at least.

He should be happy. Instead, all he wanted to do was curl up and die.

On his way to the elevator, which seemed to be the only space Pascale and Carrie hadn't spruced up during their time in Gstaad, he bumped into Thorne.

"Ah, Dark, just the man I wanted to see. Are you all settling in?"

Dark nodded. "Everything's fine. I'll be up in my room."

"Perfect. Please tell the team I've arranged for a doctor to come tomorrow. If you could make sure everybody's down here early—"

"But we're all fine. Ash is the only one who—"

"No, it's not that kind of doctor," Thorne said, shaking his head. He still wouldn't say what kind it was, but Dark eventually figured it out.

His body whipped around. "A shrink? You want us to see a shrink?"

Thorne nodded.

"But none of us pulled the trigger."

Thorne shrugged. "But you were all ready to. Sometimes, that means the same."

The men are going to love this.

But Dark didn't feel like standing here arguing. "I'll let everyone know," he said.

"I expect you to see her as well, Dark," Thorne said, before walking off.

Great.

Just what I need.

Somebody else trying to get into my head, when I can't even stand being in there myself.

The last time he'd spoken to a shrink had been in Syria, right after he'd killed Rourke, his commanding officer. Or rather, a shrink had tried to speak with him to evaluate what

had made Dark crack, and whether he was a danger to himself or to others.

He hadn't spoken to the shrink, because he'd had nothing to say. Or rather, nothing he said would have led to a different outcome for him, and it would have ruined the man's reputation.

Dark had made Rourke's wife a widow and left his children fatherless. It wasn't right that they should be left without the man's pension, on top of everything else—which was exactly what would have happened if Dark had come clean and exposed the way his commanding officer was attempting to burn an entire village to the ground to cover up the fact that he'd accidentally killed two children.

Rourke's death had been—if not accidental, because Dark had known when he faced up to the man that it might well end with one of them dead—then at least unpremeditated.

That hadn't helped him.

If anybody had suspected the truth, they'd been happy to sweep that truth under the rug. Happy to let Dark pay—and he'd been happy to pay, because he'd killed a man. One of his own. A man he'd followed, and had once looked up to. That wasn't the kind of thing one could recover from.

It wasn't the kind of thing one *should* recover from.

Whether he was in prison or free, he should pay for it for the rest of his life.

A shadow came down the stairs. Dark recognized Ash. The man rotated his shoulder and winced, but quickly smoothed out his expression when he saw Dark.

“Are you okay?” Dark asked.

“I'm fine,” Ash said. He moved sideways to pass, but Dark stood in front of him.

“You saved her, and I'm grateful,” Dark said quietly. “As much as I hate the type of man you—“

Ash's expression paled. “What the fuck do you know about the type of man I am?”

Dark pulled himself to his full height, so he was standing eye to eye with Ash. “Are you saying everything in that report was a lie?”

Ash snarled, his top lip pulling. “I’m saying, you should judge me for my actions. Have I ever given you any reason not to trust me?”

No. He hadn’t.

“Right. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” Ash said, pushing through so Dark would have no choice but to step aside or risk slamming into the man’s injured shoulder.



Alexia

Like everything else in Gstaad, the hotel room was lovely.

Thorne had booked her into a junior suite, with windows facing the town on one side and the rugged mountains on the other.

Before leaving, he'd told her it was paid for until Sunday—which meant she had three days to do nothing.

She wasn't sure that was a good thing.

She should feel *something*.

After all these years looking for justice, she'd finally gotten it two days earlier. Kvyat wouldn't be going to prison, but he also wouldn't be hurting anybody else ever again.

She should feel happy about that.

She should feel glad that Nikolai was with his mother, and that he likely would grow up to be a better person now that his father was out of his life. She'd spoken to him the day before, and it looked like the drug they'd been given had affected him more than it had affected her. He didn't remember anything about the time they'd been taken, and even less about the way his father had died. That was also a good thing.

She should feel glad about all that.

She should feel *something*, but instead, all she felt was the emptiness of the years ahead.

She sat on the small, rickety table on the balcony, looking out at the town. Two stories below, people walked by, some moving quickly, with a sense of purpose, others more slowly, as if they had all the time in the world.

Alexia wished she were a smoker, so she'd have something to hold in her shaking hands.

The doorbell rang. She considered ignoring it, but a part of her couldn't stand thinking it might be Dark looking for her.

It wasn't.

She tried not to scowl at Thorne.

“I told you to order anything you wanted from room service,” he said, looking her up and down. “It doesn’t look like you’ve had anything to eat since yesterday.”

Alexia squared her shoulders. “So what if I haven’t? Maybe I’m on a diet,” she quipped, realizing she sounded like an immature teenager. This man wasn’t to blame for her problems.

“Come,” he said, pointing towards the elevator. “I’ll take you out to eat something.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” she said, not moving an inch. She wasn’t afraid of Thorne—something told her the man would never hurt her—but she was tired of being ordered around.

She was on her own now, and the sooner she figured out how to deal with it, the better off she’d be.

“I think you should come with me, Miss Miller.” And then he let the bomb fall. “It might help you understand Luke Dark better.”

Damn, he’s good.

She moved forward so quickly, she ended up standing in the middle of the hallway in her socks. Thankfully, the key card was in her pocket and she was able to let herself back in. She quickly pulled on her boots, blushing hard.

“Where are we going?”

“There’s a small vegetarian restaurant around the corner. I think you’ll like it.”

“I’m not a vegetarian,” she said automatically.

“No, but I am. I’ve heard great things about it, regardless.”

They were offered a round table in a corner that looked like it could seat six people comfortably. Though the restaurant was almost empty, it didn’t surprise her when Thorne sat with his back to the wall, facing the doorway.

Ten minutes later, they were digging into a meal of hummus and crackers, freshly made falafel, sesame pancakes, and a soy-flavored broccoli salad.

Thorne ate with gusto, looking up every so often to make sure she was eating as well.

And she was.

The first bite had made her realize just how hungry he was, and the food was delicious. Particularly those sesame pancakes. She wondered if she'd be able to replicate the dish at home, and if Dark—

No.

She wasn't going to think of Dark.

Dark had made it clear she shouldn't think of him.

He didn't just let me go.

He pushed me away.

Thorne cleared his throat as he carefully wiped his fingers off on one of the white paper napkins.

"I need to ask you a question," he said.

"I figured you weren't just looking for some company for lunch," she said, her lips almost curling up into a smile. "Ask away."

"In Dark's report from the night of the party, he mentioned somebody told you about Kvyat—a journalist who knew that Kvyat had killed your brother, and that you were still looking for justice."

She sighed. "What does it matter now? Kvyat's dead."

Thorne nodded. "Indeed. But I'd like to meet your contact. We may have things to discuss."

"I don't know who he is," she said honestly. "We spoke on the phone once, but that number was later disconnected. Since then, we only communicate by email."

"Would you be willing to write to him and let him know I'd like to speak with him?"

She considered that for a moment. “I don’t see any problem with that,” she finally said. “But it’ll be his choice whether he wants to speak with you or not.”

“Of course,” Thorne said, crunching loudly on a piece of broccoli. “I appreciate that.”

Alexia wondered vaguely how much broccoli one had to eat to maintain that physique—imagined him as a panda in the forest, munching away on bamboo stalks sixteen hours a day.

“Something funny?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Nothing.”

“There was another reason I was hoping to have lunch together.”

“It’s too late for lunch.”

“A snack together, then.”

“I’m all ears,” she said, taking a sip of her ice water, her appetite all but gone.

“You probably have a lot of questions,” he began, then paused, fishing for information.

“I *had* a lot of questions,” Alexia replied honestly, “but Dark refused to answer any of them. I’m not stupid. I know you guys are not friends, that you were working together on some ... mission ... involving Kvyat.”

“I need to know you’re not going to tell any of this to anyone,” Thorne said.

Alexia smiled ruefully. “You don’t need to threaten me. There’s nobody I could tell, and I’m ...” She paused for a moment, looking for the best way to say this without embarrassing herself. “I’m not going to tell anyone anything. Not only because you saved my life and Nikolai’s, but also because I would never do anything that could hurt Dark.”

“Ah. Dark,” Thorne said, pushing his plate away, though there was still plenty of food left. “We come back to him.”

“I don’t want him hurt.”

Thorne nodded. “To be honest, he’s not doing so well at the moment.”

Her stomach clenched, threatening to let go of everything she’d just eaten. “What do you mean, he’s not doing so well? What happened?”

Thorne raised his hands, palms up. “Relax. I don’t mean physically. Physically, he’s fine. But emotionally, he’s ... not doing great.”

Good.

Serves him right.

I’m not doing so great, either.

“I’m going to give you a choice, Alexia.” He sighed. “A choice that I normally shouldn’t offer.”

Alexia’s ears perked up.

“I can tell you something now, something that will likely change everything. It will change the way you see the world, the way you see Dark ... it will change a lot of things. Or, I can *not* tell you. You can go back to New Hampshire, to your job, to your friends, to your life.”

“So if I don’t want to know ...”

“We will order dessert—I’ve heard they have a great chocolate and avocado cake—and then we’ll go our separate ways. You will never see any of us again.”

Alexia swallowed thickly, wishing she hadn’t had quite as much food. It was getting really warm inside the restaurant. “And if I do listen to you, will I be able to be with Dark?”

“That’s not up to me. It depends on you and on Dark. But yes, you would be able to be with him—if that’s what you choose. But you’d be giving up everything you’ve ever known.”

Thorne was presenting it as a choice, but really, there was no choice.

No choice at all.



Dark

Dark sat alone in the darkened office. The rest of the team had gone out to dinner with Pascale and Carrie, but he hadn't felt like joining them.

He didn't feel like doing much of anything.

Thorne walked into the office, not bothering to turn on the light. The man seemed altogether too comfortable in the dark.

"Good. You're here," he said.

"You need something?" Dark asked. "Everyone saw the shrink this morning."

"Dr. Devlin told me. Apparently, she had a lot of interesting conversations about the new furniture."

Despite himself, Dark's lips curled into a wry smile. "I didn't tell the men not to talk to her."

"But you also didn't talk to her yourself." He raised his hand. "About anything real, I mean."

"Give me a break, Thorne. You got what you wanted. Kvyat's out of the picture. The plans are safe ... we even found out a dangerous criminal who everyone thought was dead is alive and well. That's worth celebrating, isn't it?"

"She'll be back next week, Dark. Make sure the men know how important it is that they speak with her."

Dark nodded. "Fair enough. I'll speak with them."

"How are you doing?" Thorne asked. He walked to one of the cabinets and pulled out a bottle and two glasses.

Dark read the label.

Knockando.

Single Malt Scotch Whisky.

"15 years. I guess we are celebrating something."

“What can I say? Life’s too short to drink bad whisky. I don’t have any ice. I hope you take it straight.”

“Straight is fine.”

Thorne poured them both a generous shot—looked more like two shots, even.

“So,” Thorne tried again. “Are you okay?”

“Do you really care?” Dark asked back.

Thorne shrugged.

“Who is really behind this unit, Thorne? Who do you report to?”

Thorne looked down at his glass. “Why would I tell you that?”

“You want us in the dark ... but you also didn’t deny it when Rogue mentioned your links to Interpol. Is that where you built your career? What did you do to get sent here?”

Thorne’s white teeth flashed, then. “What makes you think I did something?”

Dark waved his hand around them. “I’m sorry to say, this doesn’t seem like anyone’s idea of a cushy retirement job, Thorne.”

“All you need to worry about is the job ahead, Dark. Now, if you have no more questions—“

“I *do* have another question,” Dark interrupted. “Why me? I don’t yet understand everything about what we’re doing, but I know you’re high enough on the totem pole to choose your team. So why did you choose me?”

Thorne swirled the golden liquid in his glass for a long instant. “Your file said you were a creative, unorthodox team leader. A pain in the ass for anybody managing you, but that your men respected you.”

Did my file say all that?

It was true his team had always been the best part of the job.

“It looks like the reports were right,” Thorne continued. He took a small sip of the whisky.

Dark scoffed. “About me being a pain in the ass?”

“Yes. But also about you being a good team lead.”

“Jesus, Thorne. Is that a compliment?”

“Fuck off.” Thorne stood up. “You should all get some rest. I’m putting things together for the next mission.”

“I’ll pay my dues, Thorne. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Oh, I’m not worried. And maybe when the five years are over—”

“It’s four years and ten months now.”

Thorne scowled. “Maybe when that time is over, you’ll choose to stay on.”

Dark took a sip of the whisky. It felt warm and smoky going down his throat.

He wasn’t sure of anything anymore. He’d wanted that freedom—the honorable discharge, perhaps even the chance to go back to the Rangers. But now, ever since he’d watched Alexia leave, everything felt empty.

He remembered everything about that instant, the one just before she’d turned away—remembered her green eyes, bright with pain, the way her brow had furrowed, as if willing him to do something, to say something.

But there was nothing he could have said. He didn’t have anything to offer her.

The elevator dinged. Soft, light footsteps sounded along the hallway—not any of the men. Maybe Carrie had come back—

Not Carrie.

Alexia walked hesitantly through the doorway.

Dark’s hand shook against the glass, the whisky swirling dangerously close to the edge. “What—what are you doing

here?" he croaked.

He looked behind them to where Thorne had been standing, but the man was nowhere to be seen.



Alexia

Alexia laughed.

“That’s all you have to say to me? No hello-I-missed-you-Alexia?” she said, acting braver than she really felt.

“Hello. And you know I fucking missed you,” Dark growled. “What are you doing here?”

She took the time to study him. He looked dreadful. Well, he looked wonderful, strong and rugged and... just him... but dreadful in the sense that he looked like he hadn’t slept in days, with a shadow under his chin that told her he might not have shaved in several days, either.

She took a deep breath.

“Thorne came to visit me at my hotel. We had lunch together, and we... spoke,” she began.

“You had lunch together?” Dark repeated, his voice dangerously low.

“Late lunch, to be very accurate. More of a snack.” She felt like she was poking a bear, but knew this was a bear she could afford to poke. Dark would never hurt her.

“But you were... you stayed...”

She took pity on him, then. “I’ll stand by you.”

“You... know?”

“Even though I’ve signed Thorne’s NDA, I still don’t know everything. You’ll need to fill in some of the blanks. But I know what you were doing in Kansas,” she said carefully.

This is the tricky part.

The part where he might close down completely if you’re not careful.

“You know I’m a murderer,” he said, taking a step forward so he towered over her.

“I know you killed a man. Thorne told me what happened.”

“Thorne doesn’t know what happened. Nobody does.”

“I know the man you killed was about to kill fifty people, Dark. I know also that you didn’t mean to kill him, that you just wanted to stop him. And I know you’ve paid dearly for what you did.”

“I killed a man, Alexia.”

“I understand,” she said, her chin up in the air. “And I know you and your team are trying to—”

“You know about them, too?”

She shook her head. “Not the details, but I know they all come from... complicated situations as well.”

“We’re a team of misfits.”

“I know you’re a team of people trying to do the right thing now, Dark.”

“Great. So one cozy chat with Thorne, and you’ve turned us into heroes in your mind.” He ran his fingers through his hair, as if in pain.

This isn’t going well.

He hates himself too much.

“So what,” he said, roughly. “you move into my room and...” He paused dramatically. “Oh, no, there is no *and*. You move in and *nothing*.”

“Right now you’re not giving me any reason to go anywhere with you, least of all to move in with you,” she said, irritated by his pessimism.

“There’s nothing I can offer you, Alexia,” Dark said, his voice softer than she’d ever heard it before. He sounded almost ashamed. Then his voice hardened. “Thorne should have known better than to involve you any deeper into this.”

Okay, now he was really pissing her off. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down.

“I’m not going to let you do this to us, Dark. And you shouldn’t blame Thorne. He gave me a choice as to whether or not I wanted to hear the story. And you know why I said yes?”

Dark looked up at her. The light played in his penetrating blue eyes.

“I said yes because I love you.”

“You... love me...” He seemed to sway for a moment. She felt better when he leaned his large frame against a metallic desk, setting the glass down carefully on the surface.

“I love you, Dark. And I know there’s a lot we don’t know about each other, and maybe trust won’t come easy to either of us, but—“

“I trust you,” he interrupted.

The elevator dinged again, and what seemed like a herd of elephants headed in their direction. Griffin and Slate appeared first, walking side by side—which was good. Dark hoped they were closer to solving some of their issues. Rogue followed, his face stuck in his phone screen as he typed away furiously with his thumbs. Then Ash.

“Why the hell are you sitting here in the dark?” Rogue asked. “Oh, hi Alexia.”

“Hi Alexia,” the rest of the men said at the same time.

None of them seemed in the least surprised to see her there.

“You guys were in on this with Thorne?” Dark asked, his voice rough and dangerous.



Dark

“Dark. Hey. We were talking, remember?” Alexia asked, looking somewhere between amused and hurt.

Amused, he could cope with. But he couldn’t bear to see her hurt.

Hell, that was why he’d let her go in the first place, even though it almost killed him to do so. Because he couldn’t offer her anything, and she deserved ... she deserved the world.

But his mind kept going back in circles.

“You said you love me.”

“I know. I do,” she said, her voice strangely patient now. She took a step forward, so they were almost touching, and reached out to grasp his hand. Hers was small and cold, and he gripped it unconsciously, looking to warm her skin.

“You can’t love me,” he said.

“I love you, Dark,” she repeated once again, as if realizing how much he needed to hear it. “And the only way I’m leaving is if you tell me you don’t love me back.”

He should.

He should tell her he didn’t love her and set her free.

The lie was a small enough price to pay for Alexia’s future happiness.

He should do it even if it destroyed him.

Her expression turned impatiently. “And I don’t mean you should lie to me, you fool,” she said.

“That’s what he was going to do,” Slate said, moving so he was standing right beside Alexia.

“Stay out of this,” Dark growled. “In fact, what the hell are you all doing here? If you’re back from dinner already, shouldn’t you be in your rooms?”

Griffin snorted. “Are you our dad now?”

“I think you should all stay,” Alexia said. “I know you’re all in this together, so how I feel—and how Dark feels—affects you too.”

“Oh, I think we *know* how he feels,” Rogue said.

“You don’t know anything,” Dark replied.

I love you.

I love you so much it hurts every time I breathe.

But I want you to be safe and happy.

“You don’t have to say it if it’s too hard, Dark,” she said kindly. “I just need to know if you want to give us a chance.”

“No.”

“No?” she asked. Her eyes widened with hurt that she was trying hard to mask.

“No. It’s not hard. I love you, Alexia. And if there was something I could—“

She interrupted him, jumping up into his arms. He held her tight, so her feet didn’t touch the floor. Her heart beat hard against his chest.

“Stop. I don’t want to hear the rest. If we love each other, we can make this work.”

“Hear, hear,” Griffin replied. For once, his sharp face seemed relaxed. He looked like he was going to go grab some popcorn.

“I don’t understand how you can be so generous, Alexia,” Dark began, his voice faltering. “I love you, but these men and I ... we owe a debt that we may not be able to repay.”

“We’ll talk about it, Dark,” she continued, and she looked so sure of herself, and he wanted so much to believe her, to know that he didn’t have to let go, that he could keep holding her against him. “But I’m staying.”

“Maybe you should have moved into one of the larger apartments when you had the chance, Dark,” Ash said glibly.

Dark leaned back further against the desk, bringing Alexia onto his lap. It felt right to have her there.

“You know, guys, I knew from the beginning that you weren’t television executives,” Alexia said, looking at each of the men in turn.

“Really?” Griffin asked. “What gave us away?”

“Lots of things. But I don’t think you need an ego boost at the moment, so I’ll keep them to myself.”

The words were barely out of her mouth when Thorne walked back in. He’d left the whisky bottle and glass somewhere, for his hands were free. He also didn’t look like he’d indulged at all, but then, the man was a good actor.

He caught sight of Alexia, sitting on Dark’s lap.

“I guess you’ve sorted things out, then,” he said, his voice serious and dry. “There are a couple one-bedroom apartments left, Dark. You two could move into one of those.”

Dark nodded, feeling slightly overwhelmed. The whole team was offering their support, even Thorne, and he knew better than to take any of it for granted. “Thank you.”

Thorne looked as if the whole conversation pained him.

“Now, if we can get on with business. I’m glad to find you all here. I was hoping to have a small debrief.” He raised his hands as Alexia made to move from Dark’s lap. “No. Stay where you are, Alexia. You’re part of the team now, aren’t you?”

She smiled shyly, then settled in further against him.

“I was thinking of something,” Rogue said before Thorne could begin. “We’re missing a name. So I came up with one. Chimera Force.”

All eyes turned to look at Rogue in surprise.

Dark turned the name around in his mind.

Chimera Force.

Chimeras were hybrids, misfits ... a bit like them, he supposed. It kind of fit.

“Think about it,” Rogue insisted, not backing down. “It’s a great name for us.”

Thorne’s eyes glittered dangerously. Maybe he had drunk a bit more whisky than he was letting on, and he was simply good at looking sober.

“I like it,” Alexia said.

“Me too,” Dark replied. If Thorne found it annoying, and if Alexia liked it, then it was a great name.

“Good name, Rogue,” Griffin and Slate said, embarrassed when they realized they’d spoken in unison.

“Any problem with that, Thorne?”

Thorne inclined his head and sighed loudly. “Fine. As long as you’re not planning on getting T-shirts printed. I’m not paying a cent for that.”

The laugh burst out of Dark before he could stop it. One by one, the others joined in, all of them laughing hard enough that they had to lean against something. Alexia and Thorne were the last ones to start laughing.

They laughed for a long time, until tears rolled down their cheeks.

And Dark had been around the block long enough to know what this meant. That it wasn’t going to be the name that would turn them into a team, because they were already a team. They were a team, even if nobody could ever know about it.

“You guys did well out there,” Thorne said.

“But we lost Lemercier,” Rogue countered. “I’ve been trying to trace him, but he’s disappeared into thin air.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help more,” Alexia said. “I don’t remember anything about the hut where he held us.”

Dark tightened his hold on her, his throat sounding a low growl.

“Lemercier is bad news,” Griffin said. “You need to warn all agencies, Thorne, let them know he’s still alive.”

“Already done,” Thorne said.

“If we find him again ...” Ash began, but was quickly interrupted by Dark.

“He’s mine.” Again, that growl that sent a shiver right through her. “All mine.”

Ash inclined his head in acknowledgment.

Thorne cleared his throat.

“While I agree with you that Lemercier is trouble, and I’d love to see him behind bars. Unfortunately, he’s not our priority at the moment.”

Dark turned a questioning look at him.

“Not tonight,” Thorne said, making it clear he was done speaking for the moment. “Go upstairs. Rest. My colleague Reynolds is on his way. We’ll all speak in the morning.”

“Reynolds?” Dark asked.

A ghost of a smile crossed Thorne’s expression, and then was gone. “I think you knew him as Bald, though I caution you, he wouldn’t appreciate the nickname.”

EPILOGUE



Alexia

“This is it,” Dark said, letting her into the small studio apartment.

“It’s not as bad as I imagined,” she said. “At least the windows are big.”

Dark arched an eyebrow.

“You’d be willing to live here?”

“Thorne did say he had a one-bedroom he could clear out for us,” she reminded him. “But yes. I’d be willing to live anywhere, if it means we can be together.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed.

“God, Alexia, I ...”

“Just say you’ll give us a chance, Dark. A chance to see if this works.”

“Believe me, this works,” he said, grabbing on to her butt and bringing her flush against his hard body.

“Not that,” she said, laughing. “I already know *that* works. I mean, if *we* work, you and I, without any lies between us.”

“No more lies,” he promised, bringing her even closer into his embrace.

“What do you think Thorne wants to talk to you about?”

Dark shrugged his powerful shoulders. “He’ll tell us when he’s ready, but I imagine he’s got another target for us.”

“Like Kvyat?” Alexia shivered. “Thorne told me the man had arranged to sell the plans for an experimental nuclear reactor to the Iranians, who would have used it to manufacture weapons ... I just don’t understand how a man could do that ...”

“I wish you hadn’t had to see that. And I wish you hadn’t had to see him die,” Dark said, tightening his arms around her.

“He could have traded me back, along with Nikolai, but he gifted me to that awful man, Dark. I have no illusions about what would have happened to me if you and your team hadn’t been there.”

“We were there. I’ll always be there for you, Alexia. I swear to you.”

She burrowed into his T-shirt, feeling his strength and letting it fill her.

“There’s something I need to ask you,” he said.

She tensed, then forced herself to relax.

No more lies.

“You told us you had a contact, remember? Somebody tipped you off that Kvyat was looking for a tutor for his son.”

Alexia nodded. “Yes. I already told Thorne everything I know about him, but it isn’t much. All I know is he’s a journalist, and that he was looking to expose Kvyat ...”

“He could have gotten you killed.”

“He didn’t.” She paused for a moment. “Thorne wants an introduction.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him I’d email my contact, but that it would be up to him whether he wanted to speak to Thorne or not.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t want you in danger, Dark.”

“I can’t promise there won’t be any dangerous missions in the future, baby, but what I *can* guarantee is that I’ll do my best to come back in one piece. I have too much to live for now.”

It would have to be enough.

For now.

“Did you eat dinner?” he asked, looking intently at her.

Alexia shook her head quickly.

“Lunch?” Another shake of her head, and she could now feel the unhappy vibrations coming off him. “I was in a rush to get here,” she justified.

Might as well put it all out there.

“I was in a rush to get to *you*.”

Fire shone in his blue eyes.

“Let me cook you something.”

She looked warily at the little kitchenette. It looked like it’d never been used before.

“You have food here?”

“Carrie and Pascale said they filled the fridge for our return.” He walked over to the small fridge and opened it cautiously. When he opened his mouth again, he sounded relieved. “Eggs and peppers. I can make you an omelet.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather ... do something else?” she asked coyly.

Dark’s gaze heated for a moment, then cooled down as he visibly took control of himself.

“I’d rather feed you,” he said.

“An omelet sounds nice.” She’d eat anything if it would make him happy.

It turned out to be the best omelet she’d ever had—soft, buttery and extra-fluffy. She closed her eyes and swallowed a soft moan as she chewed a piece.

“Wow,” she said. “You really *can* cook.”

“Omelets and pasta are about the extent of my cooking abilities, but if it makes you look like that,” he said, his voice tight, “I’ll take a cooking class.”

“You don’t need to take a cooking class,” she said. “I know what I’m getting into, Dark. I want to be with you, and I don’t need you to play house with me.”

“I’m not playing,” he said. “I need you to know I’ll do everything to make you happy, Alexia.”

“I *will* be. I’ll be happy if we’re together.” She took another bite. “Are you sure you don’t want any?”

He shook his head, but took one of her hands in his. It was lucky the omelet was soft enough she could cut it with her fork and didn’t need her other hand, because she wasn’t about to move that hand for anything.

“Tell me more about yourself, Alexia.”

Maybe it was the warm food in her belly, or the strength she found in his hand, but it was suddenly easy to tell him about her brother Rob. Not about his death—she’d already told him about that—but about what he’d been like while he was alive. Dark listened, not interrupting once, and there was no judgment in his eyes. Only love and respect.

And she realized, she’d come to Switzerland looking for justice, and had come away with something new—a chance at a future she’d never imagined could be hers.

— — — — —

Thank you for reading the first Chimera Force story. If you enjoyed it, please take a minute to leave a quick review. Reviews help other readers find my work, and I appreciate them more than I can say.

Sign up here (<https://www.jrpace.com/stay-in-touch/>) if you’d like to hear about my new releases, and read on for a preview of Ash’s story!

PREVIEW: CHIMERA FORCE BOOK 2



Reka

Istanbul was meant to be the appetizer—a quick three-day pit stop, a chance to get over their jet lag before traveling on to Lake Salda, a place that had been described by the contest organizers as Turkey’s Maldives.

By their second day in Istanbul, Reka already knew she would have been happy to stay in the city for their entire ten-day holiday.

Maybe it was because it was her first time traveling outside the States, or because she hadn’t taken a holiday in the last five years, or because she was with her two best friends, or simply because Istanbul really *was* an incredible city, but Reka didn’t want to leave.

Each morning, they woke up to the relaxing prayer sounds coming from the nearby mosque. Then, after a leisurely breakfast, they went out to explore the city. The previous afternoon, they’d pampered themselves at a local *hamam* the hotel receptionist had recommended, a gleaming palace of warm marble and citrus-scented steam.

Reka thought of the goody bags they’d been given, filled with natural olive oil soaps and traditional Turkish cosmetics. She would try them all, except for the shampoo—her thick, frizzy hair didn’t respond well to new products, or to humidity, for that matter, so this trip was proving quite the challenge.

Although Reka loved her hair, sometimes she wished she had Chloe’s straight blond hair or Aileen’s wavy red locks. She sneaked a look in their direction to confirm—and yes, both her friends looked like they’d just stepped out of the hairdresser’s.

Reka sighed, then smiled, her thoughts moving to the day ahead.

They still had to decide if, after their trip to the Gran Bazaar, they would look for another *hamam* or go back to their hotel to relax. Reka was probably the most athletic of the

three, and even her feet were hurting from walking around so much. She couldn't imagine what Chloe and Aileen's feet felt like.

"This place is amazing, Chloe," Aileen said as they stood at the entrance to the covered market.

"It really *is*," Reka agreed. "I didn't imagine it would be this big."

"I told you!" Chloe said, flicking her blond hair out of her face. "Sixty-one streets and over four thousand shops."

Reka and Aileen laughed. In the weeks before the trip, Chloe had read every single guidebook ever published on Turkey, including several old, out-of-print ones she'd gotten from friends. Of course, she was also the one who had won the travel magazine's contest in the first place, and therefore the reason they were all here.

Originally, the prize had been a ten-day trip for two but Chloe had managed to convince the organizers to make it a trip for the three of them, if they flew economy instead of flying first-class.

It was a running joke between them that sweet, mild-mannered Chloe could sweet-talk anyone into doing whatever she wanted.

"I'm so glad we're all here," Chloe said, taking their hands and squeezing.

Reka squeezed back. The three of them had met their freshman year in university and even though they'd never shared a class together—Reka had been studying Psychology, Aileen had been a biology major, and Chloe had changed majors three times before settling on Comparative Literature—they'd been inseparable until they graduated.

And beyond.

Even now, five years after graduation, they still met up once a month religiously, taking advantage of the fact that they all lived in Chicago. But meeting up for dinner together wasn't the same as spending ten days together discovering a new country. This was another thing altogether.

Reka was glad she had made time in her schedule for the trip. At first, she'd been hesitant, worried she'd fall behind on her publishing schedule, since she was contracted to write monthly articles for a number of psychology magazines, as well as providing support on her specialty, emotions management, to several local schools. A conversation with her mother, however, had made her rethink things, when she'd asked Reka, "If not now, when?"

Reka was a long distance runner, the kind who was always thinking of the next mile, and then the one after that. She was the same in life—there was always the next project, the next goal, the next thing she wanted to accomplish. It was a way of thinking that had helped her in life but, sometimes, it also made her miss out on things.

Not this time.

She wasn't going to miss out on an instant of this amazing trip with her friends.

"Hold on," Aileen said, bringing up her camera and snapping a shot of Chloe and Reka.

Though she enjoyed her job in a genetics lab, Reka knew Aileen's real love was photography. She hoped one day her friend would be able to turn that love into a career.

"How many pictures have you taken already, Aileen?" Chloe laughed. "Aren't you going to run out of space on your laptop?"

"Don't worry, I brought extra memory sticks with me," Aileen replied, sticking out her tongue. "Reka, can you get a bit closer to Chloe so you're both standing right under that archway? There, right there!"

Reka, half a head taller than her friend, placed her arm around Chloe's slim shoulders and squeezed gently. They knew better than to rush Aileen when she had her camera out.

As Aileen snapped away—and she claimed that was one of her secrets, taking many, many shots, so she never missed that perfect moment—Reka suddenly felt something strange. She

looked around them, searching for the source of the unexpected discomfort, but found nothing.

“Just a couple more!” said Aileen.

Keeping her smile firmly in place, Reka looked surreptitiously left and right—but no, there was nothing strange, nothing out of place. And then the feeling was gone, so fast it might never have happened, except she’d learned caution from her uncle, a man Reka knew had spent more time around evil than he’d ever let on around the family. One of the things he’d taught her was never to ignore one of those strange feelings.

“Even your camera’s exhausted, Aileen. Let’s go inside,” she said quickly. She wanted to leave their current exposed position and get inside the market.

As well as enormous, the market was beautiful. Reka loved the arching hallways, the strange smells and sounds. They declined innumerable offers of fragrant, warm tea, because both Chloe and Aileen knew by now that taking tea from strangers was not something Reka felt comfortable doing.

Aileen stopped outside a shop to look at a beautifully patterned carpet in earthy tones.

“It’s handmade,” the shopkeeper said. Like most people here, he spoke perfect English. “Pure wool.”

“It’s beautiful,” Aileen said sincerely.

“I’ve seen your living room,” Reka whispered in her ear. “You’d have to knock down your neighbor’s wall in order to fit that inside.”

“Maybe that would be a good thing,” Chloe said, laughing softly. “Her neighbor’s that hot doctor.”

“Yeah, the hot doctor who brings home a different woman every Friday night, like clockwork.” Aileen wrinkled her nose. “No, thank you.” She turned to the shopkeeper. “Thank you so much, it is too large for my house, but it’s beautiful.”

“A smaller one, perhaps?” the man said quickly, picking up on the opportunity.

Aileen laughed. “Maybe another time. Thank you, though.”

They walked on, stopping at various shops to look for souvenirs for people back home. With Aileen’s help, Reka bought a wide leather belt for her mother, which the merchant wrapped in a dainty linen bag. Of the three of them, only Aileen understood and enjoyed the art of bargaining. Chloe was too shy, and Reka too impatient.

By the time Reka looked at her watch again, it was noon. It was easy to lose track of time inside this large, covered space. Once again, that odd feeling struck her—not just *odd*, but actually *off*—that something was wrong, and that they shouldn’t stay here any longer.

“Why don’t we find an exit and get some lunch?” she asked, suddenly wishing the place was less of a labyrinth. “You must have a few places bookmarked in the area, Chloe.”

“Actually, I do,” Chloe said, looking excitedly at her phone. “This place serves the best baklava in town, apparently.”

Aileen and Reka exchanged a quick look. They didn’t have the heart to tell Chloe that neither of them particularly liked the gloopy, sticky dessert.

“Okay, lets go there,” Reka said, catching sight of an exit and herding her friends quickly in that direction.

She breathed a relieved sigh as they finally set foot outside the covered market. Out on the streets, the sun was shining in a way that reminded Reka of summer, even though it was still early March. She drank in the light and air greedily.

“This way,” Chloe said, leading with her phone.

They walked together down some stone steps and into a smaller, populated street, full of shops that looked like they had been left out of the Grand Bazaar by mistake. Reka saw a leather belt similar to the one she’d chosen for her mother, but decided not to ask the price.

Chloe’s GPS sent them into a left turn leading into a smaller, more residential street. Colorful, clean laundry hung

from lines set out between houses on either side of the street.

They were halfway down the street when Reka caught sight of a shadow in one of the doorways.

The feeling came back then—a hundredfold. She swallowed past the stone in her belly, looking for her voice. She didn't want to alarm her friends, but this was no longer something she could keep to herself.

It was Chloe, ever sensitive to other people's thoughts and feelings, who noticed first. "Are you okay, Reka? What's going on?"

"We need to get out of here," Reka said simply. She pulled her friends closer to her, one arm around each.

The shadow stepped out fully, becoming a man. He was tall, maybe five or ten years older than them, with dark brown hair and a thick mustache. Dressed in light trousers and a brown tunic, he looked like any working man, except Reka had never seen a working man sporting that kind of bulk. The tunic stretching around his thick shoulders and barrel-shaped chest looked like it was ready to rip apart.

Reka turned to look around. Behind them and in front of them, the small street was completely empty.

Every muscle in her body tensed.

Play it cool.

"Keep going," she hissed at her friends.

There are three of us and only one of him.

We just need to get past him.

Beside her, Chloe made a choked sound, but Reka didn't stop to look at her friend.

And a part of her, the part that had been trained since childhood to be sociable, to look for the *good* in everyone, still couldn't believe this might be happening.

Maybe I'm misreading the situation.

Maybe he's just a man on his way to work.

He'll step aside and we'll just—

A knife appeared in his hand, disabusing her of any such notion. The large, curved blade glinted in the sunlight. But what really scared Reka, what sent her into breathless panic, was the change in his expression, how it went from cautious to hungry in the space of an instant.

As if he'd taken off a mask.

The man took a step closer to them, blocking their path.

Aileen screamed, driving Reka to action.

“There’s three of us,” she said breathlessly, as much to remind herself as anything else. “We split up and run back the way we came.”

Still keeping a hand on either friend’s side, she bodily turned them around, propelling them to action. After the initial push, Aileen bounded off down the street like a rabbit. Chloe, in her dainty ballerina shoes, struggled for a moment but finally found her footing and ran after Aileen.

Reka glanced behind them, then wished she hadn’t, because the man with the knife was running after them.

Fear spurred her on, and though Reka had never been a sprinter, she’d also never had this good a reason to sprint before. Her trainers hit the cobbled stones hard, each step reverberating against her shins as she pushed herself harder and harder.

She easily overtook Chloe and raced on, each step taking her closer to Aileen, who hesitated at the end of the street.

“Turn right, Aileen!”

Right, the way they’d come. They had to get back to the stores and the people. That was the only way they’d be safe.

And they were so close. So close, Reka could almost taste it.

Safety.

Freedom.

A small scream behind her stopped Reka short.

No.

Chloe was struggling in the man's arms, her waif-like form jerking and hitting wildly. The man jerked on her elbow, pulling her back like it was no effort at all.

Aileen faltered, looking back at them, and Reka knew she was a second away from turning back. And Reka knew, intuitively, that was the worst possible outcome.

No.

“Keep going, Aileen! Get help!”

She didn't stop to wait if Aileen did as she'd asked.

She ran back, pulling her keys out of her small backpack as she did so, relieved that she'd forgotten to put them in the hotel room safe. Dropping the backpack on the dusty ground, she clutched the small pepper spray in her suddenly sweaty palm.

She prayed she remembered to use it—tried to think of how long ago her uncle had given it to her—then prayed pepper spray didn't expire. She tightened her right hand around the small canister, leaving her thumb free to discharge the spray, and rushed at the two figures.

“Let her go!” she screamed, pressing the top firmly in short one-second bursts, the way her uncle had taught her. She directed the spray at the man's face—since he was a head taller than Chloe, Reka figured she wasn't likely to hit her friend.

She hit the jackpot with the third or fourth burst, which had the man howling and recoiling from them. His hold on Chloe loosened as he grabbed for his eyes.

Yes.

Reka stepped in closer, taking advantage of his temporary blindness to pull on Chloe's arm and tug her away.

“Let's go!” she cried out.

Chloe stared at her in horror, and it took Reka only an instant—but it was an instant too long—to realize Chloe wasn't staring at her, but rather at someone behind her. Reka turned her head, just as something hard slammed against her temple.

Her last, conscious thought was for Aileen. She hoped her friend had managed to get away.

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