



HIDDEN OBSESSION

AN ALLIANCE AGENCY NOVEL 2

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

MADDIE WADE · INDIA KELLS

HIDDEN OBSESSION

An Alliance Agency Novel: Book 2

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PREFACE

Hidden Obsession

An Alliance Agency Novel: Book 2

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HIDDEN OBSESSION BLURB

Cleo Darwin and Mason Bentley

On the hot streets of Miami, someone is watching, waiting for the perfect moment to strike at a team member of the Alliance Agency.

Cleo Darwin is the stunning violet-haired office manager of the Alliance Agency. She is capable, controlled and respected by the people she works with. But the woman who has such complete control has a secret. Her past is anything but pretty; it is messy and cruel and why she strives to live her life with no room for surprises.

Until she meets Mason Bentley, the clean-cut suit wearing operative that makes her body hum and her heart wants more. She tries to fight the attraction they share but he is slowly breaking down her defenses and showing the life she could have with him—a future.

Mason Bentley has spent his life protecting the rich and famous, from politicians to royalty, and never has he been tempted to change the rigid control he has on his life until her. Cleo walked into his life and made him yearn for a future filled with bright colors and love.

Now, a stalker is hunting Cleo, and as the threats escalate and the stakes become perilous, will Mason be able to protect the woman he has given his heart to, from the person who wants her dead?

The stakes have never been higher and the danger never so real, but not all is as it seems as secrets and past lives crash into the present

CHAPTER ONE

THE CRICK IN HER NECK WAS GETTING WORSE, AND IT DIDN'T improve her temper as Cleo Darwin tried to make sense of the papers on her desk. Since she had become Alliance Agency's official caretaker, secretary, paymaster, and overall miracle worker, she had her work cut out for her trying to keep track of everyone and everything.

The trouble with secret agents, former soldiers, ex-cops, and the like was they were big babies. They didn't think about paying their rent, forgot to take care of their taxes, and all the other simple tasks required for everyday life when they were entrenched in a mission. Maybe it was better not to be concerned with mundane things when your life was on the line, but that meant someone had to do it and that someone was her.

Their unsigned forms and half-completed requests were hers to deal with. As well as anything or everything related to the Agency or its team members. Along with the occasional unusual—or impossible—request thrown in for good measure.

Shane Rhodes and his fiancée Emme Wallace had founded the Agency and assembled the team less than a year prior. Much had happened during that time.

The team was made up of a mish-mash of different characters, all skilled and dedicated, even quirky and most definitely likable, but they all had one thing in common—they were loyal and their commitment to the Alliance Agency was absolute.

Mason Bentley's face formed in her tired mind. One of the quietest members of the Agency, the former secret service agent and bodyguard was the opposite of the others. Calm, organized, straight as an arrow. She never had to chase after him to sign paperwork or file a report. His paperwork was always perfectly presented and on her desk when she needed it. While Mason kept to himself he was still a fierce team member and leader of men when needed.

She was attracted to him, God help her, and that was the worst possible idea ever. The fact he had been stabbed not long ago and had almost died during surgery was messing with her mind, causing her to confuse compassion for attraction. At least that's what she constantly told herself.

He always wore a suit that fit his body like it was made for him—which it probably was. With shiny shoes, and his hair perfectly in place, Mason epitomized the James Bond look. Conforming, polite, and always by the book, he was her opposite in every way compared with her edgy look, purple hair, and outgoing attitude. He didn't flirt with her like some of the others did, but he occupied her thoughts more than he should.

Shaking her head, Cleo chased the intruding thoughts away. The fact she was thinking about Mason like that meant she needed either a one-night stand or a fresh set of batteries. One of those solutions should take her mind off her sexy co-worker.

As she had now lost all focus for her work, there was no point in staying any longer. She glanced at the clock and was shocked to see it was almost nine. The Agency had been deserted for hours now. *Time to call it a night and head home.*

Emme wouldn't be happy that she was alone, but since they were in a quiet neighborhood, there was nothing to worry about. And she had a couple of tricks up her sleeve if some dumbass wanted to test her patience.

After making sure all the lights were off, Cleo turned the alarm on and locked the door.

The night air was fresh, but the menacing clouds above signaled an impending downpour.

The empty parking lot was lit enough to verify she was alone as she walked toward her bicycle chained to a bike rack around the corner from the entrance. Shane had insisted the entire building have no dark spots, the safety of his staff a top priority. The building looked out onto a quiet road with palm trees on the pavements that still gave Cleo a kick when she saw them. The back of the large urban building was more rural though, facing flat land where the training grounds had been established.

Cleo couldn't stop the curse that formed when she noticed one of her tires was flat. She could take the bike inside and repair it, but at this time of night, it would take too long, and she didn't have the patience. All she wanted now was food and a warm bath.

Walking toward the street, she took out her cell phone and opened the Uber app to call a car. After seeing the wait time for the nearest driver, she realized it would be quicker to walk to her apartment. Less than five minutes into her walk, the first raindrop plopped on her face.

She could call one of the Agency's members that lived nearby, but she felt terrible bothering them this time of night. *What to do?*

Her inner debate was cut off as her cell rang. She wasn't surprised to see Emme's ID on the screen. "Hey, Emme. What's up?"

"Are you for real? It's past nine and you just left the office. What have I told you about working late? You really need to get a life."

Cleo rolled her eyes. "So says the woman who checks the alarm system's log. Shouldn't you be doing dirty things with Shane at this hour instead of checking on your employees?"

The laughter on the other end of the line was a clear indication she had hit the mark with her reply. "I'm letting him recover before having another go at him in a minute. And you

haven't answered my question. Why are you leaving the office so late?"

"Because your employees are lazy and make my life difficult. I'm about to turn mean and not bring coffee in the mornings if they don't start behaving."

A metallic clink sounded behind her, and Cleo turned but didn't see anything. The street looked empty, but instinct churned in her belly. Usually, her instincts were on point, but maybe she was just tired.

"Be careful on that bike at night. Cars can't see you that well."

"Well, even my bike is against me. Flat tire. I'm walking home. And if I'm lucky, the rain will hold off for a bit longer until I get home."

A faint banging sound behind her made Cleo turn again, and this time, she noticed a fleeting shadow and cursed under her breath.

"What? What's going on?"

Ignoring Emme's outburst, Cleo reached into her bag to retrieve her mace. "I think I'm being followed."

On the other end of the line, Cleo heard shuffling before her boss spoke again. "I'm sending you someone, leave your phone on, it helps with the tracker."

"Emme, don't. I'll just wait until he gets closer and spray him."

"Cleo, that won't work if he has a gun. I'm sending someone. It's not negotiable."

The rain started to intensify and promised to be an intense downpour of biblical proportions. Accelerating, Cleo looked back and saw the person following her—a tall figure wearing a hoodie. That was so cliched, she would have laughed if she wasn't so pissed and more than a little scared. Keeping her head was her priority, so she crossed the empty street. Maybe her imagination was playing tricks on her. Perhaps he wouldn't follow.

“Cleo, talk to me.”

She looked back again, and the hooded man was still following her. With the rain soaking through to her skin, her mace wouldn't work. “I'm definitely being followed, and whoever is following me is getting closer. I may have to stop talking for a while. I'll need my breath for running.”

Emme said something, but Cleo decided to pocket her phone and put her bag over her neck to free her hands. Whoever Emme had called may not arrive in time, so she was on her own. As always.

At this time of night, most of the stores and factories were closed, so she tried to bring up a map of the surroundings in her mind and debated whether to head toward a business that might still be open, or head toward the residential area.

A car passed by, but she didn't have time to flag him down. She made another quick turn at the end of the street, and from the corner of her eye, saw that the man had picked up the pace, now almost jogging. He was massive, and she wondered if she had any chance of defending herself if he were to attack.

She started to run hoping all those times she'd jogged in the last few years would now pay off. Grateful for her flats, Cleo started sprinting around the corner and darted between a couple of buildings hoping her memory served her well, and there was a bar and a convenience store a couple of streets down.

Lungs burning, she pushed her violet hair out of her face, trying to clear her vision from the rain. As she passed another building, Cleo caught sight of a bunch of metal rods beside a dumpster.

When she turned to head in that direction, a body rammed into her from behind, causing her to fly into the metal side of the dumpster.

Her shoulder and arm took the brunt of the impact, and her knees scraped along the pavement.

A shadow came over her and grabbed her by the vest, swinging her into the dumpster again.

Screaming even though nobody could hear her, Cleo tried to get her bearings, willing her body not to let fear consume her so she could reach the rods. Maybe then she'd have a chance to take the fucker down.

When her attacker reached down, she rolled out of his grasp managing to kick his chin in the process. The angry growl from her assailant was definitely male.

Her hands reached blindly for anything she could get to throw at him. A piece of brick at first, followed by several blocks of wood that were too light to do much damage.

A cold hand captured her ankle and pulled before she could react. Her fingers scraped the pavement, but there was nothing to hang on to.

As he picked her up with his hand around her throat, Cleo tried to kick and punch, not wanting to believe it was the end.

“Leave her alone. Now!”

She recognized the familiar English accent just as her attacker turned, using her body as a shield, and she saw Mason with his gun out, standing in the pouring rain. The injured idiot was trying to save her. She'd never been so relieved to see someone in all her life.

He was dressed in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and she had never seen him in such a relaxed outfit unless he was working out. It was so unlike him and yet he still had an aura of menacing command that made her want to strip him naked and make him lose control.

The three of them were so close she could feel her attacker's warm breath against her neck and Mason stood less than six feet away.

Everything happened blindingly fast. Cleo didn't have a chance to blink before she was thrown toward Mason. Closing her eyes, she braced for the fall, but a strong, hard body caught her instead as her attacker's footsteps retreated.

“Cleo, look at me. Are you all right?”

Shivering from the cold and shock, she looked up at his handsome face but could only nod. She was a strong woman, but she felt shaken, and tears pricked her eyes as she fought to blink them away, thankful for the rain that hid them.

Mason ran his hand gently along her face, pushing her drenched hair out of the way. He was breathing hard, his blue eyes looking deep into her soul. She guessed he was trying to decide if he believed her.

He was so close she could feel his breath against her lips and Cleo thought he would kiss her. Instead, he helped her back on her feet. Looking her up and down, before scanning the area, he kept his gun ready while guiding her back toward the road.

His car was at the curb, and he whisked her quickly inside. He must have noticed she was shaking as he reached out to turn the heat up even though it wasn't truly cold.

Mason pushed a button on his steering wheel, and his phone started to ring. She wasn't surprised to hear Emme's voice on the other end when it was answered.

Mason shot her a quick glance before speaking. “Emme, you're on speaker. I've got Cleo. We're on our way to the hospital.”

That pulled her out of her stupor. “*No*. I'm fine. I don't need to go to the hospital for a scraped knee. A warm shower and a band-aid will sort me out.”

Emme sighed. “Cleo, you were attacked. You need to report it to the police.”

“What good would it do? I can't identify the man. I don't have enemies, it's a one-off incident. I'm fine. There's no need to make a fuss.”

“Mason, talk some sense into her please?”

“Not sure that's possible, but I'll try.” Mason disconnected the call and took a deep breath. “I think you should report it

and get checked out but it's your call. You're an adult and I can't make you. What do you want to do?"

Bless the man. "Drive me home, Mason. I'll be fine."

He was clearly against the idea but had the good sense not to say anything.

The five minutes it took to drive to her apartment was enough to steady her and shake the fear that clung to her like slime. She couldn't wait to have a hot shower to scrub the memory of the cold hands from her skin once and for all.

Mason parked in front of her building and got out before she could stop him. She exhaled, annoyed at the relief she felt. Of course, he would go all white knight on her. That was who he was. She saw how he looked around as he rounded the car, his hand on the gun tucked in the back of his jeans. He looked stern and fierce and sexy as hell. It helped to reassure her, not that she would ever admit it.

Finally, he opened her door and offered his hand. Any other time, she would have scoffed, but it was a sweet move, and she needed to touch him, so she indulged herself. Mason's presence steadied her—not that she wanted to explore the reasons why right now.

They reached her front door and she was about to let his hand go, and thank him for rescuing her, when she noticed a yellow post-it on her door.

Mason tensed and pulled her back but not before she saw what was written on it.

Can't wait for the next time I can hold you in my arms in the rain, darling Cleo.

CHAPTER TWO

MASON HAD BEEN NURSING A BEER, REFLECTING ON HIS recovery from the knife wound that had nearly taken his life when he'd received Emme's call. He'd heard Cleo's name, and was out of his building and in his car like a rocket. He lived closest to Alliance, so he didn't question why he'd been the first called.

All he knew was Cleo, that stubborn, sarcastic, beautiful, intelligent woman, was in trouble. He'd been battling his attraction to her since he'd walked in the very first day at Alliance and saw her sexy ass bent over the desk as she'd tried to connect the printer to her computer and cursing the entire time.

Tonight, he'd nearly had a heart attack when he'd seen a shadowed figure looming over her, pulling at her ankle. If he had been a few minutes later... He didn't want to think about what might have happened. As she'd sat huddled in his car, shivering and trying not to let him see, her gorgeous lilac hair plastered to her face, he'd never wanted to protect someone as much as he did her.

Cleo was not meek and she was no damsel in distress. To see her so shaken made him feel feral with rage. He'd intended to walk her inside, make sure she was okay, then go to Alliance and check the CCTV from the area. The note on her door instantly changed his plans. His blood turned to ice as he realized two things, one, this was not an isolated incident and two, this sick fuck knew where she lived.

Cleo had herself a stalker. He'd seen too many cases like this not to recognize one. Snatching the post-it note between his forefinger and thumb, he reread it and made a decision. "Pack a bag, Cleo." His words seemed to snap her from her fog, and he felt his lips twitch at the re-awakening of her formidable spirit.

"What?"

It was as if she hadn't heard him correctly. He took her keys from her cold fingers and opened her door, which didn't even have an insurance-approved lock on it. He and Cleo would be having a serious discussion about how she handled her personal safety, but not right now.

He unlocked her door and pushed her through, closing it behind them, barely taking in the abstract paintings and brightly covered purple walls of her apartment. Without waiting, he walked through every room, checking to make sure there was no intruder before returning to stand behind Cleo who was still in the doorway.

Cleo rounded on him, hands on her hips and Mason tried not to look down at her wet clothes and notice the outline of her perky breasts. He tried, and he failed. Cleo wasn't a client, and he couldn't employ a professional attitude to the case.

Cleo was the woman he had spent the better part of a year fantasizing about, and now she was in danger, standing before him, all attitude and fire, her body practically begging for his touch.

She let her bag fall from her hand. "Thank you for your help, but I have it from here."

Mason felt the last thread of control snap at her complete disregard for what was happening here. "Cleo, it may have escaped your notice, but the man who attacked you tonight, the one who was seconds away from doing who knows what to you, knows where you live." He stepped closer, softening his angry voice slightly as he saw her shiver again. "Now, either I'm staying here, or you're coming to stay with me!" Mason moved, so they were nearly touching in the close confines of

the room. “Which will it be?” He was perfectly willing to stand there all night and argue if it kept her safe.

She seemed to think on it a second before looking behind her at her tiny couch and shrugging. “Fine, I’ll pack a bag but only for one night and only because my couch is too small for you.” Then she turned and walked toward her bedroom.

“Cleo?” She stopped at his call and looked at him. “Who said I would be on the couch?” His wicked grin made his intentions clear. He was done running from his feelings for this little sprite—he was going to make things clear that mild-mannered Mason only went so far. He saw her mouth form a pretty little ‘O’ that made his dick twitch and grinned as she scurried away.

He picked up his phone and dialed Emme to update her on the situation. “Emme, it’s me.”

“So what’s the status?” He heard shuffling in the background as she put him on speaker.

“She opted out of the hospital. Bad news, the attacker knows where Cleo lives. The bastard even left her a note on the front door. It’s a classic sign of a stalker.”

“Motherfucker.” Shane spat the word.

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly.” Mason’s answer revealed his gloom.

“I’ll be right over.” Shane obviously felt she shouldn’t be left alone.

“No need. I have her packing a bag. She’s coming to stay with me.” Mason let the statement hang, waiting for Shane or Emme to say something.

Shane chuckled. “About fucking time.”

Mason had no clue what that was about and didn’t ask as Cleo chose that moment to walk in carrying a small overnight bag. She had changed from her soaked workwear of a chic pantsuit and blouse, which he’d been sure were made to torment men with the way they hinted at every curve and showed nothing and everything at the same time. He was

wrong—the yoga pants she was wearing were the epitome of torture. They hugged the soft, round cheeks of her ass before tapering down into long shapely legs that he could picture wrapped around him.

“Mason.” Emme’s voice rose, which made him think it wasn’t the first time she had said his name.

“Yes, sorry?”

“I said, we’ll have Alex and King come over and run some fingerprint searches.” He could hear the definite smile in her voice.

“Good idea, I’ll be in early to get started on this case.”

“Okay, give Cleo a hug from me.” It was the last words Emme said before disconnecting.

“What was all that about?” Cleo came closer, the hoodie on her top half-covering her from his gaze.

Mason reached out, taking the bag from her hand. “Emme and Shane agree you have a stalker. They want you with one of the team or me until this is figured out.”

“I can carry my bag, Mason.” She frowned at him as he walked to the door and stopped.

“I know, but if you need to run, I want your hands free.” Again, he reached into his back and took his gun from the holster.

“Oh!” She stayed behind him silently as he opened the door and checked the hallway before ushering her out. He kept her between him and the wall, protecting her at all times. He got to the car and opened her door, letting her slide inside as he placed the bag on her lap and rounded the hood and climbed inside. “Fasten your seatbelt.” He watched as she did just that, glaring at him the entire time.

“Happy?” It was clear her shock had worn off.

“As a clam.” He offered her a grin. Cleo crossed her arms as she tore her eyes from him.

He drove in silence, constantly checking for a tail and finding none. Stopping at his apartment building, he parked the car as close as he could to the entrance. "Stay there."

Mason tried not to be distracted as she poked her tongue at him. He opened her door and walked her inside to the building's elevator. It was about to close when a hand moved in to stop the door.

Mason felt himself bristle at the young man who tried to step inside. "Get the next one." He stepped forward and stopped the man from entering. He was pretty sure it was the grandson of the woman one floor below him, but he wasn't about to take the chance.

"Seriously, dude?" The way he looked at Mason was almost comical.

"Seriously, dude." Mason hit the close button, and the man pulled his hand back.

The elevator started to move, and he felt a moment of relief.

"That was rude."

Cleo's anger made him sigh and turn to her. "Excuse me for not taking chances with your safety, but I can't get the image of you on the ground in a dark alley out of my mind." He watched her pale at his harsh words.

The doors stopped, and Cleo remained silent, making him feel like a giant asshole. Taking her arm, he led her to his door. He would get her inside and then apologize.

He let them in and did his usual walkthrough, leaving her standing by the door as he did. He thought she would make herself comfortable, maybe throw some sass his way, but when he came back, she was still there by the door, looking unsure and frightened and he hated himself for that.

Without words, he opened his arms, and with a tiny hiccup, she dropped the bag and flew into his open arms. Burying her head in his neck, she sobbed, her tears soaking into his already wet shirt as he held her tightly to him and rocked her body. He hated that this had happened to her. He

would find this motherfucker and string him up by his balls and then let the fucker rot in the desert.

But nothing had ever felt righter than the feel of her in his arms. It had taken this to push him into going after what he'd known in his heart was his from the minute she'd told him he looked like a Bond wannabe.

Now he had her, he wasn't giving her up, and any fucker that got in his way would find out Mason wasn't as mild-mannered as he seemed. Cleo might take a little persuading but if there was one thing Mason was, it was patient.

CHAPTER THREE

FOR THE LAST HOUR, CLEO HAD STARED AT THE CEILING detailing the pale off-white color of Mason's guest room, but she still wasn't able to close her eyes and relax. Every sound made her tense, wondering where it came from or what it was. It was so unlike her it made her angry with herself. Her brain kept reverting to her attacker, and even though she would rather forget the episode, Cleo forced herself to go over it again and again, to try and see where she'd made the wrong move or what more she could have done to save herself.

Her mind whirled, and there was no stopping it. Accepting she needed help wasn't easy for her. Cleo was independent, she took care of herself and others—they didn't take care of her. Realizing that she would have to let someone in wasn't easy.

Curling onto her side, Cleo fixated on the pale, blue striped curtains for a while. Would the attacker be able to climb to the window? Unable to remember how high Mason's apartment was, she pushed the cover aside and went to check. She heaved a sigh of relief as she looked out the window. Unless he was Spider-Man, there was no way he could access her room. It calmed her a bit, but she was the kind of woman who liked to be prepared. She looked around to see if there was anything she could use to defend herself, just in case.

Switching the light on, she analyzed her surroundings. The room was a lot like Mason, tidy with everything clean and in its place. She was relieved to see the baseball bat in the corner

of the nearly empty closet. For lack of anything else, it would do.

Turning off the lights, she headed back to bed with her new protector clutched in her hand. She stilled as she heard a muffled banging sound that seemed to resonate from the opposite side of the bedroom door.

Her heart picked up a beat, and she forced herself to remain calm. She knew she wouldn't settle until she had investigated the noise so she silently opened the door and slipped into the hall. Everything seemed peaceful and quiet as she padded silently down the hall. She checked on Mason, opening his door as quietly as she could. All she saw was the vast expanse of his muscled back on his king-sized bed. He was still asleep and hadn't heard the noise. Maybe it was nothing, but she wanted to check before alerting him.

Moving through the dark apartment without knocking anything over wasn't easy, especially since she hadn't taken notice of the layout when she'd arrived. Thankfully enough light came from the kitchen window to illuminate the space so she could see the table and chairs on her right near the kitchen counter, and the living room on the left. There too, the light came through the large windows, and she could pretty much see nobody was there.

The loud banging happened again. It sounded as if it was coming from the front door. Grabbing the baseball bat with two hands, ready to swing at the person on the other side, she approached the entrance and checked the peephole. The hallway seemed empty.

Shaking her head, Cleo had almost convinced herself she'd imagined it and was heading back to her room when the banging sounded again. It was so close, she jumped back and knocked over a chair but didn't care. If some madman was trying to play mind games with her, she was ready for him this time.

When the light came on, she gasped and whirled, ready to strike. She halted her movement when she saw Mason in

pajama pants, his gun in his hand, looking at her with a deep frown.

“Cleo. What’s going on? What’s with the bat? Is someone at the door?”

Before she could speak, Mason passed her and tapped a few keys on a pad near his front door before opening it and checking the hallway. She watched his shoulders relax when no one was there. Mason closed the door and reactivated the alarm before taking a quick look in the living room and finally turned his attention to her. Seeing him half-naked, all muscles and sinew that could only be guessed at under his tailored suit, almost derailed her thoughts. It was the angry red scar from the knife wound that had nearly killed him that stopped her wayward thoughts.

Mason put the gun on the table and gently removed the baseball bat from her tight grasp before putting his hands on her shoulders. “Cleo, what happened? Are you all right? Talk to me.”

At that moment, she felt like the biggest fool. “I couldn’t sleep, and then I heard a loud banging coming from the door. Twice. So I went to check.”

And at that precise moment, the noise sounded again. Cleo jumped, but Mason didn’t seem surprised and sighed. “The sound isn’t coming from the front door. It’s George one floor up. He does shift work and has a shower when he comes home. The pipes are old, and they make that awful racket every time he turns the water on or off. The landlord won’t do anything about it, so I’ve learned to live with it. That’s why it didn’t wake me, but the chair did when it fell.”

Cleo rubbed her face, feeling defeated. “I’m going crazy. I’m so sorry.”

“You’re not. Why didn’t you wake me when you heard it?”

She shrugged. “You were fast asleep. I didn’t want to disturb you if it turned out to be nothing. And if the attacker was at the door, I planned to smash his head in with the bat.”

Mason seemed to debate her words a moment before he schooled his features and nodded. “Thanks for trying to protect me, even if I’m the one that’s supposed to be protecting you at the moment.”

“Don’t make fun of me.”

“I’m not. I’m touched. But it’s one in the morning, and we both need sleep if we want to catch this asshole tomorrow.”

She shook her head. “Go back to bed. I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep tonight. My mind won’t settle.”

Mason nodded, but instead of heading back to his room alone, he took her hand and pulled her with him.

At first she thought he would lead her back to her room, but instead, he went to his. Cleo’s heart started to beat faster, but not for the same reason as before. Pulling back the covers, he told her to hop into bed.

“You want me to sleep in your bed? Where will you sleep?”

Was there a twinkle in his eyes, or was she imagining things again?

“I’m sleeping there too. Keeping you close is the only way to make sure you’re safe and not about to smash my head in with a bat.”

Part of her, the sensible part, wanted to turn around and go back to the guest room. Another part of her, the naughty, rebellious part, wanted to slide under the covers with him.

And she did exactly that. It seemed wild and the crazy was the theme of the night.

Mason switched the lights off, put his gun on the nightstand beside him, and slid into the bed beside her, careful not to touch any part of her body.

“Goodnight.” His voice was deep, and it held a new intonation she hadn’t heard from him, and one she couldn’t interpret.

“Goodnight, Mason.”

She turned her back to him, trying to find a comfortable position to fall asleep. Unfortunately, that wasn't about to happen. Trying not to move too abruptly, she rolled onto her stomach, and then her back, before going back to her side.

A low growl came from the other side of the bed. "Shut your mind off, Cleo. That's the only way you'll be able to sleep."

Rolling to her back again, she turned her head to look at him. His black hair was tousled, his warm skin so close to her fingers almost distracted her from their conversation. "Easy for you to say. I can't turn my mind off just like that. Nobody can. Not even you, ninja."

He chuckled. "You're right. We don't control it, but there are things you can do to calm your mind. Focus on something peaceful or a nice memory. That can trick your mind into relaxing."

Cleo huffed and turned her back to him again. "As if it was that easy. Go to sleep, Mason."

The bed moved, and before she could react, he brought his arm around her and plastered her body against his. His taller frame enveloped her like a cocoon, his breath fanning her hair. "Another option is to prevent you from moving at all."

"Very funny." She might have sounded sarcastic but being caught in his embrace felt reassuring and exhilarating at the same time. How she wished the man wasn't such a goody-two-shoes. A wilder man would take advantage of the situation, and in Mason's case, she would have let him. "You may like that kind of thing, Mason, but being trapped isn't something I'm into."

His arm didn't let her go, instead his cheek rubbed the top of her hair in a rumbling sigh that made her blood simmer. And when he slightly pushed his hips against her bottom, the evidence of his growing erection was undeniable. Was she hallucinating again? Mason Bentley—the straightest arrow she had ever met—couldn't want her. That was impossible.

“You know nothing about what I’m into, Miss Darwin. But I’ll share one of them if you want to know. I’m into anything that involves you, Cleo.”

Her stomach somersaulted. “It’s flattering, but I don’t believe you. You’re just trying to distract me.”

His hold tightened. “I’m not a player, Cleo. Nor am I a liar. I’m telling you the truth.”

“We’re too different.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

Cleo knew two people who were so different couldn’t make it in the long run. “I don’t date co-workers. Ever. Besides, you’re not thinking straight.”

That made him pause for an instant, his body eerily still. She was telling him the truth. There might be an attraction, an itch to scratch, but there would be nothing more between them. Even if deep down she yearned for it, she wasn’t delusional, and it was probably his protector gene revving him up. If she succumbed, maybe she could get him out of her system, once and for all.

“Are you trying to tell me I don’t know my own mind, Miss Darwin?”

“I’m only stating facts. You’re probably swimming in adrenaline and so am I. This isn’t real.”

“Interesting theory. And if we go with that theory, I’m not really attracted to you, and you’re not attracted to me?”

Should she lie? Common sense wanted to; her naughty side didn’t want to lose Mason’s touch. “I’m attracted to you, but as I told you, it’s only stress and hormones talking. This is nothing more than lust.” A half-lie could work after all.

“Well, for the sake of that theory, how can we prove it?”

It was apparent he was testing her, and everything that had happened tonight blurred her limits. Mason’s hand splayed on her stomach, caressing her in a lazy line just below her breasts, not low enough or high enough to ease the ache.

After a few minutes, her hips started to sway in a silent call, and she cursed under her breath. Lust was coiled too deep inside her to make her sensible. “I don’t know what it would take, Mason. I...”

She swallowed hard, and Mason’s velvety voice returned to her ear. “I think you’re lying because your body is singing an entirely different tune. You have complete control here, Cleo. So if you could do anything, what would you do?”

Again, her mouth opened and closed, and at that moment, she wished she could kiss him. She tried to turn, but he kept her in place. “No way. You say it’s hormones, stress, or adrenaline making me want you. I’m sure it’s not. But you’re not convinced, so I think the best bet is to clear your head of all of those pesky hormones so you can start to think straight, don’t you think?”

Unsure where he was going, it suddenly clicked, and she turned her head. “You’re not serious.”

His smile was the most beautiful and wicked one she had ever seen. A fantasy. “I am.”

“But you won’t...”

He kissed her hair once more. “My head is full of fantasies about you, so if I can have one fulfilled, and at the same time help you to relax and sleep, I’ll take it. I know we can be more than you think. Please, Cleo, violet-haired goddess, be my fantasy.”

It was insane, and wild, and hot. “It doesn’t change anything between us, Mason.”

He hummed, never stopping caressing her under her tank top, his hand warm against her skin.

Throat dry, but unable to resist the challenge or her lust for the sexy man, she reached under her pants, between her legs. When she found herself wet and ready, her breath caught, and Mason answered with a deep moan behind her.

“Please don’t stop.” Pushing her hand gently, he whispered in her ear. “Move your hand.”

Cleo shivered but obeyed him, her body no longer hers to control.

Mason put his rough hand on her waist and caressed her hip and thigh to her knee, rounding her ass every time his hand went up again. Spurred on by the man behind her, her brain in a fog of desire, she started teasing herself like she did so many nights, imagining it was Mason worshipping her body. Her fingers knew her body well, and she knew it wouldn't take long for her to explode, especially with her fantasy man in the flesh enticing her with his words and subtle touch. How Cleo wished he would cup her breasts or let his hand wander over her fingers. Better yet roll her beneath him and take her like she'd imagined so many nights alone in her bed.

At some point, Mason grabbed her knee and hooked her leg back over his, allowing her better access. Unable to think, unable to stop herself, Cleo pursued her pleasure until the teasing was too much to bear, and she frantically pushed herself toward the most brutal orgasm she had ever experienced.

Her body seized and she cried his name before the air got stuck in her lungs. It was like an electric shock coursing through her every muscle, burning her skin, extending the mind-blowing ecstasy as Mason whispered sexy-nothings into her ear.

Slowly, she relaxed, spent and unashamed, for now at least, and as Mason had predicted, her body shut down, unable to resist being pulled into a deep slumber after the intensity of her release.

With Mason cuddling her, his breath in her ear, unable to understand his words anymore, Cleo fell into a blissful sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

MASON PLACED THE POD INTO THE COFFEE MACHINE AND discreetly watched the door. He had slipped out of bed silently, leaving Cleo asleep, her violet hair spread out on his pillow as he had imagined, only his imagination had not done her justice. The image of her pale skin, relaxed face, long black eyelashes flat against her rosy cheeks, was a vision not even he could conjure.

It was the way she had cocked her top leg over the sheets, hugging the pillow to her body, the delectable curve of her ass on display in those yoga pants had him contemplating throwing away good sense and crawling back into bed. He wanted nothing more than to wake her with his mouth or hands on her body. But last night was new, and he worried how she would feel this morning.

Cleo was important to him, way beyond a colleague or friend. She had the potential to be everything, and he didn't want to screw that up by scaring her off or moving too fast. So he backed away with the sole intention of making them some breakfast and having a cold shower, not necessarily in that order.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and put a mug with sugar and creamer on the side for Cleo in case she came looking while he was in the shower and moved toward the bathroom. He would use the bath off the hallway this time; he didn't want to freak her out by using the en suite.

He silently grabbed his clothes from the drawers and moved to the bathroom, ignoring the erection that hadn't gone

away since he'd crawled into bed with her last night. As he showered, he replayed every second of her climax in his head. The way she sounded, the way she pushed her body into his as she sought relief. It had been heady and erotic, and his hands itched to make her climax so hard she fell into a blissful sleep.

His cock bobbed, growing harder under his hand. Mason swiped his thumb over the head, imagining it was Cleo's hand touching him. He wrapped his hand around his shaft and worked his cock, leaning his other hand against the wall for support. The water hit his skin pouring over him as he came in a rush of breath, the force of it making him sag against the tile.

He took a few seconds to recover and catch his breath, then finished his shower. Drying off, he dressed in a crisp white shirt with a dark blue tie and a dark navy suit. It was second nature for him to wear a suit to work; he had worn one for so many years it felt wrong not to wear one now. It was also a great way to hide a weapon and still give him the freedom of movement that combat pants did. Knotting the tie in a traditional Windsor knot, he combed his wet hair and threw the damp towel and his pajamas in the laundry hamper.

He exited the bathroom and ran into Cleo, barely having the reflexes to grab her arms and stop her from landing on her ass. "Are you okay?"

He took in her sleepy, mussed form and it became his new favorite look on her. Her hand moved to his bicep to steady herself as she examined him, the blush that crept over her skin from her neck to her cheeks was adorable.

"Yes, I need coffee." She ducked her head and moved away from him toward the kitchen.

He followed, not looking at her ass at all, and made his way to the coffee pot to pour her some of life's great elixir. "So, we have to meet with Emme and Shane at nine to go over your case."

"Is that necessary?" She took the cup and added milk and half a sugar.

“Yes, absolutely, it is. The stalker knew where you were last night, where you lived, and he threatened you. We can’t just brush it off as nothing. He needs to be caught and locked up before it escalates.”

“Fine. Anything I can do to help?” She hugged the mug and took a sip, her eyes closing in ecstasy, a moan slipping from her throat.

Mason found himself gripping the edge of the countertop to stop himself from moving to her. Her eyes opened and found his, and she must have seen the desire there because her lids went heavy with need, her bottom lip dropped open slightly, and he saw her breath hitch. He was seconds away from saying screw it to his plan to take things slow and dragging her back to bed to finish what they started when his phone pinged on the counter in front of him.

Her eyes cleared, and he saw her walls go up as she jumped off the stool, with her coffee in her hand. “Can I grab a quick shower?”

“Yes, of course. Everything you need should be there.”

As she vanished down the hall, Mason opened the text from Shane to distract himself. He couldn’t resist calling after her though. “Shout if you need me to scrub your back.” He heard the sexy laugh from her as she walked away and smiled.

“Dream on.”

“Every night, baby.” He laughed back and grinned harder when she laughed louder.

THEY ARRIVED at the Alliance offices with ten minutes to spare. Cleo seemed to be in a flap because she hadn’t been able to get everyone coffee as usual. Mason had nixed the idea of her popping into her usual coffee house, telling her that her regular habits needed to change until they had caught the guy. That had gone over like a lead balloon.

Cleo, he was finding out, was a creature of habit. She liked things done a certain way and in a particular order. He had

kind of known that about her but not how agitated she got if things couldn't be done the way she was used to.

Cleo flew around her reception desk, with only a cursory pat to Killian who came wandering out to greet her just in front of Caitlin.

Caitlin rushed forward, her eyes coming to his in question, to which he nodded. "Hey, Cleo, are you okay? I heard what happened."

"Yes, I was a little shaken up, but Mason took care of me." She blushed at the double entendre. He would like to take care of her more if she would let him.

"That's good. Don't worry we'll catch this asshole," Caitlin stated as she walked to the door, her work dog at her heel. "Come on, Killy, let's take you to see your new friends before the meeting starts."

Alliance had taken on another four dogs in the last year. Kingsley Knight's wife Sydney, who also happened to be their former client, was working the breeding program with Caitlin. The two new German Shepherds and two Rhodesian Ridgebacks were less than a year old, and training was going well from what he could see.

He saw Cleo moving around like a madwoman and went to her. Grasping her shoulders, he spun her to face him, holding her tight but not painfully so. "Calm down."

Her flushed face and the almost panic-stricken look on her face made him want to hold her and never let go. "I can't. This isn't me, Mason. I don't flap. I'm in control. I'm organized. I have ways of doing things, so everything runs like clockwork and this man, this stalker, is ruining that."

He realized she was hanging on by a thread. "What changed between us leaving my place and getting here? You were calm at home, what happened?"

"That was just us. You don't expect anything from me. Here I'm organized Cleo. I have the paperwork you want before you want it. I have lunch ready. I handle my business. I haven't done that this morning and now everyone will know

this is getting to me.” The distress she was feeling was evident on her face.

“Right, give me a list of everyone’s order, and I’ll go get the coffees while you take a minute to calm down and get your game face on.”

“But...”

“Let me help you, Cleo.” He kept his tone gentle as he caught her eye. “Please.”

“Okay, thank you.”

He felt her shoulders relax under his hands. Giving them a gentle squeeze, he let go and waited while she made a list and tried to hand him some cash. “I got it.” And he left the office.

Mason jogged to the closest coffee house down the block and had the order filled, adding bagels and muffins for good measure. He carried them back into Alliance and found a much calmer and more in control Cleo behind her desk. She offered him a grateful smile, which he felt in his dick, and then answered the phone as it rang.

Mason carried the coffee and food into the conference room where Shane was talking to Malco and Alex. Both men looked up as he entered and nodded.

Shane frowned. “How’s Cleo?”

“She’s good, holding it together well all things considered.” He didn’t add anything about her meltdown. If she needed people to see her as strong, then he would help her do that.

“She’s a tough cookie, would make a fine operative but I think if we lost her as office admin, the place might fall apart. A good office manager is harder to find than a good operative if you ask me.”

“Yeah, she’s fantastic at her job.” It was a clear affirmation. “Are the others joining us to go over the case?”

“We figured we’d get you to lead and Malco and Alex can offer support. We can draft others in as and when we need them, but we have a few cases at critical stages right now so

it's going to be a bit of a juggle. Honestly though, Mason, this is your bag. Close protection is what you do best, and between us all we'll find this asshole."

"Fine by me."

Emme walked in the room then shaking her head. "Cleo amazes me. She's always so calm and collected." His boss went to sit beside Shane. Mason found it interesting Cleo had only shown her distress to him. It gave him hope that maybe he could talk her into taking things further and giving them a chance.

Mason spent the next hour telling them everything he knew about the case including everything he and Cleo had discussed regarding it. Alex was going to look into any cameras around the places Cleo frequented to see if he could spot anyone who seemed to be following her. Malco was going to look into her past boyfriends to see if anything popped, and Mason would be her shadow.

Shane looked at Mason. "What about her home? Are we going to get some cameras up?"

"Yes, I'd like to. Does Kingsley have time?"

"Yes, we can pull him off his case for a few hours. Is Cleo going to stay with you or are you going to stay at her place?" From the slight smile on his lips he could tell Shane's inquiry wasn't only for professional reasons.

"I'll speak to her, but I prefer my place. It has better security and more room but let me see what she says."

"She could always stay with Emme and me for a few weeks until this is sorted." Shane seemed to be taunting him.

"No, she stays with me." Mason's expression made it clear there was no room for argument.

Shane's eyes shot to him with surprise at his tone and he lifted his chin as he crossed his arms over his chest and took his time to assess Mason. "Like that is it?"

"Not yet." Mason made it clear where he was headed if she would let him. "Although Cleo may take some convincing."

This time he grinned.

“Yeah, good luck with that.” Shane chuckled, and Mason felt himself relax. He loved this job and would have hated to jeopardize it.

“Lucky fucker.” Malco shook his head with a smile which Mason returned.

“Yeah, well, it’s far from certain.”

“Well, the man that catches Cleo will be a lucky one, and he better be prepared to work his ass off because something tells me she’ll be a tough nut to crack.” Emme beamed at him, her features softening.

“Bit like me, hey, baby.” Shane gave wink that made Emme blush.

“Nothing like you, you big softie.” She laughed as she stood and kissed his cheek before leaving the room.

The others followed, and Mason went to his office to make a start on all the things he needed to get done including starting some searches. It was around eleven-thirty when he heard a scream from reception that made his blood turn to ice.

CHAPTER FIVE

CLEO CLOSED THE BOX AND PUT BOTH HER HANDS ON IT WITH force, trying not to lose her mind, but

Fearing it was too late. She was shaking hard, but couldn't move. If she did, what was in the box was going to get out.

People quickly surrounded her, which was no surprise considering her scream. Screaming was very unlike her. The Alliance agents surrounded her desk with Mason pressed against her side, but all her focus was on the box.

"Cleo, what's going on? Talk to me," he said, and she could hear the urgency in his voice.

She opened her mouth to tell him, tell them, but no sound came out, and a shiver made her tremble. Mason touched her shoulder, trying to remove her from the box, but she vehemently shook her head.

A scratching sound came from inside the plain brown container, and a whimper escaped from her lips. "I... I... have a phobia, okay. And it's inside the box. If I let go of it, they'll get out and be all over the place. I can't let go of the lid. I don't know what to do."

Damn! At that moment, she hated herself for reacting that way, but it was a visceral reaction and something she had no control over.

Mason started rubbing her back. "It's fine. I can keep the lid closed. And I'll take it outside."

Cleo breathed hard and tried to move, but it was like being trapped in cement. “I can’t. I can’t let it go, Mason. I’m sorry,” she said, hating the weakness in her voice.

People shifted around, and Malco moved to her other side. More sounds came from the box, and Malco nodded. “I can guess what’s inside. Don’t worry, Cleo. You can leave it with me. Go with Mason now.”

Still unable to move, she felt Mason circle her hips and shoulders from behind and pull her against his muscular body as Malco grabbed the box and took it outside with Alex, Shane, and Emme on his heels.

Mason’s hold was reassuring and calming, and after a moment, muscle by muscle, she relaxed.

“I’m sorry.”

His mouth was close to her ear with a low, annoying growl. “You have nothing to be sorry for. You’re safe with me.”

A male yelp and Emme’s muffled scream came from outside, making Cleo jump, but Mason didn’t let her go. Alex came running inside, disappeared for a few seconds and came back with a plastic storage container in his hands. He appeared pale and swallowed hard before disappearing out the door.

“What was in the box, Cleo?”

Calming down, she exhaled, slowly returning to herself. “Snakes. I have a snake phobia. So many snakes...”

She shuddered. “I was checking the mail, and there was a box addressed to me. I thought it was the office supplies I’d ordered because the box was so big...”

“Easy. A fear of snakes is not uncommon, and if I’d opened that box, I probably would have screamed louder than you.”

The silly thought made her laugh, helping her to relax even more until finally, Mason loosened his hold on her.

Glad her head wasn’t spinning anymore, and her legs held her up, she turned to him. “Thank you. Damn, I hate being this

weak.”

“It’s not weak to fear snakes. Some are dangerous, and you didn’t know what kind they were.”

The team came back inside, Malco carrying the empty shipping box with him. “I was right. There were several baby Arizona coral snakes inside. There are coral snakes here in Florida but they are a bit different. The sicko must have gone to a lot of trouble getting them. They’re extremely poisonous. You did well keeping the box closed, Cleo.”

She shivered but remained calm. “I come from Arizona and never saw them. Not that I was ever an outdoorsy girl anyway. Didn’t know you were an expert on snakes, Malco.”

The man smiled. “Not an expert, but as I used to live where they were found it was prudent to learn to respect them and be aware. I’ve put them in my car and called animal control to pick them up.” Malco showed them a tarot card: the Lovers. “When we transferred them into the plastic container, we saw that inside the box.”

Ice settled in her belly, and she rounded the desk. She took the card from his hand and frowned, turning the card over. “I need to go home. Now.”

Shane stepped in front of her before she could bolt for the door. “Easy, Cleo. Why do you want to go home now? What’s the significance of the card?”

She hesitated. “I have a similar deck there and that card could have come from it.”

Shane nodded. “Okay, take Mason and Malco with you.”

Alex whitened a bit. “What about the snakes? Animal control isn’t here yet.”

Malco clapped him on his shoulder. “I’m leaving the keys with you. You don’t even need to go near the car, just point and click to unlock the doors.”

Alex grimaced but took the keys. His reaction made Cleo feel a bit less ridiculous. Alex Webb was a big and dangerous man and wasn’t a snake fan either. The knowledge made her

feel a bit better. And now that she had seen the card, she feared the snakes weren't the only thing she should be afraid of.

IN THE BRIGHT light of the morning, her neighborhood didn't seem as scary as last night. Mason drove in silence, Malco in the passenger seat beside him scanning the area. Cleo wanted to ride shotgun, but both men nixed that, and she was forced to sit in the back much to her chagrin.

Within five minutes they had arrived at her place. She got out of the car, but Malco blocked her as she was taking out her keys. "Wait for us to check the place, Cleo. Please."

But she was tired of not being in control of anything and ignoring him she headed for the front door. After all, they had been in her tiny apartment last night. Did that mean her stalker could have been hiding there while she packed her bag? Or after? Taking a single card would be easy; nobody would notice.

Mason jogged behind her as she unlocked her door and immediately pushed her behind him before she could enter, but not before she glimpsed inside. Her heart stopped at the sight. It looked as if a wild animal had been turned loose inside her home.

Everything had been thrown to the ground. Her curtains had been pulled off the poles and someone had slashed her lovely blue couch and the colorful cushions on it, completely destroying them. On the living room wall, spray paint had been used to draw two huge interlocking red hearts with a black arrow through the middle. Mason and Malco bypassed her, guns drawn as they advanced, making sure the place was empty. Their shoes crunched over the broken dishes, glasses, and trinkets smashed on the floor. Cleo felt her heart break at the sound of her possessions being destroyed even more.

Mason returned, sliding his gun into his holster under his jacket and Malco came back shaking his head. "The place is clear. I don't know what this asshole's problem is, but he did a thorough job in trashing Cleo's place."

Not listening to the men, she went to her bedroom, and it took everything in her not to fall into a mess of tears and rage. Every piece of furniture was broken and her dresser lay face down. The perpetrator had sliced her mattress and drapes like he'd done to the couch in the living room. She could practically feel the rage it took to do that kind of damage.

With all the destruction, it was the sight of her purple vibrator sitting in the middle of a pile of fabric and stuffing that had her sucking in a breath. To have something so intimate touched by a stranger—most probably the man who'd attacked—her made her feel dirty and vulnerable in a way she never had before. At least the men behind her didn't comment, thank goodness.

As she looked around, Cleo saw the tarot cards all over the floor. Some were torn, others bent. Returning to the dresser, she noticed it had been knocked over before the person had the chance to rummage through it.

When she bent down, it was evident that the piece of furniture was way too heavy for her to move by herself. She remembered the two men who were now standing by her bedroom door and she looked at them with raised eyebrows.

Mason, arms crossed, came nearer, a smile tugging at his lips. "And here I thought we were here as silent extras. Take a side, Malco, use your muscles for once."

It took both men to put the dresser upright and Cleo managed to keep most of the drawers closed during the process.

Cleo pulled open the first drawer and sagged in relief when she saw the carved wooden box still intact. It contained the few family heirlooms she possessed, mostly inexpensive jewels, several old photographs, and the tarot deck from her grandmother. Quickly, she pulled it out, checked the deck, and found the Lovers card before sagging in relief. She closed her box and put her forehead against the lid.

Mason approached, his hand finding the familiar spot on her back in a show of support. She was glad to have it as she began to explain. "I don't own much, but this box contains the

few memories and valuables I do possess. I thought it was from my grandmother's deck when I saw that card with the snakes," her voice shook on the word, "but it was from my own set. I can live with that fucker destroying those."

Mason seemed tempted to ask a question, but more pressing matters needed to be dealt with. "We need to call the authorities on this. Grab a bag and pack everything you don't want to leave behind. Bring your clothes too."

Keeping the box against her chest, she looked around. "I don't want to touch anything he may have touched. It feels dirty to me."

Mason nodded, and Malco disappeared. "You can take what's in the dresser, that hasn't been touched."

Malco reappeared with a folded garbage bag. "I found it under your kitchen sink. It's clean and was still in the box. Not pretty, but you can use it for now."

Grateful, she smiled at the man. "Quick thinking, Batman, thanks."

He nodded a small grin playing on his lips before excusing himself saying he would call Shane before calling the cops.

Mason picked up the bag and opened it for her so she could throw in what would be useful and take it with her. But where? To Mason's apartment?

"Why a frown? A penny for your thoughts, Cleo?"

Distracted, she shook her head. "I need a place to stay. I just realized I might never be able to live in this apartment again. And that makes me mad because I loved it. After Emme and Shane hired me, finding this apartment was the first thing I did. I splurged on the furniture, the decorations, and the clothes. I remember my first night here. I was so happy I had moved here."

She wasn't on the verge of tears this time; she just felt so very sad. And then she thought of who could have been so vile; a fire started burning inside her. "I don't understand who this person could be! I haven't been in Miami long enough to have much contact with people, let alone make any enemies."

And I work all the time. Apart from here and the occasional trips to the store, I barely leave the office.”

Mason put the bag down before looking at her. “Stalkers are sick people. They’re obsessed with the object of their desire. It doesn’t mean it’s someone you know or noticed. It could be someone you’ve met once, and instantly became the object of his sick fascination. The team is going to find him, then we’ll have answers to your questions.”

Cleo puffed out a breath and rolled her shoulders. “In the meantime, I feel like my home has been burned to the ground. I’m like a boat lost at sea, without anywhere to go.”

“You do have a place to go. You can use my guest room for as long as you need. My building is safe, and as we work together, we can use my car to get to and from work.”

“I can’t invade your home like that. Last night was a one-off, an emergency, but staying until we find this guy? I can’t impose on you like that.”

Mason took another step, and this time, a dark cloud descended over his handsome face showing his annoyance. “You are not imposing on me. In fact, Emme and Shane wanted to take you to their place last night, but I decided to take you to my home.” He lifted his hand and his fingers traced her jaw. “I want you at my place. I wouldn’t have offered otherwise.”

Delicious shivers started rolling over her skin as his mouth came closer. It took all her might not to lean up and taste him. “What happened last night won’t happen again. I told you, I don’t date or have sex with co-workers.”

“As you had sex with yourself, I think your point is moot. I can be as stubborn as you, Miss Darwin. Accept it or not, there is something between us. It’s been there since the first moment we met. It stands between us and I don’t think there are many options. My choice is to explore it.” When she opened her mouth to answer, Mason shook his head. “Don’t deny it. You’re too smart to play dumb. And you can say we’re opposites all you like, but I don’t agree. I don’t think you know me enough to make that call, and the glimpse I’ve had of

you makes me believe I'm right. So take this little cohabitation period as a possible test. You look beyond the suit, and I'll look beyond the purple hair, and then we'll see where we truly stand. I won't ever force myself on you. But I won't be taken for a fool either, not when I know you want me as much as I want you. When you're ready to admit that we can talk."

Speechless, Cleo couldn't say anything, as she tried to wrap her mind around what he'd just said.

"Now, let's put your stuff in my car and deal with the team, the police, and most probably your insurance. Then we can head back to Alliance and take this fucker down."

CHAPTER SIX

MASON LEFT THE BLACK BAG FULL OF CLEO'S THINGS IN THE trunk of his car. She had vetoed all her underwear, stating she wouldn't wear anything the scumbag who was trying to scare her had touched. She was putting on a brave face, but she was frightened and upset, and he didn't blame her. Emme and Shane had taken her back to the office earlier while he stayed and dealt with the police. They had filed a report and had people dusting for prints, but unfortunately in a place with the crime rate Miami had, it was low on the list of priorities.

It was a sad but true fact that MPD was overstretched and underpaid, with drug dealers, murderers, gangs, and other heinous crimes taking priority. He got it, but it meant he and Alliance were on their own with finding Cleo's stalker. He had passed his card to the lead detective who had promised to share information with him, probably happy for someone else to solve the case for him.

However, the stalker had escalated fast. It worried him. Most stalkers started with the small stuff—late-night calls or hang-ups, the victim feeling as if they were being followed, but he had talked to Cleo, and she'd had nothing like that happen. Fuck, he probably had more hang-ups than she did.

Walking across the carpark toward the office, he saw Alex standing way back as animal control removed the venomous snakes. That was something else he could get Alex to follow up on. "Hey, Alex, got a second?"

Alex turned to look at him, his forehead beaded with sweat and Mason had a distinct feeling it wasn't the Miami sun that

had caused it. Alex seemed to have a deep-rooted fear of snakes, almost as bad as Cleo's. "Yeah, sure. What do you need?" He kept an eye on the car and didn't seem to want to turn his back on the perceived threat.

"Can you look into all the places you can buy this breed of snake? It can't be easy to get hold of them, even illegally. There might be some chatter you can find." It may well be a dead-end, but it was a start.

"Sure, I'll get right on it." Alex nodded before moving toward Alliance's front doors. Mason watched as the snakes that could very well have put Cleo in the hospital—or worse—were taken away.

Moving inside, he saw her desk was empty and walked toward his office. He wanted to touch base with a friend of his who was a profiler and see if he could run a quick profile on the stalker. He took a detour when he heard giggling coming from Emme's office. Female's giggling, and Cleo's voice stood out. It was melodic, and sexy, and shot desire straight to his dick when he'd first heard it. It was even worse now he had her face and the feel of her sexy body pressed against his to imagine with it.

Knocking on the half-open door, he pushed it fully open when Emme called for him to come in, prompting the four women standing around the computer to burst out laughing.

"I feel like I walked in on something I shouldn't have." Mason was more terrified of the four women who turned in his direction than he was of a psycho wielding gunman.

"Cleo was doing some online shopping." Mercy walked toward him, a look of mischief on her face he didn't quite understand. "You should go help her."

With that Mercy, Caitlin, and Emme exited the room as if the hounds of hell were after them. He watched the door close and heard a barrage of laughter moving down the hall.

He turned back to Cleo, who was blushing crimson. It wasn't a look he had seen on her before, but he liked it, he

liked it a fucking lot. “What just happened?” He moved closer as he looked at the door then back to her.

“They’re idiots.” Cleo minimized the screen she was on before he got to see it.

“Sounded like you were having fun,” he said as she stood, and he noticed the way her green flowery dress swooshed around her toned thighs as she stood.

“We were, kind of...” Distracted, Cleo moved around him, her breasts brushing his chest.

Mason snaked out an arm, grasping her around the waist and hauling her closer to him. Her body pressed to his front. “Why are you blushing?” His voice was soft; he wanted to feel her skin against his lips but fought the urge. He heard her breath hitch at the position that almost mimicked the one from last night.

“Caitlin told a rude joke.” Cleo’s answer was breathy, and his dick twitched.

“Yeah? Want to share it?” He was close to her neck as he took in her scent.

“I, uh can’t remember it.” Cleo pulled away, practically running for the door.

Mason watched her go and turned back to the computer. Taking a seat, he shook the mouse to wake the screen and maximized the display from the bottom. A popular website with a lingerie covered model popped up. Mason felt his lips curl into a grin as he realized what they had been looking at. Cleo needed new underwear and didn’t that make his dick go from the semi-erect state it always seemed to be in around Cleo to rock fucking hard.

Moving the mouse, he saw the basket showed nine items and he couldn’t resist. He was going to hell, but he didn’t give a flying fuck at that moment.

Clicking on the basket icon, a list of the things she wanted to purchase. He almost swallowed his tongue when he saw a dark red lace teddy, black lace thongs, satin demi-cup bra’s—

whatever the fuck they were—and the pale green silk slip with black lace on the breasts. *Jesus Fucking Christ!*

The instant visceral image of Cleo in that lingerie was more than he could take. That she might be wearing something like that now made him want to club her over the head and drag her to his office and find out. Of course, he would never do that, but fuck if he didn't want to.

Deciding that now was as good a time as any to loosen little Miss. Darwin up, he quickly set up an account and purchased the items in the basket before forwarding the email receipt to her private email.

He closed the screen and walked back to his office, stopping to talk to Shane on the way. He wondered how long it would take before she saw the order confirmation email. Mason didn't have to wait long. She banged on Shane's door, moments after he and Shane had finished discussing what happened with the MPD.

“Yes?” Shane called, and Mason bit back the smirk when she entered.

“Can I talk to Mason a second please?” Her voice came through gritted teeth. Cleo was rattled, and he liked it way better than Cleo frightened.

Shane motioned Mason away. “Yes, we were done anyway.”

“Are you okay, Cleo?” Mason tried to appear solicitous as he moved toward the door, his lips tipped up.

“Peachy.” The way she ground out the word made him chuckle. He walked back to his office with Cleo at his heels, breathing fire down his neck and tried not to enjoy himself too much, but it was useless.

“What can I do for you, Cleo?”

She closed his office door before answering. “Don't you play innocent with me. I can't believe you bought that stuff for me.”

“But you wanted it didn’t you?” His hands in his pockets, he rested his hips against his desk.

“Well, yes, but it wasn’t for you to buy them for me.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong, Miss. Darwin.” Mason pushed up off the desk and advanced on her slowly, the predatory look he knew was in his eyes making her step back as he approached. “Way I see it, you’re in my home, and although I fucking love the idea of you walking around without underwear, it may make you happier to have some on. I did it to make you more comfortable.” Mason stopped as her back hit the wall beside the door and his body was mere inches from hers. Cleo looked up at him, her eyes wide, the pulse in her neck pounding as her chest heaved.

Mason could hardly tear his eyes from the devastatingly beautiful sight she made. “You test every fucking ounce of restraint I own. You are so beautiful, Cleo.” His head descended toward hers. “Tell me to stop if you don’t want this.” Despite his begging, his answer was her silence. “Thank fuck.”

They were his only words before he took her lips in a brutal kiss that was hot and wet. Her soft body melted into him as she grasped the front of his shirt, pulling him closer. He had known Cleo would be a firecracker and he wasn’t mistaken. She kissed him back passionately as he backed her fully into the wall, pressing his hard cock against the soft mound of her pussy and eliciting a moan that had him ready to take her there and then. His hand slipped from her left hip, going down her thigh before traveling up the deliciously soft skin of her thigh and finding her bare ass cheek.

Mason caressed the skin, making her moan into his mouth, as he lifted her leg, wrapping it around his hip, and ground his dick into her pussy. “Are you wet for me, baby?” He slid his hand around and found her hot, wet slit. He teased his finger over her clit, making her squirm against him. “Fucking drenched.”

He kissed his way down the delicate skin of her neck, and over the curve of her tits. He rubbed her clit in circles with his

thumb and teased the entrance of her pussy with his fingers. "I'm going to make you come." And then he plunged his fingers inside her hot wet, heat. Cleo dragged his head up so she could kiss him as he worked her harder until he felt the first signs of her climax.

"Mason." Her voice wavered, only a husky breath.

"I got you, baby. Come for me, let it take you." Mason crooked his fingers and rubbed over her G-spot, and she gasped into his mouth as he swallowed the scream that accompanied her climax. Her pussy squeezed his fingers tight as her legs gave way, and he held her up with his arm around her waist.

He expected her to pull away, to fight what had happened between them, blame him somehow, and she would be right. He'd let things get out of hand. He had only wanted a kiss, but Cleo seemed to turn his good intentions to dust. He was surprised when she pulled back and smiled at him, her face having a post-orgasm glow that made his dick harder.

"Well, there's no going back now." Her laughter was delicious as he helped her straighten her clothes.

"I have no idea what that means." He couldn't help but laugh as he kissed her neck and then stepped away.

"I might have morals, Mason, but I'm no fool. When a man can give you an orgasm like that, you don't throw them out of your bed."

"Well, technically, it's a wall. Does that mean you're willing to give us a go and let me take you on a date later?"

Cleo looked at him and tilted her head. "Yes, I believe I will." Then she turned on her heel and left him alone.

Mason walked to his desk, adjusting his aching cock as he sat down to try and work. He needed this stalker gone so he could enjoy getting to know Cleo better. He wore a grin on his face for the rest of the day. He would take her to his favorite bar later for the best beer and burgers in Miami.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THIS IS A HORRIBLE IDEA. THE ENTIRE THING WAS, AS A MATTER of fact. Cleo sighed as she let herself fall on the bed in Mason's guest room.

Why had she agreed to go out with Mason? No scratch that, to go on a date with him?

It was his fault, the man was messing with her head, or more accurately, with her body. When he got close, she forgot all the logical reasons why she had to keep their relationship distant and professional.

After what happened in his office, her professionalism would never be entirely the same. Couldn't he see how opposite they were? Or was she blind and missing something? For so long, she had battled alone, survived the slums to gain her freedom and a life for herself. That fight had left emotional scars, made her put on blinders. A soft knock on her door made her jump from the bed.

"Cleo? Are you ready?"

A quick look at the mirror confirmed she was. With the timing of the invite, and in her current situation, she didn't have a decent outfit to wear. Mercy had come to her rescue and found her a fantastic crocheted white dress that bared her shoulders and flared into a split skirt. Going with the bohemian feel, she added hooped earrings, wedged heels, and fresh flowers in her upswept violet hair. When she opened the door, the look on Mason's face showed his approval. At least

she was now wearing underwear after stopping at a big box store on the way home to grab a couple of pairs and some bras.

Dressed in tan slacks and a relaxed white shirt, she had to admit the look suited him. Her hands itched wanting to explore the body she had briefly seen that morning, but instead, Cleo accepted the arm he gallantly offered her, and they were off.

He hadn't told her where they were going, keeping a secret smile on his face when she had asked. She realized it wasn't far as they headed toward the ocean and a neighborhood she hadn't had a chance to explore.

Mason parked on a side street and opened her door, taking her hand to lead her toward the sound of waves. His hand was solicitously on the small of her back as he continued to watch their surroundings.

Just as they neared the beach, he steered her around the corner toward what looked like an illuminated shack. On closer inspection, it was exactly that—a beach shack built from reclaimed wood with a wooden fence for added privacy. Fairy lights were strung over clusters of tables with a bar on the side and the kitchen at the far end. It was packed around the dance floor, the crowd friendly and lively.

Once they were seated in a corner, Cleo couldn't help but smile. "You've surprised me, Mason. I thought you would take me to some chic, fancy high-end restaurant, someplace quiet and romantic."

"Was I right to bring you here or have I made a mistake?" The question was light, but the intent serious.

"That depends on the food. And the company."

Mason was still laughing when the server came over with a small basket of tortilla chips, offering them menus and taking their drink orders.

The music wasn't overwhelming, and the setting sun over the ocean soothed her frayed nerves, almost making her forget the shadow obsessed with her.

The fruity cocktail in her hand was potent, but she didn't mind. "How did you discover this place, Mason?"

He followed a drip of condensation rolling down his glass of cold beer with his finger. She remembered what those fingers felt like on her skin. “I like to jog on the beach in the morning. I passed by it one day and that night I came back and ate the best burger I’d ever had. It’s become my favorite place to unwind. I come here when I need to kick back and relax. I wasn’t trying to impress you tonight, Cleo. I just wanted to have a nice evening and share something I like with you.”

It was a smart move, she had to admit. He could have gone expensive, but that wouldn’t have had the same effect. He was giving her a piece of himself, and that meant more to her than any expensive restaurant would. “I could use a burger, to be honest. I haven’t eaten much in the last twenty-four hours, and a juicy calorie-laden meal would go down a treat.” Something dark flashed in his eyes and his jaw clenched. Cleo regretted bringing her attack up. “Thank you for giving me this night out. I needed it more than I thought.” She changed the subject to a less emotional one. “Have you always been such a protector, Mason? Is that the reason you applied to the Secret Service?”

Mason leaned back, looking around before answering. “I was recruited by SO14, that’s the Protection command within London’s Metropolitan Police Service, while I was finishing my master’s degree in criminology.”

“Ah! That’s where you started wearing a suit, am I right?”

“Hey! I like the suit. But yeah, you’re right. Don’t underestimate the power of the suit, lady. It’s like a skeleton key, it gives you access to people or places sometimes without a badge. People respect the suit.”

Cleo winked at him. “I admit it suits you. You look good in one. No doubt about it.”

Mason grinned. “Never thought about it. It just became part of me, and I’ve continued to wear it. I never had the opportunity to stop wearing one because the Secret Service quickly approached me. I’d had a high rate of success and solved cases quickly with SO14. My reputation reached the ears of a couple of people there, and I decided to make the

jump. It's was the most grueling work I've ever done. Intense too. But amazing training. The investigations with them are very complex."

"So you just did investigations? Have you protected any presidents?"

"You know I can't discuss details, but I had a few bodyguard duties—known and unknown people. Being a bodyguard is a whole different world. Your brain needs to be on edge every second because it's all you have to assess a situation and react. It's never about brawn, but the brain."

Cleo was fascinated. Mason was a great storyteller, but she was more intrigued by the man. Cleo was about to ask another question when the server came to take their order. The service was slow, but she didn't care. She was having fun, and was in no hurry to return to reality.

Mason ordered a massive burger and Cleo couldn't resist the Mexican variation. With their drinks refilled, Mason entertained her with fascinating anecdotes.

When their food finally arrived, the discussion turned less serious and they were both laughing as they tried to eat their burgers without making a mess but failing.

Cleo couldn't help wiping his chin where the sauce was running down, and Mason grabbed her hand and licked her fingers slowly and deliberately.

Lust surged, but before she could make much of it, Mason changed the mood again and threw her an onion ring, making her giggle. Belly stuffed, Cleo leaned in her chair as the soft sea breeze played with her hair, admiring the couples dancing nearby.

"You want dessert?"

Cleo rolled her eyes. "If I have another bite, I won't fit into this dress anymore."

Mason winked at her. "Well, if that happens, please, please, please, don't hesitate to take it off. And it would be my pleasure to help you remove it." His wink said it all.

Licking her lips, she only smiled at him, taking another sip of her drink to steady her racing heart.

His eyes remained on her, almost burning over her skin until he broke eye contact to look at the people milling around them. "I feel like I'm dominating the conversation here."

Cleo winced and toyed with her glass, knowing she was evading a bit. "I don't have anything interesting to say about my life."

The way Mason remained silent, only arching an eyebrow, made her realize he didn't believe her. Biting her lip, she sighed. "I don't like thinking about my past, Mason. I've told people before and saw the change in their eyes. Believe me when I say you should focus on the woman I am, not the circumstances around how I got here."

"Circumstances?"

Her brows turned into a frown. "Why do I get the feeling you won't let it go?"

"Because you're a very intelligent woman?"

Her chuckle was more sarcastic than she intended. "No one thought I was intelligent where I came from. As I said, I'm from Arizona, but what I've never told anyone is that my family was, well, still is, part of a cult."

Her heart pounded in her ribcage when she said the words, part ashamed, part fearful what Mason would think of her. Unable to maintain eye contact, she stared through the opening of the restaurant's fence, her eyes on the flickering light over the waves.

"My parents aren't educated. We lived in trailer parks most of my life, and not nice trailer parks. My mom was a hairdresser, my dad..." She hesitated a second. "At his best, he was a decent mechanic. Despair is fertile soil for scammers, and they fell prey to a man named Jeffrey Spears. He arrived at the trailer park where we lived and slowly started acting like some sort of messiah, professing he could help the people there. He spread money and his version of the gospel all over the place, and slowly gained a hold over the people. I was

young, but something deep inside me told me to stay as far away as possible from him. It was slow, but after a few years, Spears controlled trailer park. I was nearly sixteen by then.”

Cleo wasn't sure if she should continue and couldn't bring herself to look and see Mason's expression. She finally lifted her head when a warm hand rested on top of hers. Mason looked at her as if she was the center of his universe. There wasn't pity or judgment on his face, instead it was the expression he wore when he was analyzing a case, trying to understand it inside and out. “I know what you're thinking, Mason.”

“Is that so?”

“You think my past has something to do with the stalker. I can tell you right now it's impossible. Nobody knows I'm in Florida. And anyway, it's been a lot of years since I left.”

Mason nodded. “It crossed my mind. But you have me riveted. I sense something exciting happens in the next part of your story.”

Cleo warmed a little, the corners of her mouth going up. “If you like action movies, you could say that. Spears didn't focus on the children, because they couldn't be used for profit. Indeed, he asked his followers to remove us from school because it wasn't worth it, that we'd learn more by working for him doing cleaning and yard work. I hated my life. I loved school and missed my friends. My parents neglected me, and I was tired of being hungry and poor. But what was for me outside? So I stayed. I thought I was safe until I saw something change in Spears' behavior toward me.”

Mason exhaled sharply, his hand squeezing hers and she continued.

“I knew something was brewing, and as I said, I didn't want anything to do with him. What spurred me to make a move was when I saw how he started looking at me, and people started whispering when I passed by. Something had changed, and I decided I wasn't going to stay and find out what it was. So, in the middle of the night, I packed my backpack, stole the few dollars my parents had left, and

disappeared.” Cleo felt guilty at not telling him the whole truth. She knew exactly what Spears wanted from her, but she wasn’t ready to tell Mason the rest yet.

Mason whistled. “You have guts. You were only a teenager. Where did you go?”

“I remembered we’d visited my paternal grandmother in Mesa a few years before Spears arrived. I managed to get there and searched for her. It took a few days, but I found her.”

Remembering her grandmother opening the door, and the immediate recognition as she pulled her into her arms, made her choke up all over again. “I told her everything as she listened, feeding me, comforting me. We cried—her for her son, and me for my parents and my lost dreams. I stayed with her, hidden in her apartment for a long time until I got my bearings. She taught me to read her tarot cards. It was our bonding moment, I guess.”

“Did anyone try to find you? The police?”

Cleo shook her head. “I doubt they would have involved the police because that would mean they’d enter the trailer park, and Spears would never allow that. I was more scared that my father would contact his mother and ask questions. But it never happened.”

“What did you do?”

“My grandmother is an amazing woman, she helped me build my confidence, and even though she didn’t know anything about it, she found an online secretarial course. That kept me busy, and also gave me hope I’d eventually get a decent job, be self-sufficient. Once I completed my course and had my diploma, my grandmother pushed me to leave the state, get as far away as possible and start over, have the fresh start I deserved, away from the threat of Spears finding me. She offered me a bus ticket to Houston, which was a lot of money for her, and gave me her tarot cards, saying they would bring me luck and sent me away and my new life began.”

Now a tear rolled down her cheek. It had been a long time since she’d felt so vulnerable in front of anybody. Mason

didn't say anything, instead he stood and pulled her to her feet before leading her to the dance floor.

He pulled her into his embrace and started to sway with her. The music was low and the melody smooth and sexy as their bodies touched.

Mason's cheek was rubbing against hers. "You are an amazing woman, Cleo. I've never met someone as resourceful, smart, and strong as you. I needed to take you in my arms because I'm in awe of you."

Stunned by his words, she tightened her arms around him. It seemed as if she was floating, and it felt beautiful. Cleo let her eyes drift over the fairy lights, spellbound by the moment until her attention was drawn to a man at the bar looking directly at her. Tall, blond, and built, he sipped his drink, his striking blue eyes never wavering from her. Until then, she had forgotten about her stalker, but the shiver that ran down her spine as she saw something in his look and the ball of ice settling in her belly brought all her stress to the surface.

The way she tensed immediately alerted Mason, who pulled back to look at her. "Hey, Cleo. What's going on?"

"There's a guy at the bar watching me."

Mason's reaction was immediate as he turned and put himself between her and the bar, ready to defend her. Cleo's breath seized in her lungs when the blond man got up from his chair and headed toward Mason. Cleo held on to his shirt, waiting to see what was going to happen.

Just as she thought the blond man was about to attack, he smiled, transforming him from threatening to devastatingly handsome, and he and Mason hugged, laughing as they exchanged manly back slaps.

Stunned, Cleo took a step back, trying to get her heartbeat under control.

Mason turned to her. "Cleo, I'd like you to meet Travis Vaughn, a friend and colleague from the Secret Service. Travis, this is Cleo."

Travis' smile was warm when he shook her hand. "A pleasure meeting you Cleo. I saw how Mason reacted, and I'm sorry. I thought it was Mason but I wasn't sure, and that's why I couldn't help but stare until I was certain. It was inappropriate, and it's obvious I scared you. Please accept my apologies, but I couldn't believe it was Mason."

Cleo offered a smile, reassured. "Don't apologize, I overreacted. Let's just say I'm a bit under pressure right now."

Travis frowned at her and Mason, about to ask a question, when a couple bumped into him. "We better get out of the way. I didn't mean to disturb your dance or your date."

Mason clapped him on the shoulder. "I didn't know you were in town. Why didn't you call me?"

They moved toward the bar, Mason taking her hand. Cleo felt foolish for suspecting Travis. She was way too tense, and her brain was playing tricks on her. She shook off the bad feeling deciding she had overreacted.

"I'm finishing an investigation here. Tying up some loose ends. Couldn't be side-tracked. You know how it is."

"Why don't you join us at our table? We'll grab another chair." Cleo smiled, wanting to make amends with Mason's friend.

Travis hesitated, and Mason gave her a hard look, but Cleo squeezed his hand in confirmation. Winking at Travis, she led the way. She wanted her brain to stop feeding on fear and spending time with two dangerous men was the best way to feel safe again.

"Come on, Travis! I can't wait for you to tell me all the dirt you have on Mason so I can tease him mercilessly about it."

CHAPTER EIGHT

AS THE NIGHT WORE ON, MASON FOUND HIMSELF FALLING deeper and deeper under Cleo's spell. Everything about her—from teasing him about his suits to revealing her past with her parents—showed him a woman he wanted in his life. The way she reacted to his touch set his blood on fire. It had been easy to push the threat against her to the back of his mind here where he was familiar with the people.

Her reaction to Travis had been a wake-up call. Mason had mixed feelings about inviting Travis to join them. On the one hand, he hadn't seen his friend in over a year, on the other and more selfish side, he wanted Cleo to himself. In the end, Cleo had decided for him, and he let her have her way. Watching the smile on her face as Travis regaled her with stories of some of their escapades warmed him.

Travis flirted shamelessly, but to her credit, apart from being friendly and her usual sweet self, she didn't respond or flirt back. If anything, she leaned in closer to Mason. Around midnight he saw her try to smother a yawn and decided to wind things up.

Mason pulled Cleo closer and kissed her head. "I think it's time to get this one home to bed." It was too soon for displays of ownership or over-familiarization, but he didn't do it for that reason, it was a natural reaction, just as hers was to lean into him.

Travis offered a grin as he stood with them. "Of course. I'm sorry I crashed your date."

“Please don’t apologize, Travis. I loved meeting you.” Cleo’s smile was genuine.

“You too, and if this guy doesn’t treat you right, call me.” His friend offered her a flirty wink.

“I will.” Cleo laughed not correcting him about the status, or unknown status, of their relationship at present.

“Mason, let’s try and get together for a drink before I leave town.”

Mason shook his friend’s hand. “Absolutely.” He had been so busy with work and recovering from the stabbing, he hadn’t seen his buddies for a while, especially ones from his Secret Service days.

“Look after this one; she’s far too good for you.” With a grin, Travis headed toward the beach with a wave.

Mason walked Cleo back to his car, his arm around her waist. She leaned her body into his, snuggling close like she was cold. He stopped, taking off his jacket and wrapping it around her shoulders before he carried on to the car.

The drive home was quiet, but not awkward. It felt content, relaxed as if they had done this a hundred times. He could imagine doing this with Cleo for the next fifty years and not getting bored. Not that he was getting ahead of himself, they had made no promises to each other, but he thought maybe one day there could be a real chance for this to go the distance.

Despite her reservations, Cleo had opened up to him, trusted him and the fact that she was now in the passenger’s seat, wrapped in his jacket fast asleep reinforced she trusted him.

He pulled up outside his apartment building and killed the engine as he watched her for a few minutes as she slept.

In a normal situation, he would walk to her side of the car, slide his arms around her, and carry her upstairs but with the current threat, he couldn’t do that. He needed to keep his hands and head clear in case of an attack so he gently caressed her cheek with his finger.

“Cleo, honey.” She startled awake, a look of fear on her face. “Hey, it’s okay, just me.” He made sure to keep a reassuring tone as her sleep clouded eyes found his. “We’re home.” The sentence settled in his gut as he realized his apartment had never felt more like a home than it had over the last twenty-four hours.

“Okay.”

When she moved to grab the handle, he gently stopped her. “Wait for me to come around.” Only then did he exit the car, quickly moving to her side and helping her out before he ushered her inside and up the stairs without incident.

Closing and locking the door behind them, he watched her drop her bag on the couch and kick off her shoes by the coffee table.

“You want anything? A drink?” Without waiting for her answer, he poured himself a small brandy.

Cleo looked at him from where she had slumped into the sofa and shook her head. “No, thanks. I should probably head to bed. It’s been a long day, and I’m shattered.”

Mason nodded, she did look tired, and he had no doubt that until this sick maniac was caught, there would be more for her to face. Mason moved toward her not wanting to rush things but not wanting her to think he didn’t want this. “I had the best time tonight, Cleo.”

“Me too. You’re fun to be around, Mason.” She got to her feet and went to straighten his tie as he moved closer.

“I want this.” He motioned to her and him. “I want us to explore what this could be.” His hands rested on her hips. He saw the pulse in her neck kick up and felt the familiar tightness in his balls from the unused desire of their encounters. “What do you say?” The answer felt like it held more weight than he could imagine.

“I say yes.”

Her answer surprised him. “Yes?”

“Yes. I realized tonight life is short, and I can’t spend it worrying about what if. I trusted you with my past, and you were gentle with what I gave you. If I can trust you with my past and my present, then I’m willing to give it a go with my future. But I have rules, and that means no more messing around at work. I’ve worked damn hard to be the best at my job, and I won’t have it ruined by getting caught fucking you at work.”

“Thank you, Cleo, for trusting me, and I won’t promise we’ll be the next Romeo and Juliet, but I can promise to be honest and respect you at work.”

Her laughter filled the space between them. “God, I hope we aren’t the next Romeo and Juliet. Didn’t they end up dead? How anyone thinks that’s romantic, I’ll never know.”

He chuckled in return. “True. Now, get yourself to bed, we have work tomorrow.” He pushed her gently toward the door.

Cleo laughed softly, and it went straight to his cock, forcing him to bury a moan. She stopped at the door to the hallway and turned back to look at him, offering him a sultry look. “You coming?”

Mason shot back his drink, placed the empty glass on the counter, and followed her silent invitation. Cleo took his hand and led him to his bedroom before she turned and leaned into him. “I can’t sleep without my new sleep therapy.” She began to unbutton his shirt.

“That right?” With a grin, he lifted his hands into her hair and began to pull out the flowers there.

“Yes, and I must say I recommend it. Maybe you should try it too.”

Mason felt like his cock was going to explode right then at the images her words conjured up. “Maybe I will, but I thought you were tired?” Regretfully, he gave her a chance to back out.

“I was, and now I’m not.” She stepped back and pulled her dress over her shoulders and down, letting it pool at her feet, leaving her in just a white, lace bra and thong.

“Fuck it.” That was all he could say to the vision in front of him, taking her to the bed with a kiss that left them both breathless. He was in awe of her soft skin under his hands, the lush curves beneath him. “You’re so fucking beautiful, Cleo.” His voice rumbled as he kissed his way down her front, teasing her nipple through the lace of her bra with his mouth, making her arch against him and hold his head.

His cock was pressed to her core as she squirmed against him seeking more, seeking relief from the need building in them both. Mason moved his hands down her ribs, over her small waist, and the gentle flare of her hips. His head followed as he kissed his way toward the edge of her panties. “I want to taste you,” he begged, meeting her dark eyes with a desire that he knew matched his own.

“Yes.” He could hear her need in her reply.

Mason moved her thong down her long legs, where she kicked them off with a flick of her feet. His eyes landed on her pussy, the thin strip of hair a pleasant surprise in this time where women felt they had to shave every inch of hair from their bodies. Kissing his way closer, he nipped the inside of her thighs with his teeth before swiping his tongue along the sweet folds of her pussy. Mason nipped, licked, and kissed her, tasting her until he felt drunk on the sweet taste of her and the whimpers and groans that came from her.

“Mason,” she begged as she held his head to her, her hips moving looking for more.

Mason lifted his head and caught the look of complete rapture in her eyes before he smiled and went right back to her pussy.

“Mason, I...” She began but never finished as her climax crashed through her. Legs shaking, body writhing, she rode the sensations that racked her body. The complete way she surrendered to the moment was hotter than hell and had his balls aching for release. He dropped a kiss on her swollen clit before he crawled back up her body. “That was...amazing.” She stroked his cheek and stared into his eyes.

“Yeah, it was.” He saw her eyes soften as she pushed him up, so they were both sitting on their knees on the bed.

“Now it’s your turn.” She shoved him back until he lay flat.

He went willingly, wanting to see what she would do next. In the most seductive move he had ever seen, she crawled closer until she was kneeling over his waist, her hands at his belt. Cleo made quick work of the belt and then undid the zipper on his pants, her movements slow and considered as she exposed his hard cock to her hungry eyes.

“Commando.” Cleo purred with a raised brow. “Hmm, if I had known that then dinner would have been much more interesting.”

“Dinner was perfect.” He couldn’t remember the last time he’d enjoyed a meal so much.

“But dessert will be better.” She grasped his hard cock and stroked him from root to tip. Mason bucked his hips as her head lowered and Cleo followed the path of her hand with her tongue, licking and teasing him until he wound his hand in her hair and tugged, making her moan before she took him in her mouth.

The moan slipped from his throat in a guttural sound as she took him into her mouth. It was all he could do not to flip her on her back and fuck her throat. This was the best kind of torture, and he began to move his hips as she worked his cock like a god-damn pro.

He felt his balls tighten and the warning tingle shot along the base of his spine as she teased him. “Cleo,” he warned as she backed off, before starting again.

“What?” The question sounded so innocent as she dove back in, taking him so far back in her throat before swallowing he saw stars. His control gone, he pulled out and flipped her onto her back, before crawling up her body and pushing his cock back into her waiting mouth.

“No more teasing, little girl.” With a growl, he began to fuck her mouth as his hand teased her pretty pussy, circling her

clit until she was rocking her hips again as she worked him.

“I’m gonna cum.” He could only groan as he felt his climax peek. His words seemed to encourage Cleo as she worked him harder, not stopping until he came hard, his vision going white as he heard her scream her pleasure beneath him. Next time he would fuck her until they both came so hard they passed out, but for now, he pulled his softening cock from her mouth and watched the woman who was so put together lick her lips and grin.

Cleo was a gift, and she deserved to be worshipped, but they needed sleep. Stripping his clothes, he crawled into bed after putting on a pair of gym shorts and giving Cleo one of his T-shirts. Then he wrapped her in his arms, and they fell asleep, neither of them thinking about the danger that stalked her.

CHAPTER NINE

MASON FELT ON TOP OF THE WORLD THE MOMENT HE OPENED his eyes the next morning with Cleo wrapped around him, her soft skin glowing in the early morning light.

He was tempted to wake her for a repeat of the previous night, but a quick look at his watch told him that if they indulged again, they would be late. The idea of a morning romp was tempting, but if he wanted a future with Cleo, he had to keep her safe and alive, and to do that, he had to catch her stalker.

Untangling himself from the warm woman in his bed, he showered quickly and dressed before going to the kitchen to start the coffee. As he checked the fridge to see if there was anything that could still be classified as edible, he heard the shower turn on. With some difficulty, he ignored the rush of blood to his cock imagining Cleo's naked body under the spray and finally found a pancake mix that was still within its expiry date.

He was setting the table when two slender arms came around his waist. Turning to see the goddess who'd rocked his world a few hours earlier, he took in the scent of soap and shampoo coming from her as he stole her lips in a good morning kiss. However, when lust flared, he grabbed her hips and pushed her to arm's length breathing hard. "There's nothing more I'd like than continue our good morning kiss, but if we do, the pancakes will get cold, and we'll be late for work."

Cleo wrinkled her perfect nose, clearly disappointed before checking the time on the stove. “But we still have time...”

“Not if we stop for coffee and pastries as you normally do. And because we can’t go to your usual place, it will take extra time.”

Annoyance was replaced by resignation before a smile returned to her mouth, and she gave him a chaste kiss. “Thank you for thinking about it. I didn’t realize we’d need extra time.” She looked at the table and gave him another peck on the mouth. “And thank you for going to all this trouble. I love pancakes.”

Warmth expanded in his chest when she turned to fill them both a cup of coffee. Dressed in a bright blue dress, her violet hair in a simple ponytail, with minimal make-up, she looked stunning, but then she always did. Mason loved how perfectly at ease she was in his kitchen, doctoring her coffee before taking a sip and closing her eyes in visible bliss.

“How do you take your coffee?”

“Black is fine.”

Rounding the counter, she put his mug on the table. “No wonder you take it black, it’s amazing coffee.”

Mason brought the plate of pancakes and put it in the middle of the table. He went back for syrup, butter, and brown sugar, hoping that it was how she ate them.

“There’s a little shop on my jogging route I discovered a couple of weeks ago. My Spanish is rusty, but the owner and I communicate through coffee.”

Cleo sat and smiled. “I think I’ll have to take up jogging too. It seems you discover the most amazing places during your runs.”

She helped herself to a few pancakes before drenching them with syrup, catching the last drop with her finger before licking it. The image of those ruby lips around his cock came to mind, and he was glad he was seated for a few minutes to give his hard-on a chance lessen a bit.

“And I’ll need to start jogging if you feed me pancakes like this every morning. Otherwise, I’ll need to shop for more than new underwear.”

She winked at him, and Mason shook his head, smiling at the light banter. “I like your curves, Cleo. And you can jog with me anytime.”

Cutting a piece of pancake, she started to eat, rolling her eyes at him. “My exercise is using my bike every morning and night. I haven’t had time for sports since I left Arizona.”

She said it lightly, but the topic was obviously heavy for her. However, he couldn’t help himself and dug a little more, wanting to know her better. “What did you do after you left? You said you went to Houston. You found a job there?”

“Yep. As a file clerk in a law office. It was pure luck that I landed it within a week of arriving. I was renting a room in a hostel nearby, and I met a lawyer at a coffee shop one morning as I was looking at the classifieds. We said hello, she asked for the arts section and if I was searching for a job. Less than a year later, I was promoted to executive assistant.”

“That’s not a surprise. You’re too intelligent and resourceful to remain a clerk. And that firm had the brains to see it.”

With a stunned look on her face, Cleo nodded. “I worked hard, especially since my education was limited. I almost refused the position because of that, but they told me what I lacked in training, I made up for in street smarts, drive, and planning. I seemed to be able to sense events before they happened.”

Mason nodded, having seen that himself since he’d started working for the agency. “Did you stay in Houston long?”

Cleo grabbed her mug, taking a sip as she thought about it. “Five years. Then I was headhunted by another firm in Salt Lake City. Stayed with them a couple of years before going on a business trip to New York. It was a complicated case, and we were there a month. I don’t think I’ve ever been so tired in my

life, but I bumped into a contact who offered me a job I couldn't refuse. It was working for the head of the NYPD."

This was impressive. "Head of the NYPD? You're talking about The New York City Police Commissioner? Really?"

Cleo nodded, smiling at the memory. "Yeah. Nice guy. He offered me a position as one of his assistants, and I couldn't resist. And I learned a lot."

"And how did you become part of the Alliance Agency?"

Cleo pushed her plate away. "I gave myself a quick vacation in Miami, rented a car, and told myself that I was going to party until I dropped. Unfortunately, I never got to do it because I was barely out of the airport before I was pulled over by the biggest imbecile of a cop I've ever met. We argued so much he decided to take me to the station. I gave him and his superior an earful. There are benefits from working for law firms and a police commissioner. You pick things up regarding the law and your rights. What I didn't know was that Emme was in the station and heard most of it. She caught up with me when I finally got out of there. She offered me the job. I think it's my destiny to be offered jobs."

"Well, I have Emme to thank for having the incredible luck of meeting you."

"I guess so. And being caught in my mess too. I can't wait until we catch this guy. I'm already tired of looking over my shoulder."

Mason nodded before forking up the last bits on his plate. He then started clearing the table, trying to find a way to bring something up without Cleo shutting it down. "That's the plan for today. We'll have a team meeting to see what we've gathered so far and if there's anything we should dig deeper into. I want to take a look at someone you told me about yesterday, that Jeffrey Spears guy."

The way she tensed was instantaneous. "I told you, Mason. Nobody knows where I am. Nobody is looking for me. They probably knew I would've been a problem and not submissive enough for his tastes. There's no way the stalker is related."

Mason wasn't so sure about that, but what raised his curiosity was how adamant she was about shutting the possibility down. Investigations could be done quietly to prevent raising suspicions and she should know that. "Cleo, we still need to look into it."

She finished clearing the table, and Mason feared for his dishes when she almost threw them in the sink. "I didn't confide in you so you could dig into that part of my life. It has nothing to do with the stalker. I told you, I have no enemies, no family. Promise me you won't stir anything up. Please, Mason."

Seeing the stubborn look on her face, Mason hesitated before nodding, but the discussion was far from over. If someone from her past was a possible threat, Mason knew he wouldn't be able to keep his promise and still protect her.

THE DRIVE TO get coffee before heading to Alliance was heavy with silence. Mason knew Cleo was still defensive about what they'd discussed. He regretted losing the intimacy they had enjoyed earlier, but it couldn't be helped, her safety was paramount.

Mason parked close to the Alliance entrance and Cleo got out the car without a word and disappeared inside. With a sigh, Mason got out and went into his office to gather his notes and his thoughts before the meeting. Cleo busied herself with her own and was ignoring him, which made him grind his teeth, but he left her alone, hoping she would see why he wanted to explore every possibility to keep her safe.

He went to his office and sat in his chair, closing his eyes to try to clear his mind. Should he believe Cleo and not check into Spears? His gut was against it, and he usually listened to it thanks to his experience as an investigator, only this time, he had painted himself into a corner.

"Why isn't Cleo smiling this morning? What did you do?" Opening an eyelid, he saw Mercy leaning against the door jamb, arms crossed, and brows furrowed. Before he could answer, she stepped in and closed the door behind her. "I know

you and Cleo had a date last night because she borrowed one of my dresses. And I can see by the look on your face it didn't go to plan."

Mason swiveled to face her. "It has nothing to do with the date. The date was perfect, everything was perfect."

Mercy sat in front of him, putting her booted feet on the desk. "Well, from the look on both your faces, you could have fooled me. Or was it what happened after the date that was disappointing?"

He scoffed at that thought. "Not that it's any of your business, but it was perfect too. It's the morning after that went south and it's my fault."

The blond agent nodded. "Of course it's your fault, but I'm curious to find out why before I put my boot up your pretty ass."

Mason smiled at her threat, although he knew that Mercy Broussard wasn't all talk, she could absolutely put her boot anywhere she wanted. "She told me about her past last night."

The surprise on her face was evident before she whistled softly. "Whoa, things are serious between you two. She's said a few bits and pieces about herself to us, but not much. The fact she's opened up to you means she cares about you."

Mason rubbed his chest as Mercy's words sink in. "That's the trouble. Part of what she said, someone she told me about, may be linked to her stalker. I might be wrong, but I want to check it out, be certain. Unfortunately, I told her what I was planning this morning, asked her if I could dig, and she went ballistic and made me promise to leave it alone. So I'm kind of stuck now."

Mercy nodded, looking concerned. "Nicholas brought her bike in this morning to look at it. Her tire didn't just go flat on its own, someone slashed it. She didn't see it because it was dark. Nick will take care of it, and he told me it's up to you if you want to tell her or not."

A curse flew out his mouth. It was becoming difficult to juggle protecting her without pissing her off. He knew he was

walking a very fine line.

“As I said, Cleo’s talked a bit about her past when us girls have gotten together. The potential threat you’re talking about isn’t Jeffrey Spears by any chance?”

His eyes zeroed on Mercy’s who was clearly coming up with a plan. “Maybe.”

Removing her boots from the desktop, she brought her chair closer and put her elbows down instead. “OK. Hypothetically. Maybe I remember that name all by myself and wonder if he’s related to Cleo’s stalker. And because I care about her, and I have no idea what she may or may not have told you about her past, I start a discreet investigation on my own. I’ll be careful and make sure Cleo doesn’t have a clue where I am and what I’m doing, because yes, I remember she does our expense reports.”

Mason smiled at how cunning Mercy was. “That’s a lot of maybes. And if Cleo finds out about it...”

“I’ll take the blame, and you’ll be off the hook.”

That didn’t feel right for him. “I take responsibility for what I do, Mercy. I don’t hide behind anybody.”

Shrugging off his reply, she stood. “You’re not hiding anywhere or behind anybody. You’re investigating the leads we’ve already gathered while I’m focusing on something else that may be inconsequential. Don’t worry, if it’s what you want and I find something significant, I’ll pull you with me into the line of fire to tell Cleo. In the meantime, protect my friend, and get your ass into gear to take this stalker down.”

CHAPTER TEN

THE MEETING HAD STARTED, AND CLEO WAS AT HER DESK regretting the way she had treated Mason that morning. He had been trying to look out for her. He wasn't using the information she gave him for the wrong reasons, he was being thorough. Leaning back in her chair, she hit refresh on her emails waiting for the last of the receipts to come in so she could get the expenses done for the team.

The problem was she was terrified of dredging up her past. She had told Mason the truth, but that didn't mean she wanted to stir things up and risk Spears rekindling old acquaintances. She had played down how dangerous the man was and feared what could happen if Mason got involved.

Cleo knew she would always look over her shoulder. Jeffrey Spears had seen to that. He was convinced she'd make the perfect wife for him. It was the real reason she had run. She remembered clearly hearing Spears discussing it with her parents, and them agreeing to it like she was cattle and not their only child, had sickened her. At that moment, her mother had ceased to exist.

Distraught, she had run to the only person she knew would help her—her grandmother. She had hidden her, lied to her only son until the time came when she couldn't anymore, and then she had given Cleo everything she had and forced her away to start a new life, even at the risk of her own. What would Spears do if he knew her grandmother had helped her flee? Spears had seemed to forget about the older woman's existence, and Cleo prayed it stayed that way. It was one of the

reasons she'd left Mesa. The risk of bumping into Spears or his followers was too high, and it placed her nana in a dangerous position.

If Mason went looking for Jeffrey Spears, it would only help Spears find her. She loved this job and didn't want to have to leave it to protect them and herself. There was a chance Spears had all but forgotten about her, but Cleo knew better.

The agency was the first place she'd felt she could be herself. She could dress how she liked, be who she was without fear, but more than that, for the first time she had real friends. People she could talk to, get drunk with, confide in, and if he found her, she would have to give all that up. Her stalker meant business she knew that, and she had no clue why he was targeting her. Her conscious mind was aware it was probably random, Jeffrey Spears would never go to these lengths. He would simply snatch her—he wouldn't try and scare her.

Her email pinged, and she saw the last email from James come through. The man was a flirt, and a manwhore, it was no wonder he was nicknamed Romeo. He wasn't only that, but also an absolute sweetheart as a friend. She couldn't wait for the day some woman took him down. Her lips tipped into a grin at the thought as she got to work sorting the expenses for the team.

It wasn't her job, but she found it easier to do it this way than try and go through a load of different reports and collate them. Her head was down as she concentrated, the door and outside gate were locked at Shane's demand, and Killian was asleep across the doorway. The big, handsome brute looked terrifying but was as soft as a marshmallow.

She looked at the door to the conference room, wondering how long they would be inside. She had been avoiding Mason and was feeling bad for it. He was in an impossible position, put there by her. She should apologize, no scratch that, she should be honest with him, but she wasn't quite ready to tell him her dirty truth.

What did it say about her worth as a person that her parents were willing to sell her like livestock? She could make it up to him, though.

As if by a twist of fate, she saw a UPS truck pull up just outside the gate and stop. She hadn't ordered any office supplies so it must be her lingerie and she hit the button to open the gate and let him in. Half of her wanted to rush to the door and open it, accepting the delivery before the others could see it but the sane part, the part terrified of snakes, held back.

The last package she had gotten had been the snakes, and she wasn't willing to risk it. Walking to the door, she recognized Stan, their usual driver, and waved. He grinned and returned her greeting as he stepped into the back of the van. Cleo hesitated unsure what to do until she saw him jump down with a Victoria's Secret bag in his hand.

Her cheeks went pink, and she quickly unlocked the door to take the parcel from him. Killian slipped past her, and sniffed Stan before wagging his tail at him and bolting back inside.

"Thanks, Stan." Stan stepped inside, handing her the form to sign. Once signed, she grabbed the bag, placing it behind her desk quickly before going back to him.

"No problem, Miss Cleo." Stan tipped his hat as he left to get back in his truck. Stan was a retired long-haul driver, who couldn't get retirement to stick. He enjoyed driving but not long journeys anymore. His job with UPS was perfect for him.

Closing the door on the Miami heat, Cleo bent to pick up a flyer that had dropped from the parcel. She stood and nearly screamed, her heart pounding in her chest as she laid a hand across her throat, feeling like an idiot. Rushing to the door, she smiled at the man on the other side of the glass who looked at her like she was one step down from the crazy farm. "Travis, you made me jump!" She ushered him in.

"Sorry, Cleo, being light on my feet is ingrained in me these days. I forget I do it until I make people jump."

“No, it’s fine, you’d think I’d be used to it, working here. They are all, well mostly all, built like linebackers with the toes of ballerinas,” Cleo said making Travis laugh.

He was handsome, blond, blue eyes, trimmed beard, obviously physically fit. In another life, she would have been deeply attracted to him, but that was before Mason.

“You here to see Mason?” She moved back behind her desk as the door to the conference room opened.

“Yes, I just wanted to see if he had time to grab a drink. I have a case I could do with his advice on.”

“Well, here’s the man himself.” Cleo gestured as Mason walked toward her with a frown.

“Didn’t we talk about not opening the door?”

Mason was angry. Feeling her cheeks heat like a child at the reprimanded, Cleo bit her tongue on her response, knowing his concern came from a good place. “I’m aware of that, but as it was your friend, I figured it was okay.”

Mason ignored Travis as he moved toward her and slipped his arm around her waist, hauling her close. The air left her as she hit his hard chest and the arms around her tightened.

“That must have hurt?” His question made her frown as she looked up at him.

“What?”

“Biting your tongue and not ripping me a new one.”

Cleo felt the smile tinge her lips. “Jerk.” But she laughed.

“Yeah, I am.” He dipped his head and kissed her hard and fast. It lasted only a second and wasn’t exactly passionate, but it left her reeling. Mason released her and walked toward Travis. “Travis,” he said, holding out his hand to greet him. “What brings you here?”

“I wondered if you had time to get lunch. I wanted to pick your brain about the case I’m on. Get a different perspective.”

Mason glanced at her and Cleo knew he wanted to talk.

“Go, we can talk at home tonight,” she said softly, and something about the way she said it must have relaxed him because she saw his shoulders lose the tension in them.

“Okay, I shouldn’t be too long,” he said to her and then turned to Travis. “I’ll grab my phone and meet you outside.”

“Thanks, Mace.” Travis waved at Cleo and walked away.

Cleo wanted to clear the air but now wasn’t the time especially as Mercy walked in and had some extra things to add to her expense report at the last minute.

FOR THE REST of the afternoon she was kept busy with end-of-the-month stuff. Mason came back two hours after he left and gave her a smile and a wink, which made her heart beat faster as he went to his office. The day was uneventful, just how she liked it, but she couldn’t shake the feeling this was the calm before the storm. Her gaze went to Mason’s closed door, and she prayed he found her stalker soon, she hated living like this.

It was late afternoon when Caitlin came rushing in screaming, her eyes wild, tears streaming down her face, Killian limp in her arms. “Someone help me!”

“Oh my god, what happened?” Cleo rounded her desk as office doors flung open.

“I just found him like this. I think it’s poison. I need to call my dad.” Caitlin’s parents were both vets, which was where she got her love of animals from.

“Let me. You stay with Killian.” Cleo dashed to her desk as Cain fell to his knees beside Caitlin.

Cleo made the call and was told to take Killian straight to the vets, Caitlin’s dad would meet her there. Cain helped a clearly upset Caitlin to the car and went with her as the rest of them stayed behind to worry.

Mason moved behind her and curled his arm around her. Cleo turned to him and inhaled the scent of the man who had become her anchor. “Do you think he’ll be okay?”

“I hope so!” She knew he was trying to be honest.

Her email pinged, and she pulled away to answer it. Rounding the desk, she opened the email and felt bile roll up her throat at the contents.

YOU DID THIS, BITCH!

A picture of Killian was attached.

It's my fault.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE ENTIRE AGENCY WAS ON HIGH ALERT AS ANOTHER ONE OF its members had been attacked. Killian was more than a simple working dog, and every available agent had been called in for support.

Like everybody else, Mason knew a significant shift had happened, something that turned what would normally be a minor threat into an emergency.

Just after Caitlin had raced Killian to the vet, with Cain accompanying her, everyone had made sure to secure the premises and search for anything that could have affected Killian in any way—scraps of food, liquid on the floor, anything the dog could have accessed and ingested.

However, everybody knew Killian had too much training to touch anything without his mistress's consent. When and how had he been poisoned?

At the same time, Wolf and Alex were working on the computer side of things, trying to find out where the email had come from. The initial assessment made both men frown, meaning it would take some time.

Cleo, the trooper she was, remained at the agency too, but Mason could see how broken she was. It was obvious she was riddled with guilt. He wished he could whisk her away and make her forget everything, but there was too much work to do, and nobody would move until they had news from Caitlin.

Returning to his office, Mason was distracted by his cell phone buzzing in his vest. Making sure to close his door, he

saw it was Mercy.

“Hey! You alone?”

That question didn't bode well for Mason. “Yeah. I'm in my office with the door closed.”

“I heard about Killian. Any news yet?”

“No, nothing. I'll call you as soon as I have information.”

“Thanks. I wasn't calling about that, though. I found Spears and he's in Miami.”

Everything in Mason went still before rage slowly took over his body. Only experience and logic made him keep his head when everything wanted to punch the man who'd put fear in the young Cleo. “Where is he?”

“He's at Mercy Hospital. I'm really starting to hate the name of that hospital.”

That wasn't something he expected to hear. “How come?”

“Spears isn't here as a patient but came with his sister. She's having treatment for some kind of cardiac problem. I still need to investigate. I don't know yet if it's a cover or if Spears even knows Cleo is here. I'm going to hang around until visiting hours are over and follow him. See where he's staying. I'll keep you updated.”

“Want me to come to you, Mercy?”

“No need for now. I'll follow him at a distance. If he does anything stupid, gets close to your apartment, Cleo's place, or the agency, we'll know.”

Mason would have preferred being in the middle of the action, but he understood it wasn't needed for now. “Okay, call for back-up if you need it and send me pictures of the man. I want to know what he looks like. And why he chose Miami to treat his sister.”

“I've already sent everything to Malco. Mercy is renowned for its cardiac surgery, but the coincidence doesn't jive for me. Malco will do some research on that and join me later. Better to have two sets of eyes in this case.”

His anger took a step back as he realized Mercy had everything under control. "Thanks, Mercy."

When they disconnected, Mason took a few deep breaths, calming himself. He had to stay in control of himself, if only for Cleo's protection. Shaking his head, he was ready to jump back into other parts of the investigation when running footsteps came from the main hall. Hand on his gun, ready for anything, Mason opened his door to see Shane and Emme, as well as the rest of the team, crowded around Cleo's desk.

The violet head turning to look at him reassured Mason instantly. She came to his side and linked her fingers with his. It was the first time she'd come to him willingly, especially when the other members of the team were around.

Shane spoke. "I've heard from Caitlin. Killian has been stabilized, but he had indeed been poisoned. The vet told her it's not a current product, so we've asked him to get a blood sample and send it to a lab I know. We should get the results soon."

Cleo's hand jerked in his grasp before tightening. "It's my fault."

Shane reacted before Mason could open his mouth. "Cleo, stop it. You didn't poison, Killian. Some asshole did, one who thinks he has power over you and can hurt you. Don't ever blame yourself again. You have an entire team that cares about you and has your back. Killian included."

Cleo relaxed a bit as the other people present in the room stepped closer in silent agreement. Wolf smiled and winked at her. "And you take care of the money. That makes you the most important and feared member of our team."

Alex rolled his eyes, elbowing him, but everyone laughed, which defused the intense situation.

Shane shook his head as he addressed the team once more. "I want each of you to be extra careful. We're not certain where the threat is coming from yet. James, I want you to go to the clinic too. Killian isn't being released yet, and Caitlin is staying with him. Cain will need back-up. As for the rest of

you, go home and rest. It's been a long day, and we need fresh eyes in the morning. Mason, before you leave, can I have a word?"

Emme went to Cleo as Wolf and Alex disappeared into the conference room with the others. Mason winked at Cleo before following Shane into his office.

His boss was curt and to the point. "Any news on your front?"

Mason sighed. "I'm running something on the side. Mercy is on it with Malco. I don't know if it's a solid lead or not, but it's a potential threat from Cleo's past. Otherwise, Alex and Wolf are on the computer side of things. Speaking of computers, boss, we need somebody with better skills to help. We manage, but it's taking us way more time than it should."

Shane nodded. "I'm looking for someone, a specialist, but it's not easy. We need to trust that person with our lives, and hackers are flighty and dangerous. If we include one in our team, they have to be the best without any shadows in their past that could become a threat."

Mason couldn't agree more, but it meant in the meantime, they had to make do with what they had.

"I'm assigning Nick and King to your building. And before you say it's unnecessary, Nick's already found a couple of entry points that may be problematic. It's only an extra precaution so you can focus on the investigation and protecting Cleo. It's non-negotiable."

Mason nodded. He wasn't about to turn down help or any advantage he could get until he knew without a doubt who was threatening the woman in his life.

MASON HAD BEEN silent the moment he'd left Shane's office, as if his mind was processing too many things, like an overheated computer.

Cleo wasn't dumb, the way he'd closed up meant he was on to something, and she noticed him looking at her, opening

his mouth as if to speak before stopping himself.

Distracted, he informed her about having Kingsley and Nicholas on security duty, looking around until they were safely locked inside his apartment. Even then, his attention went straight to his phone. Something was going on, and she wanted to know what it was.

Leaving him to his calls, Cleo went to the bathroom and turned the shower on. The blistering water was heaven and helped her clear her head. From the moment the stalker had attacked her, Mason had become her protector. But he had still been open with her, telling her about the investigation. Until this morning. It wasn't much of a stretch to guess the reason why. He was an investigator, every piece of information he had, everything he suspected could link to her stalker, he would use to keep her safe, and that included the information about Jeffrey Spears.

Cleo realized she still feared the man, but even more now that Mason had become such an essential part of her life. Until now, until him, she hadn't had anything to lose.

Every time they were together, Mason inched his way deeper under her skin and inside her heart, in a way she'd never thought she'd be lucky enough to experience.

Almost disappointed he hadn't joined her in the shower, Cleo dried herself as her eyes fell on her bag. There could be a way to make him take a break. Brushing her hair until it shone, she put on a green satin slip adorned with black lace and looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. The color was bright and despite her initial reluctance, went perfectly with her hair. It gave her a fae, almost ethereal, look. With the fluttering of satin caressing her body, she opened the door and followed the sound of Mason's voice still on the phone.

Most of the lights in the apartment were out, and he had drawn the curtains over the windows. Mason was on his phone, pacing and nodding, and for a moment she watched him as she stood in the corner out of his line of sight.

He had removed his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt over his thick forearms. He still sported his holster,

and that gave him an air of danger she rarely saw in him. He often smiled at her, but when he was deep in an investigation, it was as if he had a different persona. His intensity made her skin burn. He finished his call and turned, his eyes finding hers and it was like he'd been punched in the gut. His entire body came to a halt and tensed, his eyes turning to embers as he detailed her body.

Heart jumping, Cleo smiled, and without a word, she turned and swayed her hips as she walked toward his bedroom.

As she hoped he would, he followed her. She was turning on the lamp on the nightstand when the door clicked closed, making her heart race with excitement.

Slowly pivoting to face him, she saw Mason leaning against it. "I thought you'd like to see some of the lingerie you paid for." Looking down, she cupped her breasts before letting her hands slide over the shiny fabric in the soft light. "It fits nicely, don't you think?"

When she glanced at the man before her, it was evident her teasing was getting to him.

"I think you look like a fucking fantasy and I'm afraid to wake up."

Cleo moved closer and put her palms over his heaving chest. "Maybe you're right; maybe this is only in your head. So, just for the sake of discussion, what would I do in this dream of yours?" She let her hands drag down over his stomach until she hooked her fingers over his belt buckle. "No suggestions? I have an idea or two if you don't."

Before he could react, she fell to her knees and undid his pants before pushing them down. His erection bobbed up and with a wink, Cleo licked him from root to tip. The shudder that shook his body made her squeeze her thighs together. Lavishing him with her tongue as he grew harder, Cleo switched it up and swallowed the length of him before he could react.

Mason's voice echoed in the room as he cursed, and his hands fisted in her hair. "Look at me, Cleo." The demand was

terse, his voice gravelly, making her instantly comply. She'd noticed how his English accent got stronger the closer his emotions were to the surface.

Her eyes didn't leave him as she lost herself in him. His grip on her hair stayed gentle, only supporting her head as she started to suck. Her hands ran over his legs, enjoying his body, caressing the skin and muscles within reach, even sliding her palm over his abs.

Eyes hooded, full of lust, his body moved to the same rhythm as her mouth.

Determined to make him see stars, she swirled her tongue over him, sensing the speeding pulse, but Mason had another plan in mind. Before she could react, he pulled her up, and taking her in his arms, he tossed her on the bed. Giggling, Cleo bounced as Mason shed his clothes at lightning speed. Gloriously naked, with the expression of a man on a mission, he towered over her with such intensity, she started to slide back, her core tightening in expectation.

Mason grabbed her ankle and pulled her forward. "You're not going anywhere." And with his other hand, he pushed the satin slip over her thighs.

Cleo was caught in his hungry stare, widening her legs in a plea, her hips undulating on their own. He'd only touched her foot, and she was ready to combust.

Once more, he pulled her toward the edge of the bed, lifting her legs up. She shivered knowing nothing was between them. At first, she thought he would just take her, but his hand started tracing her sex. The touch was light, way too light for her, more of a tickle before he traced her entrance. "You're so wet, so warm. Is it for me, Cleo?" Nodding, Cleo tried once more to push her hips up, silently begging. "Take it off. I want to be the only one touching you tonight."

Mason continued to caress and tease her as she wiggled to remove the slip. As she stretched to pass it over her head, his fingers started circling her clit, and she cried out.

“Yes, you’re my fantasy right here on this bed. You can’t imagine how many times I took myself in hand in the shower, here and at Alliance, thinking of you like this. I couldn’t think straight I was so entranced by you, Cleo.”

“Mason, please. Please.”

He shook his head, but at the same time, inserted one digit inside her, and then another. “Is that better?” he asked as he gently fucked her with his fingers.

In a tornado of lust, Cleo swallowed hard before speaking. “I want you, Mason. I want your cock deep inside me.”

His jaw clenched for a moment, his erection pulsing until he bent down and took out a condom from his pants. In record time, he sheathed himself and poised his tip at her entrance. Cleo was so twisted with desire, and unable to wait she wrapped her hand around him, trying to take control. Mason smiled, licking his lips as he indulged her by pushing himself just inside her.

Cleo was on the verge of losing any sanity she had left when he finally impaled her. The movement was swift, stretching her in the most satisfying way. Her vision blurred when Mason hooked her legs over his shoulders. Her hands cupped her breasts, pinching her sensitive nipples in order to alleviate the pressure building inside her.

His hips pistoned into her with increasing speed, and it was too much and not enough at the same time. Mason took advantage of her vulnerable position and ran his thumb around her clit a few times before pinching it with his fingers. It was like her body became electrified, and she cried out as pleasure took over her.

Mason didn’t slow down and let go of her legs to cover her body, lapping at her breast before covering her mouth in a searing kiss.

Her legs locked in the small of his back, her hands all over his sweaty skin and she felt another wave of pleasure swelling before she’d even come down off the first one. It was madness, unleashed control in a way that suited her perfectly.

Having Mason out of control in her arms, nipping and sucking, grabbing her hips and arms in bruising strength, revealing how much he wanted her was paradise. She felt him slam his cock over and over again inside her, clearly on the verge of losing control himself. The tight coil of pleasure broke, and she screamed his name. Mason's muscular body tensed and bowed over her as he let himself fall into his own orgasm.

Lungs burning, muscles screaming, and every cell of her body flooded with deep satisfaction, Cleo welcomed his relaxing body into her embrace, burying her nose into his tousled black hair. Surrounded by his scent and comforted by his strength, Cleo's body softened until the world vanished around her, and she forgot everything but Mason as tiredness finally pulled her under.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MASON HAD HIT A COMPLETE DEAD END. SINCE THE ATTACK ON Killian, the last few days had been quiet. Killian was now home with a very protective and vigilant Caitlin looking after him. They still had no idea where the poison had come from, the only positive being that Killian couldn't have ingested much or things would be very different right now.

The lead with Spears was slow. Either the man was innocent, which he didn't believe, or he was a smart fuck. Mercy had reported he hadn't left the hospital except to go back to his hotel and sleep. They couldn't account for his whereabouts during the attacks on Cleo though. The fact he was now quiet and so was the stalker was not lost on him or Mercy. Mercy was going to continue her surveillance on the man until they were satisfied he wasn't a threat.

The only good thing was Cleo. She was more than he had ever hoped for, sweet, funny, kind, beautiful, and sexy as fuck. She responded to him as if she'd been made especially for him and the sex was off the charts, better than he'd ever thought possible, it was like a religious experience. He had known he liked her a lot and had been half in love with her for the last year, but now there was no hiding the fact she meant more to him than he could have imagined she would.

He had never felt like this about someone. He wanted to be with her all the time, touching her, laughing with her, talking about unimportant crap with her. She had lightened up around him and seemed to be taking their relationship at home and

work in her stride. She wasn't hiding what they were, and the team hadn't batted an eyelid.

When everything cleared up though he would speak with Shane and Emme and make sure it was okay with them. If it wasn't, well, he would have to cross that bridge when he came to it. He didn't want to give up this job, he fit here, the team, the flexibility all of it suited him, and he enjoyed it, but he wasn't giving up Cleo for anyone or anything.

The door to his office opened, and Kingsley Knight poked his head inside. "You have a minute?" The other British operative looked dead serious.

"Yeah, of course, come on in." Mason waved him inside.

Kingsley took the seat opposite him and leaned back, crossing his arms over his midsection.

"What can I do for you?" He and Kingsley had gotten on well since the first meeting. They were very different, but in some ways very alike. Mason figured the things they had in common was due to them both being English. Kingsley was more relaxed than he was, less of a stickler for things, but both were self-assured enough to know what they wanted. Kingsley had met his wife Sydney, on the first case Alliance had done. The same one which had almost gotten him killed. Mason didn't hold a grudge though, far from it. He thought a lot of Sydney and she and Kingsley were perfect for each other.

"You and Cleo, hey? I can't say it surprises anyone. Do you know she sat by your bed 24/7 when you were stabbed? Mercy and Caitlin had to bring her food and changes of clothes."

Mason sucked in a breath. He hadn't known that. She had visited a few times as had the others, but she'd never let on. "No, I didn't." He wondered what Kingsley was leading up to.

"Knew then she was in love with you. I suspected it before, you two spark off each other like water and lightning." Kingsley smirked. "I still remember that time she walked in on you in the locker room. I think it was the event that confirmed it all."

“I’m not sure we’re there yet,” Mason said doubtfully.

Kingsley smiled and shook his head. “Oh you are, you’re just fighting it. Listen, that’s not what I came here to say.”

Mason quirked his head. “So what did you want to say?”

“I like Cleo. She’s strong and clever and puts on a mask of strength like armor. But she has a vulnerability about her, and I don’t want to see her get hurt.” Kingsley left the sentence hanging, his meaning clear.

King was giving Mason the big brother talk in lieu of her not having her own. Mason’s instinct was to bristle, but he tamped it down as he realized how much the team loved her. She was one of theirs, and nobody wanted to see her hurt. He liked that, and as much as part of him wanted to tell King to mind his own fucking business, he didn’t. “I appreciate you want to look out for her, but there’s no need. Cleo means a lot to me. She means everything, and I would rather die than hurt her.”

Mason watched a grin break out on Kingsley’s face. “You love her.”

“As I said, I don’t know if we’re there yet, but we’re building something,” Mason hedged not ready to admit what he felt to anyone, even himself.

“You love her.” Kingsley chuckled as he stood. “Good for you, man. You two are good together and if you get any shit from Shane and Emme, remind them how they met.” And on that statement, he strode to the door. “Shout if you need any backup,” Kingsley said as he closed the door behind him leaving Mason with as many questions as he had answers.

CLEO FACED EMME, Caitlin and Sydney. “I’m not sure how Mason will feel about us taking over his apartment.”

“Come on. We’ll clear up afterward. It’s only the four of us, a few drinks, some nibbles, maybe Magic Mike on the TV.” Caitlin wiggled her eyebrows at the last suggestion.

“Yeah, come on. We all need to relax after the last few days and what better way than half-naked men and alcohol.” Emme grinned and licked her lips.

“Ha, says you, who has her own Magic Mike at home,” Caitlin teased.

Emme’s eyes went dreamy. “Shane *is* impressive.”

Cleo put her hands over her ears. “Nope, not listening. That’s my boss you’re talking about.”

Sydney giggled and gave Cleo a sideways look. “Pfft, you have your own Magic Mike now anyway.” Sydney had come a long way in the last few months. She was still shy in some ways, but she was a world away from the damaged woman they had met.

“Yeah, let’s talk about you and Mason.”

Cleo blushed at Caitlin’s words. “Not, here someone will hear you.”

“Fine, we’ll meet you at Mason’s place tonight.” Caitlin pumped her fist triumphantly.

Cleo knew when she was beaten and laughed. “Fine, but you bring the wine. Now go, I have work to do, even if you don’t.”

Cleo looked up as Shane poked his head around his office door and called to her. “Cleo, can I have a word please?” He eyed the other women, his fiancée included, with suspicion. “What are you lot up to? You look like a coven of witches planning a spell.”

“Did you just call me a witch, Shane Rhodes?” Emme scolded.

Shane walked closer and hooked his arm her around the waist, bringing her into his body. He bent down and whispered in her ear, making the gorgeous British operative blush prettily before kissing her cheek tenderly and letting her go. “You got a sec now, Cleo?” Shane looked at her as the others dispersed, Emme with a dreamy look on her face.

Cleo could well understand how Emme had fallen for Shane. He had a dark, sexy, brooding vibe that was hard to resist. Cleo nodded as she followed her boss into his office, wondering what he wanted.

“Take a seat.” He walked toward his desk and sat in his chair.

Her heart began to hammer as nerves set in. Was she in trouble for getting involved with Mason? “What’s up, Shane?” Her voice remained calm, not betraying her emotional state.

“I wanted to check in with you and make sure you were okay? A lot has happened the last week or so and I know it must be hard.”

Cleo felt relief flooding her system at his words. “I’m okay. Everyone has been wonderful looking after me, and I know it costs money to go after this stalker and take people off paying jobs—”

Shane cut her off and raised his hand. “Don’t! You’re one of us, and we protect our own. Someone comes after you, they come after us all. That’s how this team works. We’re family. We fight, we annoy each other, but we stick together and have each other’s backs. That said, I need you to know when I take someone on, I do detailed background checks on them.”

Cleo felt her throat clog, knowing he knew her secret.

“It makes no difference to me, Cleo. We all have a past, things we’d rather not tell anyone, and I don’t blame you, but you need to tell Mason. Don’t tie his hands and watch him fail. He cares about you. We all do, and if there’s any chance this is connected, you need to be upfront with him.”

“I understand.” Her voice was almost a whisper.

“I haven’t said anything yet, but you need to and if you don’t, I will. I won’t have one of my people hurt because I was protecting your pride or privacy. Have some faith, Cleo. None of the team will judge you for it, I certainly don’t. But if you hide this and something happens... Let me tell you, you won’t forgive yourself—ever!” With that, he squeezed her shoulder and left his office to give her a minute to get herself together.

He and Emme had known all along and not said a word. Standing, she walked back to her desk and began to work as she let the mundane jobs calm her whirring brain. Her mind repeatedly went to Mason as she worked through her list of tasks.

The last few days had been effortless; they gelled as if they had been together for years, but the constant buzz from everything being new and exciting fizzed up every time she saw him or heard his voice. The timing sucked! She had a madman wanting to do god knew what to her, they worked together. More than that she hadn't been honest with him.

She knew she needed to tell him the truth about Spears and her past. Secrets would only fester and poison what they had started and she didn't want that. Her instincts told her Mason was already following that lead anyway. A part of that made her angry at him for going behind her back, but the more rational part knew she had left him no choice. If the boot was on the other foot, would she have gone behind his back to protect him from someone who wanted to see him harmed? She thought back to the night she had spent by his bedside when he'd been stabbed and lost nearly half the blood in his body. It had been so close. They had performed CPR on him until they had gotten him into the operating room.

She had been so sure she was going to lose him, and they hadn't even been more than colleagues although Cleo thought perhaps she'd known Mason was special from the minute they had met.

His dark assessing eyes had traveled over her when Emme introduced her, and she had felt a tremor of awareness like never before. Her body had recognized it even before her conscious mind had taken notice.

Would she have gone behind his back to stop the stabbing that had nearly ended his life? Without a shadow of a doubt, she would have. To expect him to do anything else was wrong of her. They needed to talk, but first, she needed some time to get her thoughts together about what she would say and what better way to do that than spend some girly time with her friends.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MASON SAW CLEO FUSS AROUND HIS APARTMENT WHILE SHE waited for her friends to arrive. When she'd asked him if she could have Caitlin, Emme, and Sydney around for the evening, she'd almost seemed shy, hesitant, which he'd found endearing. However, he was quick to reassure her that his apartment was hers, and she could have her friends over anytime she liked.

The way she smiled and kissed him warmed his heart, and he thought it was maybe another step in their journey together, and he liked it a lot. Cleo walked past him to check the food she had purchased on the way home when he caught her by the waist.

“Don't! I'm not done yet, and the girls will be arriving any minute.”

Ignoring her, Mason closed his arms and took her mouth. She tasted like heaven. When she sighed, and her lips parted, he was unable to help himself and slid his tongue inside her waiting mouth. He was amazed to see how she responded, her hands sliding over his arms to hook around his shoulders. Her breasts pressed against his chest, igniting lust in his blood. He cupped her ass, ready to take her once more when an insistent knock at the door cut its way through the desire.

The sound made him growl in her mouth, and Cleo giggled. She stepped back, untangling herself from his hold, but not before giving him another peck on the cheek. “You made me forget where I was for a moment, Mason Bentley, and that's dangerous.” She went to the door, and he

disappeared into the bathroom for a minute, as he couldn't greet them with an erection.

When he looked at his face in the mirror, Mason cursed at himself. He was acting like a damn teenager, and that was unlike him. Since he'd met Cleo, he'd had to deal with his swirling emotions and the constant need to be with her and protect her.

Kingsley had said he loved her. Was that it? He'd been so involved in his career and his investigations, he hadn't thought much about settling down. He'd had women in his life, but none that provoked those feelings and certainly not to this level.

Feminine laughter seeped through the door, and he smiled, enjoying the sound of her pleasure in any form. Now relatively calm and presentable, he made his way out to greet the women.

They were by the counter where Cleo was pouring wine. Killian was already comfortably installed on a pile of blankets in the corner. Mason suspected that he would be cuddled a lot over the next few hours.

Sydney came to him to kiss his cheek. He liked her a lot and was happy she and Kingsley had found each other. She was courageous, fearless, and dedicated, despite all she had been through. A weaker person would have broken down never to rise again, but not Sydney.

“How is your wound?”

At the concern in her voice, he smiled to reassure her. “It's scarring well. Some pull, but nothing that won't disappear with time.”

Cleo frowned. “You never told me it was giving you problems.”

Mason winked at her. “Nothing dire. Another scar added to my count.”

Sydney turned somber. “One you wouldn't have if not for me.”

Mason shook his head. “One I wouldn’t have survived without you, Syd.”

Her smile returned. It was wrong to think Sydney was responsible for him being wounded on duty. It was the nature of the job. “Okay, so I’ll leave you ladies to whatever ceremony you’re about to undertake and be back later.”

Before he could move, Cleo grabbed his hand. “You’re leaving?”

It was said in a dismissive tone, but her energy and posture said something different. Ignoring the gentle teasing of the women present, Mason brought her hand to his lips and kissed her palm. “King and Nick are checking the perimeter. Cain and James will relieve them later tonight. Caitlin and Emme will remain with you until I get back.”

“And where are you going?”

“Shane wants to talk to me. And I want to bounce some ideas around with him. Enjoy yourself, have fun, just don’t torch the apartment.”

Cleo rolled her eyes as Sydney, Emme, and Caitlin burst out laughing.

With a last wink at her, Mason closed the door behind him.

NIGHT HAD DESCENDED over the city as Mason stepped out of his apartment building. A warm wind blew, dispersing some of the humidity he disliked so much. Kingsley and Nicholas were nowhere to be seen, but he knew they kept as discreet and invisible as possible, ready for anything or anybody.

Shane was leaning against his car. He’d obviously driven Emme and Sydney to the girls’ night. Caitlin’s car was parked a couple of spots down the street. “I bet that that wine bottle was open before you even got out the door.”

Mason grinned. “Yeah. I’m glad they organized this. Cleo needs the distraction. She still feels responsible for what happened to Killian and bringing the threat to the Agency.”

Shane nodded. “I know. I talked to her earlier, but it’s difficult to convince her of the opposite. And speaking of Killian, I’ve got news on that front. I sent his blood sample to be analyzed, and he was poisoned with a derivative of a congestive heart medication. Quite easy to find if you know where to look, but the most interesting part is, it’s not a pill, but a spray. On humans, it’s sprayed in the mouth. We suspect that for Killian, it was sprayed on his fur, and then he licked it.”

Mason considered his boss’s words. “Someone sprayed it on him. Could that have been done by accident?”

Shane shook his head. “Not according to the concentration level found in his blood sample. And what’s even more problematic is that this product can remain active after being sprayed for quite some time. So it’s difficult to know the exact moment it happened.”

“Has Caitlin been told? Has she given Killian a bath?”

Shane nodded. “As soon as he was discharged from the vet, Caitlin bathed and groomed him, so he’s fine now. I’ll tell her about it tomorrow. I wanted her to have a break before being thrown into it again. She’s barely slept since it happened.”

Mason couldn’t agree more. “So there’s no way to know when the attack happened.”

Shane shrugged. “I asked Caitlin to retrace her steps for the two days prior. Alex and Wolf are looking into it, trying to check cameras or possible feeds, but I wouldn’t count on them finding anything significant. It’s a long shot.”

“Maybe I can help you with that long shot. Do you remember that lead I was looking into? I think we need to consider it a valid threat now.” Mason told his boss all he knew about Spears. He would have liked talking to Cleo first, but her safety came before her pride. “That’s why I don’t think Spears appearing at a nearby hospital with his sister suffering from a heart condition and Killian being poisoned by a medication related to that condition is a coincidence.”

Shane's expression turned dark. "I agree with you, but we don't have tangible proof Spears has gone anywhere other than the hospital or his hotel. So far, Mercy and Malco haven't seen any suspicious behavior from him."

Mason wasn't convinced. "He could have an accomplice."

Shane nodded when he took out his buzzing cell phone. One quick look was enough for Mason to see that something was wrong when he reached back for his gun. Mason automatically reached for his own gun.

"Message from Nick. Someone is lurking in the shadows behind the building. Kingsley is on the lookout too."

In an instant, the warm night turned into a heated situation.

Shane gestured for Mason to circle the building on the right as he took a left. There were a lot of bushes and trees in the neighborhood, and the buildings and houses were close—too close. Whoever was out there could quickly disappear. Or hide in the shadows, ready to strike.

Trying his best to remain in the dark, while his eyes ceaselessly scanned around him, Mason was at the ready. Maybe it was nothing, but perhaps it was the threat that was after Cleo.

Adrenaline spiking in his blood, Mason decided to widen his search area and go around the house beside the apartment building. The house had a hedge down the side, and the faint wind rustled the leaves, making it even more challenging to see movement.

As he approached the hedge, he saw Kingsley's tall figure several yards away, coming into the light before disappearing again.

Maybe it was a false alarm. Mason hoped so as he continued checking for a while. He was ready to return to the front of the building and meet up with the others, when something caught his attention. It may have been his imagination, but his gut pushed him to check the flutter of darkness on the other side of the house.

There was no time to call anybody on the team as he silently walked toward the side of the house, his eyes never leaving the point where he'd seen something appear then vanish. Careful not to be seen by the occupants of the home, he left his gun down along his thigh but was ready to use it if need be.

As he rounded the corner, his fingers twitched over his gun, prepared for anything, but there was nothing there.

The night remained calm, eerily so. Relaxing a bit, Mason went to turn around when a distinct figure shifted back in the shadows nearby. The clear sound of running footsteps fading away spurred him into action.

Sprinting around the second house, he saw a hooded figure, definitely male, running away. It was Cleo's stalker without a doubt, and that pushed him to run even faster.

The stalker wasn't running in a straight line, dashing between the houses, turning sharply into a garden before jumping through a small, broken fence. This man knew the area well, meaning he had walked it, analyzed it. At the realization, rage flared inside Mason.

At another turn, Mason pushed his body harder, gaining on the shadow until he took another sharp turn. Mason was so close; he swore he could hear the man's breath. Preparing to attack, Mason became airborne as the stalker surprised him and his gun skittered away as he hit the ground.

Training took over, making him roll to his feet, but before he could react, the man punched him on his side, the one still healing from his wound. Mason was almost overwhelmed with the immense pain as he struggled to stay conscious and fight back.

He struggled back to his feet, dots dancing in front of his eyes as he hugged his side. His first clear view was the back of the stalker as he ran away.

"Mason!"

Kingsley was running toward him, but Mason just pointed where the stalker disappeared. Kingsley continued in that

direction, and soon Shane was by his side.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” The answer sounded hoarse as he finally stood up fully and looked for his gun. Picking it up, he headed back to his building.

“Was he the stalker?” Shane looked around as he walked by his side.

“I wish I knew. That fucker punched me right on my wound.” As he said the words, he looked at his hand and was glad to see his scar had held up, although it still hurt like a bitch. “Strong punch, but not as strong as I expected from a man of that size.”

Mason was glad to see that James and Cain were still in position as he would have hated to have Cleo without a guard, although two lethal ladies were inside with her.

It didn’t take long for Kingsley to run back to them. “Didn’t catch sight of him. He just vanished. You okay, man?”

Mason nodded. “Yeah. Just bad luck he punched me in the very spot that could take me down.”

As they approached the front entrance, Cain and James disappeared to the back of the building, resuming surveillance.

“Call Mercy. Get her to confirm Spears is still in his hotel room.” Mason knew from Mercy’s pictures and description, tonight’s stalker was similar in build and size to Spears.

As Shane waited for an answer, Kingsley turned to him. “You want to tell the women inside? Cleo?”

Mason shook his head. “No, let them have their night off, there’s nothing to be done right now, and I doubt the stalker will return tonight. Also, I think it was more like a poke, testing us, instead of a full attack. You, James, and Cain can continue to keep an eye on the women. In the meantime, I think it’s time I had a little chat with Jeffrey Spears.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MASON WALKED DOWN THE HOSPITAL CORRIDOR PAST THE nurse's station, his stride confident, the flowers in his hands a simple prop. Nobody questioned a person carrying flowers in a hospital, merely assuming he was visiting a relative, even at this time of night. The nature of the ward meant strict visiting times were not enforced. He walked past the room where Spears' sister was being treated and slowed his movements.

The blinds were open, and he could see a much older, petite woman sitting beside the bed holding the hand of a woman who he guessed was her daughter. They had the same shaped face, hair color, and features. It must be Spears' mother. From what he had read in the file Mercy had composed, the mother was not involved in her son's way of life. She and her daughter lived here in Miami.

His eyes were drawn to the corner of the room where Spears himself was sitting in a comfy chair, with his eyes closed. He didn't want to speak to the man in front of his family. Not because he wanted to protect him but because it felt wrong to drag a woman in her seventies and his sick sister into his disgusting business.

Spears may not have morals, but Mason prided himself on being a good person. That wasn't to say he didn't do shady things to get the job done sometimes, but he had a line he wouldn't cross and innocents getting hurt was that line.

Placing the flowers on the chair to his left, he took a seat and decided to wait until Spears left his sister's room. He had to move at some point, and Mason was comfortable in the

knowledge Cleo was safe and busy with the girls. His lips tipped up into a smile as he thought of the violet haired beauty who had turned his world upside down.

Cleo was a beautiful soul, full of life and vibrancy. She loved like she did everything else—with complete, unabashed joy. Her friends had become her family, and she lavished all the love in her heart on them. He was a lucky son of a bitch to have her, and he knew it. His jaw hardened as he thought about the threat to her life. Nobody was going to hurt Cleo on his watch.

The scar on his side ached as he sat hunched on the hard plastic chair. Something about the attack tonight felt off. Had the man known about his injury and targeted it or was it dumb luck? It wouldn't be hard for anyone to find out about it. When the news had leaked about Sydney and her uncle, it had been reported he was injured during the incident.

If whoever was stalking her had looked into him, he would look for a weakness to use against him. It was precisely what he would do in the same position but whoever the attacker was, he hadn't banked on Mason's desire to protect the woman who had burrowed into his heart and set up camp.

The door to room one-sixty opened, and Spears stepped out, stopping when he saw Mason stand.

The two men eyed each other, taking each other's measure before Mason spoke. "Jeffrey Spears."

The man tilted his head; he had long thick grey hair that instead of making him look old, made him look distinguished in a hippy way. His cool blue eyes were bright without any signs of the cannabis he was reputed to smoke. "Who wants to know?"

Mason clenched his jaw, trying to keep control of the anger that was surging through his blood as he stood in front of the man who had effectively stolen Cleo's family from her. And tried to take her innocence and freedom too. "My name is Mason Bentley, and I'd like to ask you a few questions regarding Cleo Darwin." The name moved past his lips, and he wanted to snatch it back as he saw the seedy smile that crossed

the man's features. Every muscle in his body tensed as he saw the light of interest in the man's eyes.

"Now that's a blast from the past. How is my little Cleo?"

Fury was vibrating through him now, and Mason fought for control. "Cleo is not your anything. She is nothing to you, only a memory."

"See, she was, but now you've piqued my interest."

"Listen up, asshole. I know who you are and what sort of sick set-up you have going on." Mason glanced through the window to Spears' sister lying in bed looking weak and frail.

"You came looking for me not the other way around."

"Have you seen Cleo lately?"

Spears shook his head. "Not since I tried to catch up with her in Mesa. We could've had a good life, and her momma misses her, but she made it clear she wasn't interested."

He was lying. Mason could spot a lie easily, but this man was good, and it was subtle, but the tell was there in the way he kept glancing at his sister. He wasn't comfortable with this conversation happening there.

"Do you know where she is now?"

"No. I don't have time to keep track of all my subjects that have flown the nest."

Mason curbed the curl of his lip at the use of the word subject. The man had a god complex, and he had lied again. He knew precisely where Cleo was, but did that make him the man who was stalking her? Mason wasn't sure. Mercy had confirmed he'd been here when the man attacked tonight so was he getting his minions to do it?

That felt off to him; the attacker felt like he was making things personal which didn't jive with getting someone else to do the dirty work.

"Good, keep it that way. If I find out you've even looked up her name on the internet, I *will* come for you and believe

me when I say you do not want that.” Mason glanced at Spears’ sister and mother, meaning clear in his eyes.

Not waiting for the other man to respond, he walked away. He was in the car driving home when he realized he had just threatened innocents. He would never do it—or would he? Was he prepared to sacrifice an innocent woman to protect the woman he had fallen in love with? The answer was simple—yes, he would. He would drag them all down to hell to protect Cleo, and that terrified him, but it was a truth he couldn’t hide from. He loved her with an almost obsessive passion, and for the first time, he knew how King and Shane had felt when the women they loved were threatened.

Parking the car, he took the stairs two at a time, needing to expel some of the energy in his body. When he entered the kitchen, Cleo was clearing up. She looked up, the smile freezing on her lips as he stalked her.

“Where is everyone?”

He saw the question in her eyes, as she seemed to feel the tension emanating from him. She put the plates down and faced him. “They just left. I was just clearing away.”

He reached her and kept walking as she backed up until she was against the wall by the window. “Fuck the dishes.” His hands grasped her wrists, lifting them to the wall behind her head as he pressed his body against hers, pushing his leg between the sweet heat of her thighs. He heard her breath hitch as her eyes became hooded. *Fuck* this woman-owned him.

His mouth crashed down on hers in a kiss that was a claiming, a declaration. She kissed him back, her hands moving over his shoulders and back as he lost himself in her. Cleo rode his hip as he teased her with his mouth. Lifting, he drew her shirt over her head before dipping his head and sucking the peak of her tight nipple into his mouth.

The arch of her neck as she cried out for him and reached for her climax as she writhed against him was the sweetest torture.

“That’s it, Cleo, ride me. Get yourself off.”

His words seemed to flip a switch, and she screamed his name as he quickly undid his zipper and grabbed a condom from his wallet. Everything was a fever pitch; he needed to feel her wet heat around him, squeezing him as he fucked her. Sheathing himself, he hitched her skirt over her hips and not bothering to remove her panties, pushed the fabric aside as he thrust into her. Her eyelids fluttered closed on a moan, as her hands clenched on him.

“Fuck, Cleo, you feel like heaven.”

His words seemed to spur her on because she dragged his head to hers as she kissed him with the same passion. They were perfect together, like she had been made for him. His hips moved as he drove them higher toward the brink, needing the release only she could give him. Her walls fluttered around him, and he knew she was close. With his cock inside her, his mouth sucking on her nipple and his thumb at her clit she came—hard. Screaming and clenching around him as he felt her grip him so tight, he saw stars. Watching her come down was the single most erotic thing he had ever witnessed. Not being able to hold back, he pumped his cock into her as he felt the ripple of his release along his spine, and then he was filling her body with his release.

He felt shredded and euphoric as his climax hit with such power his legs almost gave. He felt her hands cradle his head to her chest as they both fought to catch their breath. Finally, he looked up, wondering if he would see anger for being so rough with her. He instead saw a satisfied smile.

“That, Mason Bentley, was fucking hot.”

Yeah, she was perfect for him, and he would die before he let anyone hurt a hair on her head. “I love you, Cleo.” His voice was tender as he traced her bottom lip. His dick still inside her, still semi-erect.

“Well, I guess that’s good because I love you too.”

His Cleo never failed to amaze him. “Need to deal with this condom, but then I’m going to make love to you in our bed.” He withdrew from her and made sure she was steady before dropping a kiss on her mouth and moving away.

“Mason.”

He turned from the door to the hallway and looked at her.
“Yes, baby?”

Her eyes went soft at the endearment. “I mean it, I love you.”

“I know you do, baby. Now get your ass in bed, I want to make love to you again.”

He chuckled at the eye roll she gave him but watched as she walked toward the bedroom, ignoring the dishes before he closed the bathroom door.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE TEAM WERE ONCE MORE AROUND THE CONFERENCE TABLE. Cleo sat beside Mason, recharged and refueled after sharing around coffees and pastries.

She should be tired after the wild night she spent with Mason, but instead, she had energy to spare. At the memories of how he'd lavished her body until she was a complete mass of quivering pleasure she fought a satisfied smile from forming on her lips. Far from complaining, she nonetheless wondered what had triggered it. Mason was usually more of a seducer, but when he'd entered the apartment, intense hunger had taken over him.

In the early hours of the morning as she lay in his arm's she had told him the entire sordid story about Spears. It had been freeing and he'd held her tight making her feel safe in a way she never had before. She turned to see Emme and Shane entering the room and sitting.

"I see everyone available is here. Malco will join us in a few minutes. Mason, can you do a recap for everyone of what happened yesterday."

Cleo schooled her features to not show her surprise that something had happened, and that Mason hadn't told her anything about it last night. Her heart flipped a few times as he described his encounter with the stranger lurking by the building, and he skipped loads of details because it was evident the new bruises on him were due to the fight.

“We’re still looking for footage from anyone with a security camera, but as it’s a residential area, I’m not holding my breath on that one.”

Everyone nodded. There was a chance of finding a private camera out there, but it was a long shot.

Wolf leaned back. “With everything you and the others that were there during the attack have told us, we’ve assessed the attacker to be male, six-two, and a bit under 200 pounds. But fit, with a solid body. Moves like someone who can handle himself.”

Emme nodded. “Does anyone have anything more to bring to the table? Mercy, what have you found on your end?”

Immediately, Cleo turned to the blond bombshell who locked eyes with her for an instant before giving her report.

“I’ve been assigned to keep an eye on Jeffrey Spears, a man linked to Cleo’s past. Cain is currently on surveillance duty. Spears visually fits Wolf’s description of the attacker. The creep is in Miami to see his sister, who has undergone major heart surgery. Both her and their mother have been living in Miami for several years now. So far, he’s spent most of his time either at the hospital or the hotel. He’s on the phone quite a bit but hasn’t disappeared for any length of time. Does he even know Cleo is in Miami?”

As Mercy was giving the rundown on the man, Cleo couldn’t process the fact that Spears was so close before Mason coughed lightly and everyone’s attention turned to him. “If he didn’t know before, he does now. I went to confront him last night at the hospital.”

Cleo was frozen in place, and somehow, the puzzle piece she’d been searching for since last night clicked into place. Mason was a protector, and their night together was a definite claim. “You didn’t tell me that? What happened?”

Shane groaned. “He didn’t tell anyone. That wasn’t part of the plan, Mason. Why did you think it was a good idea to confront him alone?”

Cleo closed her mouth to any other questions as it was clear their boss wasn't happy with that particular excursion. Shane never placed blame, but you knew if you made a mistake, and you never repeated it.

Mason squared his shoulder and carried on. "It was a quick chat. If he didn't know Cleo was in town before, he does now."

A fear she hadn't felt in a very long time, one that made her flee her home as a young girl and almost made her want to do the same now, filtered through her system evoking a fight or flight response.

The sudden tension must have shown on her body as Mason immediately covered her twitching hands. "I didn't want to tell you last night. But I needed to know if the man was involved in what's going on or not."

The contact steadied her, and she grabbed him in a tighter hold. "So? What's your verdict?"

"The man is a liar. He said he wasn't aware you were in Miami. That may or may not be true. Mercy has been following him, but there's a chance he hired someone to do his dirty work for him."

Mercy seemed to agree. "The man is certainly not hands-on. From what I've seen, he likes to be waited upon, loves to be the center of attention and direct people."

Cleo nodded. "I have to admit it fits his character. Back home, he had a few men around him all the time. I'm surprised he didn't bring them here, although he may have needed them to keep an eye on his followers in Arizona."

Mason squeezed her hand before addressing the others. "Spears is our best bet, but I agree with Cleo and Mercy. We keep an eye on the chief but search for the minions."

The team started to brainstorm ideas and Cleo decided to leave them to it feeling overwhelmed. She felt lightheaded with the volume of information she now had to process and knowing Spears had been reminded of her existence didn't sit

well with her stomach, as if all the hard work she had accomplished in disappearing had been for nothing.

Heading for her desk, she felt Mason following her. “Cleo. Look at me.” It was hard to gather her wits and keep a cool head. And it became even harder when he took her into his arms. “I should have told you last night. I’m sorry, love.”

Her arms finally hugged his waist to squeeze him too, a full circle. “It’s fine, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything about it, and we had better things to do.”

He kissed the top of her head before loosening his hold. “I need to go back in. Are you coming?”

Cleo shook her head. “No, just give me a summary when you have a minute.”

Mason kissed her forehead. “I promise.” And with one last look he disappeared into the conference room.

Once she was back behind the desk, her legs gave out, and she fell into the chair. Her brain had trouble remaining in the present and not losing itself in memories and emotions. Would she ever be free of the past? All she wanted to do was live her life and explore what she had with Mason. Her parents were lost to her, but she wanted him to meet her grandmother.

Returning to her work, that thought lingered as she started scanning documents and filing until the team left the conference room.

Mason immediately came to her side. “I need to go see Travis. I’ll ask him for his help. He has access to a couple of databases that might give us more information on Spears’ followers.”

“How come?”

“Years ago, the government started listing possible cults within its territory. Spears and his group might be there.”

Cleo frowned. “The government knows about Spears and what he’s doing to these poor people? And they aren’t doing anything about it?”

Mason lifted his hands in appeasement. “Freedom of religion can’t be touched. So unless he does something criminal...”

“He’s controlling people, stealing their money. He tried to marry an underage girl! Me!!”

“Do you think I’d forgotten about that? That I don’t want to tear him apart for it? It’s eating at me, but the fact is, nothing was filed with the police. That’s why he’s free. You escaped, but those who remain do so willingly.”

Cleo couldn’t believe her ears. “I remember some of the names of Spears’ lieutenants. Maybe they’re still active.”

“That would help, especially if Travis can’t help us. Email them to me, and we’ll start tracking them down, it will speed up the process.” Gently, Mason cupped her cheek, making her look at him. “If I could, I would make all of this go away.”

“Will it ever go away?” Cleo felt so tired now. “If he isn’t the stalker, Spears knows where I am, and he’s not the type of man to let go of what he wants easily.”

Mason’s beautiful face turned dark and menacing. “I love you, and I’ll do everything in my power to protect you. Do you believe me, Cleo?”

She nodded, convinced he would lay his life on the line to do so. He took her into his arms and blurred her mind with the most soul-searing kiss. The warmth and strength of his body overtook her, his scent making her head spin. But it was his unique and addicting taste that she relished most and would never get enough of.

“I’m meeting with Travis in an hour for a chat about that list. Do you want to come?”

Cleo forced herself to smile and shook her head. “No. I still have some work to do, and I’m a bit tired. I wouldn’t be good company. And I don’t want to hear about cults, to be honest.”

His smile returned. “I understand. If you want to go to the apartment, I’m sure the guys would be happy to escort you.”

“Thanks. May I use your office? Normally I don’t mind the noise and people, but I want to get this stuff finished quickly so I can go home. I need peace and quiet to do that with no interruptions.”

With a peck on her lips, he winked at her. “What’s mine is yours, just don’t look at my browser history. Call me if you need anything.”

Cleo watched him disappear through the door. Once more he was her defender. The entire team was, and she was incredibly grateful for it. However, as she looked around, seeing people disappear to accomplish their tasks, diverted from their initial missions because of her, a somber realization came to her. In her mind and soul, the pressure was taking a toll on her, and there was no way she could withstand it anymore without acting upon it. Mason may have confronted Jeffrey, but she was the one who could make this entire nonsense stop.

Waving at Malco as he walked inside, Cleo locked herself in Mason’s office. After a few steadying breaths, unable to sit, she picked up her cell phone and dialed a number she had hoped to forget.

“Spears speaking.”

Only sheer will forced her voice to remain steady. “Spears, it’s Cleo Darwin.”

His voice immediately turned from business to interested. “Well, there’s a voice I’ve dreamed of hearing for a long time. Never thought coming to Miami would bring me so much closer to you. How are you, sweet and elusive, Cleo? I met a very intense man who threatened me and told me to stay away from you. But you know me better than that, don’t you?”

She knew for a fact it would take much more than threats to make him step back, and that was the reason she was calling. “I heard about your sister. I was told your mother is also living in Miami.”

“Are you inquiring about her health? What a sweetheart you are.”

“If I’d known living here meant I risked seeing you again, I would have avoided Miami like the plague.”

“Your loss is my gain. I’m impatient to rekindle our relationship.”

Nausea gripped her stomach at the thought. “We will never have a relationship, get that in that perverted brain of yours. In fact, I’m calling to tell you to back off.”

The laughter that came from the other end of the phone sent shivers down her spine. “If that stupid boyfriend of yours couldn’t convince me to stay away, you’re certainly not going to succeed.”

“I didn’t get away and stay in the shadows for so long because I’m stupid. And I didn’t get away without taking some precautions.”

The glee in Spears’ voice dimmed quickly. “Are you threatening me?”

“Would that keep you away from me and mine?”

“You’re flinging empty threats.”

“And if I wasn’t? I may have left in a rush, but I didn’t go empty-handed.” As soon as she said the words, Cleo knew full well she was unleashing a dangerous beast.

“You’re bluffing.”

“Am I? The last time we talked, you had taken me into your office. You shouldn’t have left those statements out in the open on your desk. Last time I checked, bank statements from the Caymans were a sure sign of a tax haven. I wonder what would happen if the IRS found out? You’ve tiptoed around the FBI for a long time, but those money guys are another type of guard dog. Don’t you think?”

“Be very careful with your threats, Cleo darling. You’re biting off more than you can chew.”

“It’s simple. You disappear from my life, stop stalking me, and I won’t send those papers anywhere.”

Cleo heard rustling and voices in the background but couldn't make anything out of it until Spears came back on the phone. "I didn't want to go this far, darling Cleo. But you leave me no choice."

The line went dead. She looked at her phone, thinking she'd kicked a hornet's nest. She did have those papers they were locked safely away for when she needed them. It was her ace in up her sleeve if she needed one.

What should she do now? With her cell still in hand, she was still debating her next step when it started ringing again. The unknown number wasn't a good sign.

When she answered, she could hear crying in the background followed by Spears' voice. "Sorry for hanging up on you, darling, but I messed up trying to do a conference call. Just wanted you to know there are advantages in having a lot of time. When you're looking for someone, sometimes you get a lead on something completely unexpected. Say hello to your grandmother, darling." The world started spinning. From a distance, she heard a slap, and the female started sobbing harder.

"Let me talk to her! Put her on the phone!"

Spears snickered. "My dear, I don't have to do anything for you. You're lucky I haven't already killed her. You're pissing me off, girl. Don't push me."

"You are a monster."

"No, love. I'm a planner. I located her years ago, and when I met your boyfriend last night, I knew it was time to get my baby back."

"Don't you dare touch her!"

Her control was slipping, and the situation she had thought would solve everything was turning into a full-fledged nightmare.

"Now I have your full attention, love, and your full cooperation, here's what's going to happen. I'm a simple man. All I ever wanted was you, and you're a good granddaughter. You want your sweet grandmother to live a long life, so you're

going to follow my directions starting now. You're going to leave your cell, get those papers you stole from me, and get to the address I'm going to give you within an hour. You fail and I'm going to ask my men to start cutting your grandmother bit by bit. One word to your boyfriend or anyone else you work with and she dies."

Cleo felt like a zombie when she wrote down the address on a notepad and heard the line cut off again. She had to go back to her old apartment where she had hidden the papers in a safe spot. She should have thought of scanning them as a safeguard, but she hadn't and there was no time to do so. It was time to act. Her body moved, but the rest of her was huddled deep inside, crying, unable to think.

There was no way she could risk her grandmother's life. It didn't matter that her parents were technically still alive, they had been dead to her for a long time. Her grandmother was the only family she had left.

She braced her shoulders and went back to her desk. The reception was still calm and peaceful. She didn't waste a minute. She grabbed some money from her bag under her desk, but left everything else behind, including her IDs. Without them she wouldn't be able to fly and it would buy her more time.

Cleo wished she could tell her friends, tell Mason, but she had dug herself into a hole, and there was no way she would bring them down with her. This was her problem to fix.

Sitting at her computer, she went into the security settings and shut off the alarm for the back door. Without a word, her eyes filling with tears, Cleo walked into the backroom and disappeared.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MASON PULLED UP TO THE RESTAURANT WHERE HE WAS meeting Travis and parked out front. He hadn't wanted to leave Cleo, but this could be the break they needed to find the stalker. He knew she would be angry later when the news sunk in that he had gone behind her back and looked into Spears, but he couldn't regret it. He'd prefer it to the compliant acceptance she had shown instead.

Her spirit had dimmed as soon as the man's name had come up. He hated it, which was why the meeting with Travis was imperative. Cleo was meant for color and drinks with umbrellas in them. Not the fear and vulnerability that was her current mood.

His mind went back to the first time he had seen her at Alliance. She had been standing with her hand on her curvy hip, throwing some serious attitude at the flower delivery guy who had managed to snap the head on a lily with his carelessness. The poor kid had been blushing and stumbling over his words to apologize. She had managed to make him feel as if by doing better, he would please her.

Cleo had that effect on people, most especially men with her sexy curves, and the way she dressed all sweet and feminine but with more sex appeal than a fifties pin-up. He had stood inside the door watching until she looked up and saw him as she waved the kid, who was more than a little in love with her by then, away.

The flower print pencil skirt, pale pink sheer blouse with a huge bow that sat just above the swell of her breasts and the

high pink fuck me heels had been enough to make him pant. Then she opened her mouth, and looking back he'd known she was the one for him.

He hadn't acknowledged it at the time though. All his preconceived ideas about falling in love taking time and building a relationship had been wiped away, and he now recognized the moment for what it had been. Him seeing the other half of himself in her. She was the light to his dark, and he was damned if anyone would dim that light on his watch.

The thought made him more determined as he walked toward On The Border Mexican Grill. Moving through the doors, Mason scanned the lunchtime crowd for his friend. Seeing him in a booth near the back, he waved and made his way over.

Travis stood as he neared, "Hey, Mason. I was glad to get your call."

Mason shook his friend's hand and smiled as he seated himself. "Thanks for meeting me at such short notice." Mason looked around the busy lunchtime service for a waitress. He was eager to get the pleasantries over so he could get back to Cleo. "Have you ordered?"

Travis shook his head, "No, I only just got here."

Mason picked up the menu and scanned it, picking the first thing he saw. A young female waitress with blonde hair in a messy bun on top of her head and pretty girl next door vibe going on stopped beside them and he smiled at her as she asked if they were ready to order, with her eyes on Travis all the while.

Travis had a way with women, he attracted them like flies, and yet he very rarely took them up on their invitation. Tall, broad-shouldered with blond hair and blue eyes, Travis was like catnip to most women, but he blew it off like it was embarrassing somehow. Mason had often wondered if there was a heartbreak in his past that he never talked about.

"I'll have a soda water and a pulled pork quesadilla, please." He closed the menu and handed it to the waitress, who

was still looking at Travis.

“I’ll have the same.” He didn’t seem to notice her which made Mason smile despite his impatience to get gone.

“What you smiling about?”

“That woman was practically laying it on a plate, and you didn’t give her the time of day.”

The surprise on Travis’ face was proof the man had no clue. “I didn’t notice.”

His face was severe and uninterested, and Mason was about to ask about it but decided not to. It wasn’t his business if he’d had his heart broken by some woman way back when. Everyone had their secrets, and some liked to keep it that way. He certainly respected his friend enough to give him that.

“So why the call to meet you?” Travis sat back in his chair and studied Mason.

“I need your help with this stalker case. Cleo is in danger, and I want whoever it is caught.”

Mason watched as Travis took that on board, his face a mask. His ability to blank his emotions was part of what made him an excellent agent. “You really do love this girl?”

Mason was taken aback by the personal nature of the comment. He and Travis shot the shit, but they didn’t usually talk emotions. He needed to be honest with his friend, though. He would be putting his ass on the line with this favor and Mason owed him that. “Yes, I do. She’s special, kind, beautiful, funny. She makes me feel things I never have before.”

Travis raised an eyebrow at that. “Wow, I hadn’t realized it was so serious.”

“It is, so you can see why I want her safe.” They paused as their drinks were set down, Mason offering the girl a smile of thanks.

“So what do you need from me?”

“I need you to check into the list of cults the government has information on. She ran from Arizona when she was a girl from a man named Jeffrey Spears.”

Travis leaned forward, his arms on the table. “You think he’s involved in the stalking?”

Mason sighed. “He is the best and only lead at this point.” The admission was sobering, knowing they were putting all their eggs in one basket with this and it could be a fatal mistake.

“Okay, give me the details, and I’ll look into it.”

Mason was relieved to have Travis helping him. “Thank you, man.”

Travis chuckled and shook his head. “Been a while since we got into any scrapes together. I miss it.”

“Yeah, we got into a few interesting situations.” Mason laughed at the memory.

They caught up on a few members of the team while they ate the delicious quesadillas before parting ways an hour later. He walked Travis to his car and watched him drive away in his red truck. He’d reached his own car when his cell rang. Sliding inside, he hit answer to Shane’s call.

“Mason, we have a problem. You need to get back here now.”

Mason stiffened at the urgency in his boss’s voice. He knew in that second it involved Cleo. “What happened?”

“Cleo is missing. We found her cell in your office and her things are still under her desk. I checked the last call she made, and it was to Spears.”

Mason slammed his hand against the steering wheel as he pulled the car into traffic. “Fuck. Do we have any idea where she may have gone?”

The silence on the other end of the phone seeped in, and he felt every muscle in his body tense as he waited for the blow he knew was coming.

“No, but Cain has lost Spears. Kingsley has gone to help him.”

Mason thought he was going to lose his lunch at the thought of his beautiful Cleo in the clutches of that sick bastard.

“Mason.”

Mason shook off the fear and tried to think like an agent instead. “Yes, sorry. Get Caitlin over to the hospital. If he has her, he has a weakness, and that’s his sister. No way would that man have left his followers in Arizona for so long if he didn’t care about his mom and sister. Put Knight and Nick on them. He doesn’t get near his family without me seeing him. If he has Cleo.” Mason stopped as his gut swirled at the thought. “If he has her, then we need them as a bargaining chip, and I’ll use anything to get her back.”

“On it.”

Shane disconnected as Mason drove the last two miles to the office. His head was a mess of emotions that threatened to fell him with their intensity, but he wouldn’t allow that. He had a job to do, and it was the most important one of his life. He needed to save the woman he loved from her nightmare, then he was going to put a fucking ring on her finger and keep her barefoot and pregnant so she stayed out of trouble.

For some reason, the thought cracked through his fear and made him smile. Cleo carrying his child. He liked it more than he’d ever thought possible, but it was the thought of what she would do if she ever found out he’d had the idea in the first place that made his lips twitch.

Cleo was smart and ballsy to go with her sweet, making her a dangerous combination for his heart, but it also made her strong, and he knew she would do whatever it took to stay safe until he could get to her. The only thing that would make Cleo weak was if someone she loved was in trouble.

Then like a hammer, it hit him. Jumping from the car before it had fully stopped in the Alliance compound, he ran to the door of the conference room and threw it open taking in

the worried faces of every operative on the team as they all looked at him. “Her grandmother. Find out where she is.”

James was on it in seconds as he read Mason’s thoughts. “Her only weakness.”

“Exactly, and he wouldn’t care about using an elderly woman to get what he needs.”

A few minutes later, Emme was on the phone with Cleo’s grandmother’s neighbor who promised to check on her and then call them straight back.

It was a tense ten minutes as they waited for news. Each person in the room held a lot of affection for Cleo and her troubles had become their troubles. He flinched when he felt a hand on his back and turned to see Sydney, looking at him with determination.

“She’ll be okay. She’s strong and resilient.”

Mason nodded and covered her hand with his squeezing it. He didn’t say anything though because he couldn’t, his words were paralyzed with fear. He appreciated her comfort though and thought again how lucky Knight was to have found her.

It was not her that had pulled him from the fog of the coma though. It had been Cleo who’d read to him, railed at him, and just damn near demanded he come back to her. His Cleo, the love of his life, the woman who was now in the hands of a psychopath.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MASON THOUGHT HE WAS ABOUT TO BURST WITH THE GNAWING fear churning in his gut, but when Emme’s phone started ringing, the entire team shifted in unison.

Emme immediately took the call—the conversation was brief and he saw her shoulders relax. “Thank you. Please, Mrs. Darwin, stay with your friend until members of our protective team arrive.” More silence in which Emme glanced at Mason. “No, we don’t have news of your granddaughter yet, but as soon as we have, you’ll be the first one to know.”

When his boss hung up, she encompassed the entire team. “Cleo’s grandmother is safe and will be staying with her friend until we arrive. I need at least three of you to go to Mesa now. Whatever threat Spears may have come up with for Cleo, it was false. Mrs. Darwin is alive and well, and we need to keep her that way.”

Mercy stepped forward. “I have a friend who owes me a favor. I should be able to have his plane ready in an hour, which will be better than a commercial flight.”

Shane stepped in. “Wolf and Caitlin will go with you. Go now and stay on guard until we get that son of a bitch and retrieve Cleo. I want you to get Mrs. Darwin to a safehouse if possible, outside Mesa preferably. Or even better, convince her to come here.”

And in an instant, Mercy, Caitlin, and Wolf were gone. With them dispatched, only six remained to search for Cleo.

Mason tried hard to get a grip on his impatience, but he knew they had to tread carefully and not leave any stone unturned. “We’ve checked the burner phone, and it’s a dead end.”

Everyone crowded closer, ready to offer their input and experience to find their friend. Malco was sitting at Cleo’s desk, typing away. From the moment she had disappeared, there wasn’t a nook or cranny of the agency they hadn’t checked and that included the computer system.

“Cleo disabled the security system. She did it from her computer here. I have the confirmation in front of me.”

Mason shook his head. “It’s proof she wasn’t taken. Spears coerced her to leave but how?”

Deep in thought, Malco sighed. “When someone is in a panic, the abductor can lie or make them believe something has happened when it hasn’t and the victim will believe it to be the truth. Until we find Cleo, I suggest we focus on where she is.”

“Anybody check on the cameras in the neighborhoods?”

James nodded. “Yeah, we could hack into a couple of them to the north and west, but nothing. We should have the others in a minute. That may give us an indication of the direction.”

Raking his fingers through his hair in frustration, Mason couldn’t believe the mess they were in. His brain tried to retrace his steps from the moment he’d last seen Cleo. “She was worried. I think this has taken more of a toll on her than she’s let on. She was quiet when I left her this morning, which is unlike her, but I thought it was everything that was going on. I was planning to talk to her when I got back.”

Malco stood. “Think back before that. You’ve been with her most of the time. Did something happen or did she say something? Was she acting strangely?”

Thinking was the last thing he wanted to do, but Malco had experience in kidnapping and hostage situations, so he got a grip on his emotions. “When she left the conference room, she said it was because she didn’t want to hear about the cult

anymore. She asked if she could use my office while I was gone.”

As he was talking, he saw Nick frown and head to his office. Two minutes later he was back waving a piece of paper. “I think I have the address.”

Alex blinked. “What did you do? Summon the spirits of the building and ask them where Cleo had disappeared to?”

Nicholas rolled his eyes as he showed them the paper in his hand. “No, stupid. I went to check the obvious. Mason said Cleo had been in his office, but his computer hadn’t been turned on. If she’s been lured by Spears somewhere, he had to give her an address. Mason is a tidy kind of guy, and there’s only one notepad on his desk. The pen was out of place too, meaning she wrote something down, and with the amount of stress she was under, she pressed pretty hard on the paper, meaning that the sheet underneath caught it too.”

He showed the page where he had shadowed the bottom of it with a pencil, and there it was, Cleo’s pretty looped writing: 4 Grove Isle Dr

Mason opened his mouth to ask what that address was, but Malco was quicker and already sitting behind Cleo’s desk.

Mason started to pace as they waited for Malco to bring up the details and he tried his best not to punch a hole in the freshly painted wall. “Just tell me it’s not an airport, and I’ll be happy.”

Shane shook his head. “We found her IDs here, so unless they use fakes, she can’t fly.”

“It’s a marina and boat storage place.” Malco continued typing, and Mason felt a ball of ice form in the pit of his stomach. Disappearing by boat was even worse.

Mason ignored his fears for the woman he loved and welcomed the empty sensation in his chest, the ice flowing through his veins. He needed to be sharp and ruthless for the next part of the plan.

“Any of you know anything about that neighborhood?”

With the collective negative, Mason knew what to do. “Gear up. I know someone who can get me a satellite view. Once we know the setup, we can take the fucker down and have Cleo back home safe.”

IT TOOK way too long to get on-site, but Mason knew it couldn't be helped. As the team took their positions, circling the building and gathering intel on possible occupants, the sun was setting over the city, a warm orange glow that was still too bright for an attack. They needed the cover of night to act on the plans he got from Travis.

His mind wanted to ask where Cleo was. If she was okay, but he refused to think of her as anything other than alive and well.

A figure came to lie beside him on the rooftop, and from the way he moved, he immediately recognized Travis.

“You didn't think I would let you have all the fun, did you?”

If he was honest, he was glad to have his friend by his side, and without taking his eyes off the building below, he clapped him on the shoulder, before resuming his position.

“What's the plan?”

Mason relayed Travis' addition to Shane, Alex, James, and Nicholas who had eyes on the entrances of the main building. So far, none of them had reported any movement from inside.

“Without infrared, it's impossible to know if they're even in there.”

“That means those suckers need to make the first move, and if I was them, I would've already done it. Unless they're waiting for nightfall.”

Mason hoped they used the second option, but the more time passed, the less sure he was there was anybody there to wait for. “Shane, we're making a move now.”

His boss' voice was calm on the other end of his earpiece. “Are you certain, Mason? There's no way to know how many

people are inside.”

“And we don’t know for sure Cleo’s life isn’t on the line as we speak.”

“All right, you take the lead, we’ll follow. Look alive team. It’s showtime.”

Mason started to move when Alex’s voice came on. “Wait, there’s movement, west entrance.”

Immediately, Mason and Travis ran to the other side of the rooftop to get a better vantage point. There was no need for more confirmation when he saw a flash of violet among the group of men. His body reacted and he was off the roof and down the stairs before he knew it, bursting onto the street at a run. When he finally reached the group, Nicholas and Alex had already blocked their route, and Shane covered them from the side.

Guns drawn, Mason and Travis blocked the back. “Spears, let her go, now!”

The group, consisting of three goons and Spears, that circled Cleo made him want to shoot them all between the eyes.

Cleo turned too, and his heart lurched when he saw her face. Pale and cold, there wasn’t anything there, as if she was empty, a walking shell of her former self.

Spears laughed, telling his followers to holster their weapons. From a distance, Mason saw civilians running, which meant the police would arrive soon. “Well, if it isn’t the boyfriend. How gentlemanly of you to come and see us off.”

Mason didn’t waver and stepped forward, his gun steadily on the man’s forehead. “I will certainly see you off. Be certain of it. Now, let Cleo go.”

Spears lifted his hands. “My dear boy, if Cleo wants to go with you, she’s a free woman.”

Not believing this, Mason gestured for her to come to him, but she stayed utterly immobile. “Baby, please come to me. Whatever that scumbag told you, it’s all lies.”

Something shone in her beautiful eyes before turning flat again. “It’s what we had between us that wasn’t real, Mason. Now, I’ve made my choice, and I’m going with Jeffrey. Family is more important than strangers.”

Even if he didn’t believe her words, they destroyed him nonetheless. Then she turned to Shane. “Sorry for putting you in a jamb, but I’m going now. I hope you find a replacement quickly.”

Shane shook his head. “Cleo, don’t do this.”

As her only answer, she turned to Spears and hooked her arm around his waist. Spears didn’t stop there and grabbed her jaw to make her kiss him.

Knowing her body as he did, her reaction was another hint she was far from compliant and being forced into this. Her words continued to ring in his head, and he shared a quick glance with Shane who frowned too. Was it a dismissal or a message?

When he finally released her, Spears’ glee was undeniable. “Now are you satisfied?”

It was a long shot, but he didn’t have a better idea. Mason holstered his gun and gestured the rest of the team to do the same. Spears and his men were about to leave, and Mason was running out of time. From a distance, he heard sirens. If he timed it right, the police could help save the day. “Wait. I promise to let Cleo go with you and I won’t try to see her again if she grants me one thing.”

Spears sneered. “This isn’t a negotiation.”

“No contact. I drop everything we have against you and yours. I’ll even tell my contact to erase your name from the government watch list. You know, the one mentions a cult in Arizona.”

That seemed to have grabbed his attention. “Whatever it is, there is no truth there.”

“And I’ll make sure that it stays that way.”

It was a standoff. Spears was assessing him like he was trying to see if he was lying. There wasn't much time, as the sirens were getting louder and Spears' followers were getting twitchy.

When he saw Spears step back, it was as if a door had slammed in his face, and panic engulfed Mason with surprising force, blanking his good sense, making him desperate. So he threw his last card, hoping to turn the tables in his favor. "Your grandmother is OK, Cleo. She's safe."

As soon as the words were out, it was as if the world had stopped turning. Everyone held their collective breaths. Mason could hear his heart beating hard in his chest, the very first sound, as he locked gazes with Cleo who looked stunned, scared, and lost. And so beautiful.

Everything slowed as the police appeared around the corner. In his peripheral vision, he saw Spears' followers reach for their weapons, and knew they wouldn't be the only ones and he started to run.

The group scattered, but Mason's only target was Cleo who was running toward him.

One of the followers fired just as Cleo reached him, and Mason only had time to drop them both to the ground, shielding her with his body. He heard Shane screaming something about not letting Spears disappear.

He heard two shots fired, followed by footsteps and unknown voices, presumably the cops, ordering them to get to the ground.

As he was already there, he checked on Cleo huddled against his chest. "Baby, are you all right?"

Her beautiful face was scrunched up and stained in tears, and her eyes closed. She had fainted but at least she seemed unharmed. Mason called her name softly. "Cleo." The commotion around them amplified. Mason heard barking behind him, but before he could react, he felt the sting of a needle in his thigh and then he was being pulled away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“WHERE’S MASON?” CLEO TURNED TO LOOK ALL AROUND HER in the commotion. One minute she had been pinned beneath him, the next he was gone and a policeman was helping her to her feet.

“Who, Miss?” The young cop didn’t seem to know what she was talking about.

Cleo ignored him as she scanned the area looking for Mason. Police were everywhere, Shane was talking to a detective and the rest of the team seemed to have dispersed—probably looking for Spears and his gutless followers.

The last few hours had been torture, but nothing was as bad as seeing the fear and hurt on the face of the man she loved. She had never meant to hurt him, but what else could she do? Spears had threatened to kill the only relative that gave a shit about her. A woman who had risked it all to help keep her safe. How could Cleo walk away from that?

Her heart had practically ripped open when she saw him, her eyes never leaving him. Tucking it away in her mind so his strength and what they had shared would last her a lifetime in the hell she knew Spears would create for her.

Cleo had died inside at the thought of never seeing him again, of never having him hold her and make love to her, but at least he would be safe.

Then he’d uttered the words that had set her free from the evil lies. Her grandmother was safe. She’d known just looking

at his face that he was telling the truth. Mason would never lie to her.

Her body rocked back as she felt a hand on her shoulder and she spun, hoping it was Mason, but she was disappointed and couldn't hide it. "Travis! Have you seen Mason?"

He shook his head as he frowned. "No, last I saw he was diving on top of you to protect you from the gunfire."

"He did, and then he was pulled away, and I can't find him."

Travis took her arm, his grip firm as if he was leading a child and steered her toward the back of an ambulance. She wasn't sure if it was fatigue or lack of food, but she was feeling disconnected from the ruckus around her.

"Sit here and let the EMTs look at you and I'll go and look for Mason."

Cleo watched as Travis jogged over to Shane and Emme and spoke to them before he pointed in her direction and all three looked around them. A blanket was hung around her shoulders as an older male EMT dabbed at the cuts on her knees. She was in shock; she knew that. She felt like she was watching everything from afar. The only thing she felt was fear that Mason wasn't there holding her.

Fear pitted and rolled in her gut like the poisonous snakes that had sat on her desk. Something was very wrong. Mason would not just leave her here; he would have stayed to make sure she was okay. There wasn't a lot she was sure of right then, but she knew that. Ignoring the EMT's protests she moved off the back of the ambulance and walked over to Shane, Emme, and Travis on leaden feet.

Emme immediately wrapped her in her arms. "Hey, sweetie."

Cleo looked at her friend, and her eyes begged for answers, "Where is he?" She desperately wanted Emme to tell her he had been sent after Spears, but as she watched Emme close down her emotions and the sympathetic look crowd in, she knew.

“We don’t know, honey. Shane has the others out looking for Spears and Mason as we speak.”

Cleo felt the sob tear from her and Shane caught her as her legs went from under her. Strong arms held her as she cried, but they were not the arms she wanted. There was only one man she wanted to hold her for the rest of her life, and he was missing.

“Why don’t I take her home with me while you and your team stay and look for Mason?” She looked up suddenly, desperate to stay in case there was any news and her hands gripped Travis’s arms as she turned to him. “No, I have to stay in case he needs me.”

He held her firmly by her biceps and looked at her with a hard, unflinching gaze. “He needs you to be safe. Emme can keep you updated every step of the way but Mason wouldn’t be happy if something happened to you while he wasn’t here.”

Cleo knew he was right, but it felt wrong to leave when Mason was missing. “Let me stay until the others check-in and then I’ll go with you, I promise.”

Travis looked annoyed but quickly hid it with a nod. “Fine.”

They didn’t have to wait long before she saw Cain, Nick, and the others walking toward them looking downcast. Her eyes searched for Mason, as she craned her neck to see him, but he wasn’t there. She moved forward, and King addressed Shane. “We lost Spears when he hit the highway. He had a van parked and waiting.”

“Mason?” Shane’s voice was clipped.

“Difficult to say. They were carrying something that could have been him, but it could have been one of his men who got hit too. As soon as we get back, we can have Alex go through the CCTV footage and see if we can narrow anything down.” King shot her a sympathetic look, and she wanted to scream at them all. She knew they were being kind, but she felt angry. Angry that this had happened to them, that Spears had found her and ruined her life.

“Let’s get you home. I’ll stay with you at Mason’s place if you prefer. That way you’re around his stuff, and if by some chance he manages to get home, you’re there and safe.”

Travis made sense, and Cleo nodded, suddenly feeling like her legs could no longer hold her up. She allowed him to start leading her away to his car but turned back to Emme. “You’ll keep me updated?”

Emme nodded. “Of course we will. As soon as we hear anything, I’ll call you.”

Cleo nodded and allowed Travis to help her into the car and buckle her in. He was an excellent friend to Mason and now her.

SHE LET them into Mason’s apartment, the tiny hope that he may have come home, no matter how small was doused by the silence. Her heart fell as Travis stepped in behind her and followed silently as she walked to the couch and slumped down, feeling exhausted and cold.

Travis moved to stand in front of her, before crouching down. “Do you want some coffee or hot chocolate?”

Travis had been kind, and she didn’t want to be short with him, but what she really wanted was to be left alone. Cleo nodded instead. “Hot chocolate would be nice thank you.” She moved to get up. “Let me just show you...”

He stopped her with a hand on her arm. “I can find everything, Cleo.”

She sat back and offered him a small smile of thanks. Noticing the hoodie Mason had worn a few days before slung over the sofa, she grabbed it and pulled it over her head. The instant comfort from his scent almost made her cry. Her body huddled deeper into the soft, warm fabric that hung halfway down her legs.

She and Mason had been an instant attraction, but she had fought it, putting up vibes for him to stay away this last year.

Even the stabbing that had left him clinging to his life had not woken her. Life was precarious and short, she saw that now.

Somehow though, he had managed to break through the barriers around her heart, cracking the walls she'd built until they had crumbled. She loved him, and there was no denying it. Had Spears taken away the only man she ever loved? Life wouldn't be so cruel that he would take everything from her. A tear slid down her cheek, and she swiped it away, determined not to give up on Mason. He was skilled and intelligent, and he would make it out of whatever hell Spears had him in.

Cleo looked up as Travis came to stand in front of her. Taking the hot chocolate from him she allowed the warmth to spread through her.

“He'll be okay, Cleo. You have to believe that wherever he is, he's safe and unharmed.”

Cleo sipped the warm sweet drink before looking at Travis. “I know I have to think that, but it's easy to let your mind go to the bad first.”

“I know it is. But Mason is a good man, the best in fact. You have to believe that things will work how they are meant to.”

Cleo stayed silent processing that, too tired to speak but not wanting to sleep in case something happened. Her cell rang in her bag, and she rushed to grab it, her hands shaking as she looked at the unknown caller. “Mason!” she exclaimed.

“Cleo, honey, is that you?” She immediately recognized her grandmother's strong yet feminine voice.

“Nana.” Tears filled her eyes at hearing her grandmother's voice.

“Yes, dear. Are you okay? They said Spears had caught up with you?”

“Yes, he did. He said he had you and I fell for it.” Her sob caught in her throat as she realized it was all her fault for being so stupid.

“Oh, my sweet girl. You have such a big heart. They say he has your young man?”

Cleo took a breath to steady her voice. “Yes. Mason came to rescue me with his team and then he disappeared.”

“Well, having met these people, I have no doubt he’ll be back with you in no time, and then I want to meet the man who has my beautiful granddaughter so enamored.”

Cleo smiled at the old fashioned statement but didn’t deny it. “You’ll love him, Nana. He is just so...” She stopped not having the words.

“I know, sweetie. I felt the same way about your grandfather, god rest his soul. Now it’s very late, and I’m old. I’ll call you tomorrow when this handsome young man you sent wakes me with breakfast in bed.”

Cleo said goodnight with a smile on her face thinking of the fun her grandmother was having with Wolf.

“Is she safe?” Travis was watching her from the doorway, and she noticed he was wearing Mason’s jumper, the one with the zip on the neck. For some reason, it bothered her that he had been in and helped himself to Mason’s clothes. “Cleo?”

She shook herself. “Yes, she’s flirting with Wolf, so I assume she’s fine.” She stood, wanting to be alone. “I think I might go to bed. Do you need anything? Blanket, pillow?”

“Na, I can grab a throw from the spare room.”

Cleo tilted her head. “Okay, will you please wake me if you hear anything at all?”

“Yes, of course, I will.” He moved forward and hugged her tightly, and she took some comfort in that. Travis was a good man and would make some woman very happy one day.

“Thanks, Travis. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“There is no place I’d rather be than here with you.” A shiver fell down her spine at those words.

An hour later, Cleo heard the front door close and heaved a sigh of relief. She hoped Travis had decided she was OK on her own and had gone back to his place for the night. It wasn't that she didn't like Travis, he was just a little full-on—watching her every move, asking if she was okay every five seconds, or if she wanted to drink or eat. She looked at the hot chocolate sitting on her bedside table. A couple of sips couldn't hurt. He meant well, but she wanted some peace to think about everything that had happened in the last few hours. And even maybe catch some sleep. Perhaps it would help clear her mind, see a detail that may help find Mason.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MASON GROANED AS HE EMERGED FROM THE DARKNESS. IT was the whooshing sound inside his skull that finally woke his brain cells. The tremendous effort it required to open his eyes made his head pound, but the pain pushed at the fog, clearing his thoughts.

The corrugated metal walls all around him and on the ceiling looked filthy, and the metal desk in the corner made him think of an abandoned office. There were no windows, only a door with a neon light above his head. Still woozy, he tried to move, and realized he was tied to a metal chair.

Where am I? What happened? Squeezing his eyes hard, he mentally kicked his mind until images rose, and the most disturbing of them all, Cleo. Bits and pieces started to come back until everything made sense, apart from the reason why he was bound to a chair.

The gravity of the situation made his adrenaline surge, finally clearing the dross from his mind. Testing his bonds, he found it futile, so he started analyzing his surroundings.

Whoever captured him had planned well. The metal-covered walls didn't show any glaring weaknesses or openings as every inch had been riveted. Even the light above his head was bolted tight. The floor was not an option as it was smooth concrete.

Had Spears organized all this? And if he had, why kidnap him? And even worse, had he got Cleo too?

In one desperate attempt fueled with thoughts of Cleo unprotected and scared at the hands of that monster, Mason poured all of his brute force against the tape and rope, hoping for a miracle that would never come.

As he was considering shuffling to the wall and hoping that he could find a kink in the metal sharp enough to cut his ties, he heard a garage door open and close from beyond the walls. There wasn't anything he could do but wait. He just hoped that Spears was alone, as it would give Mason an advantage. Maybe he could trick him into untying him. He only needed one free hand to take that psycho down. If he had been taken, it meant that Spears had some sort of plan. Maybe his friends got Cleo to safety. That single thought made him relax a little.

If Spears had Cleo, he would have killed him immediately and not bothered with him. That small hope sparked his determination. He knew every single person in the agency would never allow Cleo to trade herself for him, and they would lock her up for her own safety if need be. However, if the worst scenario had happened, he would do what it took to ensure Cleo survived.

Distant noises reverberated inside the space, although he didn't know what they were. Bracing himself, Mason ignored his headache to solely focus on the target about to open the door. This was a life and death situation, his and most assuredly Cleo's. He needed a way to turn the tables and subdue Spears, or better yet, kill him. Then he could save Cleo and get her safely away.

He heard footsteps, and when the door was finally unlocked and pushed open, Mason thought for a second he was still unconscious and in the throes of a nightmare when he saw the man entering.

Travis walked inside and closed the door behind him. "Glad you're finally awake. How's the head, my friend?"

Mason had trouble processing what was going on. His mind blanked and he couldn't think. All he could do was

watch his friend walk in, a look of concern on his face, without being able to utter a single syllable.

Travis came closer and touched his head where Mason had received that blow. “You have a hard skull, that’s for sure.”

The sting brought him back into the moment, even though he wasn’t sure if everything was real. That probably meant that the team knew where he had been taken and had found him. “Travis, quick. Untie me before Spears arrives.”

Despite the urgency in his tone, Travis only walked toward him and crouched. “You’re safe. Spears is nowhere near this place. But before I untie you, we need to talk.”

Mason opened his mouth before closing it again. “Talk? What about? What’s going on, Travis? Free me now!”

Travis looked pained as he shook his head. “I’m sorry, I can’t do that, not until we talk.” Once more, Mason pulled on his bonds to no avail, and Travis sighed. “Man, I know it’s uncomfortable, but they are necessary.”

Mason glanced around again, trying to make sense of the situation. “I don’t understand what’s going on, Travis.”

“Of course you don’t, and that’s why that entire situation went south so quickly. Damn man! If you’d seen the signs, but instead, you just went in another direction, bringing fucking psychos into the mix.”

Never before had he seen Travis in such pain and conflict as he paced the small office like a caged lion. On the other hand, Mason’s entire world seemed to be crumbling apart and he didn’t know why. Why was he talking about psychos? It took everything in him to focus on what Travis was saying when all he wanted to do was get free and run to Cleo. “Travis. What are you talking about? What do you want me to see?”

His blond friend turned to him, and there was hurt in his blue eyes. “Me! I want you to see me! Don’t you understand?”

Mason felt like he was caught in a dream as he tried to grasp what his friend was saying. “I see you, Travis. You’ve been my friend since the Secret Service.”

“You’ve been much more than a friend, Mason. You’ve been a lifesaver, and I don’t think you’ve seen or understand how much. I never told you, but I had just suffered the worst breakup of my life just before we met. One that pushed me to contemplate suicide.”

Mason stayed silent, his attention on Travis. “I didn’t know. Only that your parents died a couple of months after we started working together. You were a mess.”

Travis nodded, lost in his thoughts. “Yes. It was hell.” And then his eyes lightened a bit when he looked back at Mason. “But again, you offered me your full, unconditional support. I’ve rarely had that in my life. My parents wanted me to be a lawyer and resented me for entering my line of work, but you knew that. Through all those years, you were the only one who never judged me, stood beside me, defended me. I’ve never had that sort of support in my entire life.”

Mason nodded, although he sensed an unusual restlessness in Travis. In any other situation, he wouldn’t have worried, but being bound and vulnerable, it was another matter. “Travis, untie me.” Mason tried to keep his voice as low and calm as possible, but Travis seemed to be on a roll and ignored him.

He raked his hand through his blond hair before crouching in front of him once more, his hand on his shoulder. “You were a godsend. The only person who stood by my side. You are a good man, Mason. An amazing friend.”

Waiting for a chance to convince Travis to free him without antagonizing him, Mason remained silent. Travis’ smile turned unsteady, his eyes filling when he cupped his jaw and leaned closer. “I know you told me over and over that it was the way you were, and I see that. The innate goodness and strength in you. Do you see yourself as I do?”

When Travis kissed him, Mason was too stunned to react. His brain analyzed the scene like it was an out of body experience. It was a sweet kiss, but the most surreal one of his life.

When Travis broke the connection and leaned back, a tear slid down his cheek. “I know the Secret Service wasn’t enough

for you. You have the soul of a hero. Of course, you would have found a way to continue helping in your own way. But even though I understood your reasons, I wasn't ready to see you go. I needed you, I still do." After a brief moment, he locked gazes with him. "I love you, Mason. That's why I came back here. The mission was a cover. I've been here for months, following you, observing you, making you were okay, gathering the courage to finally say those words to you. I love you."

All the air left Mason as he looked at the man before him. It wasn't the declaration of love that threw him, but the entire situation. One of the people he trusted the most on earth couldn't be saying that to him. Time froze for a moment before Mason could form words. "Travis, man. You know I love Cleo."

The way his friend's face twisted into a grimace of pain and anger didn't bode well. Mason thought he would lose it, but instead, Travis shook his head and pushed away from the chair.

"You can't believe that. How can you fall for a woman after a few months? And one with a sketchy past that exploded in your face as soon as you decided to protect her. You're risking your ass for someone who's not worth it."

"You know nothing about her!" Mason knew he should remain calm and in control, but he was edging quickly toward losing it.

Travis returned to him, leaning with his hands on his thighs, calm slightly returning to his demeanor. "You are blinded."

"Travis..."

"No! I won't let you lose your life with someone who brings trouble to your door. Not if I can't help it. You are the only person in my life that matters. I didn't have a say in what happened to the others but I will not fail you. I will protect you even if it's against yourself."

The way he said the words made Mason tense and he pulled at his bonds to the point he expected his skin to start peeling off.

“You know you can’t get free from these. You remember basic training don’t you? It seems it will take you more time to see the light, but I expected that.”

Standing, Travis heaved a heavy sigh. “While I leave you to think, I’m going to start righting the situation. Once I deal with that violet-haired secretary of yours, it will be a positive step forward. I should have done it that night. Ending her would have resolved this whole situation. I thought that scaring the little runaway would be enough for her to bolt from Miami, but I was wrong. I should have followed my instincts.”

Now, Mason couldn’t breathe as he realized that from the beginning, his target had been the wrong one. “It was you all along? The stalker? The snakes?”

Travis smiled. “They were a nice touch, although finding snakes from Arizona was a challenge.”

“You poisoned a service dog, for fuck’s sake! How did you find heart medication?”

Immediately, Travis sobered. “That wasn’t my intention, man. It was something I found that speeds up the heart. I wanted to make her think she’d had a panic attack. An increased heartbeat is an undeniable symptom. I wanted to make the situation untenable for her to the point where her only logical option was to leave.”

“You could have damaged her heart!”

And Mason saw it on his face, that gleam of madness he had never noticed before in his friend, and it was frighteningly clear.

“As I didn’t succeed and I intend to put an end to this charade, your point is moot.”

“This is not a charade. This is not a joke! She loves me.”

A dark cloud thundered over his face. Travis came so close and his body was so tense, Mason thought he would punch

him. "I'm the one who loves you, who laid my life on the line countless times to protect yours, who would die for you! And I know you feel the same. You just have to realize it. I need to remove your blinders."

Travis' body shook and he seemed to get a hold of himself before a grim look crossed his face. Mason knew Cleo's life was on the line. Full-scale panic settled inside him, the chair rattling hard under him. Travis ignored him and as he went to the door, giving him a forlorn look as if he was trying to convey how sorry he was before leaving him.

As the door closed, Mason's pain and desperation dissolved into a primal scream that filled the empty room as he felt his heart slowly dying inside his chest.

CHAPTER TWENTY

AS SOON AS SHE WOKE HER MIND WENT TO MASON, AND TEARS welled in her eyes. She hadn't heard from the team, and seeing no messages on her phone, she glanced at the clock before calling Emme. It was still early. She hadn't slept for long, but she knew the team would already be in the office and looking for Mason. The phone rang on the other end as she waited for someone to pick up. What she wanted was to go into work and keep busy.

"Hey, Cleo." Emme sounded fresh-faced and wide awake despite it being six in the morning.

Cleo sat up in bed and swung her legs over the side, swaying as a wave of nausea hit her. "Hey, Emme, any news?"

"Nothing yet, sweetie but we're looking into a few things."

Cleo heard the pause in her voice and felt her body go alert. "Tell me."

"Some of the avenues we're exploring suggest that Spears may not have taken Mason."

Cleo's brain whirred as she tried to make sense of what Emme was saying. "My stalker? But that makes no sense."

"No, but it is something we need to consider."

"I need to come into the office. Can someone come get me?" Emme was silent, and she knew her friend was considering if it was wise. "Please, Emme, if this were Shane you'd want to help."

A sigh came over the line, and she knew she had her. “Fine, I’ll have Nick swing by and get you.”

“Thanks, Emme.”

Cleo hung up and stood, and struggled to keep standing as she was hit with a bout of dizziness. She should be feeling better by now, but if anything, she felt worse. It must be the worry making her feel ill as she hadn’t eaten for hours, except for the hot chocolate Travis had given her.

Cleo shook it off as best she could and headed to the shower, feeling more optimistic. Mason would fight to keep safe until the team found him, she knew he would and when he got free, she was locking them on a deserted island together for a month.

Finding some clean underwear, she pulled on the ones Mason had chosen for her in what seemed a lifetime ago but was in fact only days and chose a cream, floral pencil skirt and pale green sleeveless blouse. She slid her feet into nude pumps and straightened her hair, wanting her game face on for this battle.

She heard the front door open and knew it was Travis. She wondered if he’d been gone all night. She’d slept hard for those few hours. A bomb could have gone off and she probably wouldn’t have heard it. Had he been working with the team to find Mason? More noises came from outside her door. Her belly dipped, not wanting to see him. He would protest her going she knew it. She didn’t want to argue with him or upset him when he was as worried about his friend as she was, but she wasn’t a child to be told what to do either.

Pushing back her shoulders and taking one last look in the mirror, she walked from the bedroom. Travis was at the kitchen counter making a coffee.

He looked up, and his eyes trailed down, noting her outfit. “Going somewhere?”

“Yes, into the office. I can’t just sit around and wait for them to find Mason. I have to help.” She appealed to his can-do need to help too.

He put down the cup he was holding and walked closer to her. “Um, see, that isn’t going to work for me.”

He reached out and gently tucked a stray hair behind her ear, and she felt a shiver go through her. Something felt off. She remembered the uneasy feeling she’d had when she’d first seen him, and took a step back, putting on a confident face. She turned to grab her bag when a hand to her shoulder shoved her to her knees. The shock made her startle as she moved to push up, but he was stronger. His touch turning painful.

“Stupid bitch, did you think I would let you leave?”

Cleo felt fear crawl over her skin at the change in the man before her. He wasn’t a friend, rather the proverbial wolf in sheep’s clothing. A look of intense hatred rippled from his eyes into her and Cleo knew she was looking into the eyes of the man who would kill her.

Her breath froze in her lungs as she tried to make sense of everything she was seeing. The handsome, friendly, enigmatic man she had met had turned into a cold, deadly killer filled with hate. Her mind whirred trying to understand what it was that she had done to elicit such a response from him.

Held on her knees, the hard floor beneath her biting into her skin, she looked up at Travis. “I don’t understand.”

“Of course, you don’t. You could never understand the connection Mason and I have.”

Her eyes snapped to him. “Mason? You know where he is?”

Travis grasped her hair, dragging her to her feet as she gripped his wrist to ease the burn in her scalp. “You don’t speak his name.”

The growl was low and threatening, and Cleo felt the terror spill through her veins unchecked as he hustled her to the bathroom door. Her heart was in her throat with fear, but she couldn’t stop the need for the questions in her brain to get the answers they craved. “Why are you doing this?”

Travis looked down at her and cocked his head, his eyes going almost soft for a second. “Because it is the only way he

can love me. With you in the way, he'll never admit what we have, what we can be together if he acknowledges how he feels."

The dawning reality was hard to fathom as she looked into the eyes of a man clearly in love. A man in love with Mason! Had this been about Mason all along? But that didn't make sense with Spears. Travis seemed to shake off the feelings overwhelming him and pushed her into the empty bathtub. Her shoulder hit the edge, jarring her with pain, her face barely missing the taps.

Not wanting her back to him and knowing this could be her final few moments, Cleo turned and faced him. The gun he now held on her was as steady as she knew his shot would be. Cleo looked down the barrel, hiding the grief that her life would end today. She would never get to tell Mason she loved him again. To hold his hand as they walked on the beach, to play with their children and watch them grow with the man she loved beside her.

"I wish this could have ended differently, Cleo. That you would end things with Mason on your own accord. I don't hate you, you seem like a nice person, but I can't let you take him from me. He's all I have. If you'd just finished that hot chocolate from last night, we wouldn't be in this position now."

She sat forward in the bath, shocked at his words. "You drugged me last night and now you're just going to kill me and leave me here?"

"Yes, your team will believe it's the stalker, and we will mourn your loss. Eventually Mason and I will rebuild our lives away from here."

He lifted the gun, and she held his eyes not willing to die like a coward. If he wanted her dead, he would have to look her in the eye as he did it.

Cleo waited for the pain and the sound of the gun to fire and nearly puked on herself when a loud banging ricocheted into the small bathroom.

“Cleo, open up. It’s Nick.”

Her eyes darted to the door, and she seized her chance opening her mouth and screaming. “Nick, help me.”

“Bitch!” Travis spat and hit her with the butt of the gun, opening her cheek. Warm blood oozed down her face as he glared at her with hatred.

With gunfire resonating from the front door, Travis turned and ran for the living room as the banging from the door intensified, loud shouts of concern from Nick. Stumbling from the bath with one shoe off, Cleo ran for the front door. She heard the glass being broken and thought about Travis escaping. How would he do it so far up? He could break his neck for all she cared.

Gripping the handle, she took two tries to slide the lock open before falling into Nick, who grabbed her. Taking in her appearance in a second, he glanced around his entire body on alert.

“Travis. He has Mason. You have to stop him.” She pointed to the living room where Travis had gone.

Nick steadied her and handed her his phone. “Call Shane now.” Then he was gone in pursuit of Travis.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MASON WAS SLICK WITH SWEAT AS HE TRIED TO CONTORT HIS body into inching closer toward the metal covered wall, making the chair he was bound to slide maddeningly slow. Ears on any noise coming from outside the room, praying for Travis to get killed in a road accident so Cleo would be safe. Mason wasn't delusional, only desperate.

Feeling the cold sheet of metal against his forearm, he twisted a little so his fingers could sense the seams, checking for any kink or defect that would produce a sharp edge. He needed to be patient and thorough, focus on what he could with his fingertips, which wasn't much.

He shuffled again and looked down, following one seam and saw a kink in the metal near the floor.

There wasn't any other choice but to get on the floor, and once down, Mason knew he would never be able to get back up unless he cut himself free.

It took some strength to make the chair move back and forward in a rocking motion, but he used his core muscles to eventually make the chair tip backward. The shock rattled his bones, and his head felt like it was split open when it hit the concrete floor, but he didn't care and shimmied until the side of his palm touched the wall.

Unable to look in his current position, Mason knew he had found what he was looking for when the metal started slicing through his skin on the side of his hand.

It was an awkward movement that cut a lot more flesh than tape, but he could live with that. Ignoring the pain and the trickling blood, his only focus was on the very subtle and restrained movement that cut one fiber at a time, at a frustratingly slow pace.

Every time he was about to yell in frustration or lose hope, Mason conjured Cleo in his mind, and her image was enough to bolster his courage and made the suffering and fear take a back seat.

He had to get free from this chair and escape. Cleo had to be alive and well, protected by his team. He couldn't live with any other possibility.

It took time, or maybe it was the blood making his wrist slick against the tape, but it seemed as if he could move a little more. Mason poured all of his energy into pulling against the tape, hoping sheer muscle strength would tear it. His arm throbbing like a bitch from the effort, Mason ground his teeth as he suppressed a groan of agony.

"I should have known you would try something like that. After all, you are one of the most intelligent men I know."

Travis' voice reverberated through Mason's head and he thought he was hallucinating until his former friend's blond head came into view. "Apart from hurting yourself, there wasn't a chance you'd free yourself before I came back. You knew I wasn't going to leave you alone for long."

Mason's heart was in his throat as Travis walked behind him, pulling the chair away from the wall before checking his wrist. *If he's back what does that mean for Cleo?*

"Thank goodness you didn't cut yourself worse. That was a dumb move, man. I don't have a first aid kit, but that can't be helped. I'll tend to your wound then we'll be on the move."

When the words sank in, Mason got his voice back. "What do you mean, move?"

Travis walked to the desk and pulled one of the drawers open, lifting the roll of duct tape, an amused smile on his face. "You didn't think we would live here, did you?"

Live together? The more Mason let him talk, the more he saw the extent of his mental state.

“Don’t worry about a thing, Mace. I have everything planned now I’ve tied all the loose ends.” Mason couldn’t think about what he was implying. Travis whistled as he circled his bloody wrist with some more tape. “I think I’ll leave you on the floor like this for the time being, until I’m ready for us to leave.”

But Mason’s head was reeling. “What loose ends?”

When Travis locked gazes with him, part adoring, part sad, Mason wondered if he would survive the answer his blond captor was about to give him.

“You knew sacrifices were necessary.”

Mason shook his head, lungs burning with tears and despair.

“In time, you’ll understand everything I’ve done for you and all will become clear.”

Mason almost didn’t feel Travis touch his hair as if both caressing and replacing each strand, but he needed to hear it. The words had to be said for him to process them. “Travis, what have you done to Cleo?”

Travis shook his head, a sincere air of regret on his face. “She was a nice woman. But you deserve better than nice, Mace. So much more.”

Mason couldn’t see or hear him anymore, he felt like he was underwater. Disconnected. Cleo couldn’t be gone, he would sense it in his bones if she was. Or was it the disappearance of the love of his life that made him want to die, his soul felt empty. He had failed Cleo. He was supposed to protect her, and he had let her down. All those images of her, her sweet smile, warm skin, and enticing perfume were now gone from this world because of him.

Travis moved, but it looked as if everything was in slow motion.

“I thought it would affect you, but don’t worry, the grief will disappear soon. Fortunately, I thought you would be overwhelmed, so I came prepared.”

Mason didn’t react when Travis took something out of his pocket. He didn’t care. Nothing was worthwhile anymore, so when Travis injected his arm with a syringe, Mason closed his eyes and hoped this hell would be over soon. Hopefully forever.

CLEO WINCED but stayed silent as Caitlin finished cleaning the gash on her cheek and applying butterfly bandages. “I hope it doesn’t leave a scar.”

Cleo looked up at her friend. “I don’t give a damn about that. We need to find Mason before that psycho hurts him.” Tears threatened, but she preferred to hang on to her anger than her fear.

Caitlin sighed. “Emme and the rest of the team are on their way from Mesa and should be here soon. All available hands are trying to find any sign of Travis leaving the apartment. Nick let everyone know what had happened.”

Would it be enough? That question circled in her mind like a buzzing bee.

Still debating what to do, she saw Shane entering the front door, followed by Emme, Mercy, and Wolf... and her grandmother.

In one swift moment, Cleo’s world narrowed to the older woman, and she found herself running into her arms, the same way she had when she’d escaped Spears’ clutches. And like it was only yesterday, she was once again surrounded with tenderness, warmth, and much-needed strength.

“My little girl.”

Those simple three words made Cleo sob. It would have been so easy to let herself go, to fall apart, but Mason’s survival required her to keep it together. Drawing in a deep

breath, Cleo stepped back and smiled through contained tears. “You’re safe now, Nana.”

The older woman, wisps of grey hair awry, her deep brown eyes as steady and deep as ever, looked worried as she took in Cleo. “Me? What about you, my treasured child?” Worry turned to steely determination. “I’m unsinkable. You know that. But you’re hurt. That deranged man did that to you? Your friends were anxious on the plane and on our way here.”

Cleo gingerly touched her throbbing cheek. “No, Nana. It’s a bit complicated... and...”

When she opened her mouth to speak, a ball of tears lodged itself in her throat, preventing her from saying another word. The older woman was wise enough to nod, skimming her bruised cheek with a frown.

“You’re a fighter. Always have been from the moment you drew your first breath until you decided you’d had enough of that nonsense back in Arizona. I can see you are fighting again, and this battle is for the young man your friends told me about, am I right?”

Cleo looked over her grandmother’s shoulder to see Mercy and Wolf eyeing their feet in the corner as if they were the most fascinating sight in the world, which finally made her smile. Somehow, it loosened up her throat. “Has someone been yapping behind my back?”

Wolf coughed, but winked at her, his straw cowboy hat partially hiding his eyes.

Her grandmother followed her look and smiled at the huge man in the corner. “Don’t be too hard on him. I used all my tricks to wrangle information on what was going on.”

Wolf’s shoulder shook a little when he answered. “Yeah, Cleo, your grandma is brutal, have pity on me.”

This brief moment of levity steadied her enough to regain control over her emotions. “Having you here, safe, is what I need right now. I’ll explain everything later, but now, we’re running out of time to save Mason.”

Mrs. Darwin kissed her granddaughter's brow before nodding. "Dear Emme told me I could go lie down in a room nearby. I have everything I need. Go. Find your young man and then we'll talk."

Wolf appeared by her grandmother's side, a large bag in his hand and he escorted her out of sight. Emme, Mercy, and Caitlin closed around her in a tight circle, a silent show of support, but before anything could be said, the rest of the team, led by a grim-looking Shane, came in. Her boss nodded at her before signaling everyone to head to the conference room.

At last, something was moving forward, and Cleo felt energized as hope steadied her. Surrounded by so many experienced and dangerous individuals, Travis didn't stand a chance. Almost the entire Alliance Agency team sat around the conference table. Shane and Emme were at the helm.

Shane stepped forward. "Everyone has been updated on what happened at Cleo's apartment. We've all been blindsided and even if we wanted to wallow on the reasons why, our priority is Mason."

Everyone around the table nodded as Emme continued. "To cover our six, Kingsley, James, Alex, and Mercy are looking for Spears. He may not be our main target, but there's no way we can let him and his men go free. It's a disaster waiting to happen, and even if we need all hands on deck, the only solution is to split for the time being, at least until we know Spears' whereabouts."

Cleo didn't want to think about Spears, but she had to agree with her bosses. It would be dumb to dismiss the other threat, but she would have preferred more people trying to find Mason.

"Cleo, is there anything you can think of, any bit of information he might have given away that will help us find Mason?"

Shane's question was one Cleo had asked herself time and time again. "I wish I knew. He didn't give anything away, and I didn't think to ask."

Malco swiveled closer and touched her arm. “Don’t beat yourself up, Cleo. You were in survival mode. Just the fact you kept a cool head and remembered so much is amazing. I’ve been involved in countless kidnappings and rescues and I’ve seen a definite trend.”

Nicholas smiled at her. “I agree with him. You were scared, but you fought him and tried to escape.”

Their encouraging words settled her quivering stomach. “But bottom line, I didn’t get more information and Travis is in the wind.”

Malco frowned. “I wouldn’t say that. I discussed it with the team as we made our way here. We’ve come up with a theory on what happened.”

Shane nodded silently, encouraging Malco to go on. Cleo was on the edge of her seat.

“We can’t know for sure until we get our hands on Vaughn, but I think at some point, we were the one that brought Spears into the mix.”

Caitlin gasped. “You can’t be serious.”

“I think it was a one in a million chance and we inadvertently stepped right into it. The usual process when looking for a stalker is to comb a person’s past to see if the threat comes from there. I’m convinced Spears being in Miami was simply a coincidence and if Mason hadn’t confronted him at the hospital, I don’t think he would have even appeared on our radar.”

Cain leaned forward, nodding. “We shook a hornets’ nest when we could have just sidestepped it? That means Travis has no relationship with Spears either, or worse, he used it to cover his intentions toward Mason.”

Curses bounced around the room. Wolf threw his hat on the table. “We know virtually nothing about this guy, we all trusted Mason on this.”

“We need to dig deep. Anybody have friends in the Secret Services?”

Cleo almost laughed at Caitlin's statement, although she knew the woman wasn't entirely joking.

Shane pulled out his phone. "I'll see if I can get hold of someone. Been a while since I chatted with some brass, but it won't hurt to dig."

"That will take too long. We don't have time to do a psych eval on the guy. We need to find him. To find Mason," Nicholas said. From the nods of the others in the room, he perfectly mirrored the general opinion.

Emme looked at Shane, who shook his head. "I'm all for it, but we've already checked all the available videos in a five-mile radius of Mason's apartment building, and we haven't found anything. Zilch, zip, nothing, nada."

Cleo closed her eyes, trying hard to engage her brain and provide a worthy idea, but all she could come up with was the last time she had seen Mason. He had covered her body with his, so typical of his protective nature, risking his life to rescue her.

People talked all around her as she was lost in the memory until something occurred to her. "What about the cameras around the warehouse where you found me?"

Nicholas looked grim. "Alex and Kingsley looked at them. Travis and Mason were out of range, so it's impossible to see them. I don't remember Travis disappearing for that long, I mean not long enough to carry a man like Mason far without being seen and then he brought Cleo home."

But Cleo wasn't deterred. Something inside her told her it was the thread to pull. "I know, but Mason must have been unconscious at that point, otherwise he would've called for help. That means Travis had to act fast while we were all busy, and it was chaos. What if he hid him somewhere close? It may have been a spur of the moment decision and he could have gone back later to get him. I went to bed pretty much straight away, I heard him leave, but I have no idea where he went. I honestly thought he'd decided I was fine and decided to go back to his place. I didn't hear him come back till this morning, but knowing now he drugged me, he could have

come and gone a few times while I was asleep, or he could have been gone the whole time.”

The room turned silent as a tomb before Nicholas and Cain bolted out of the room. Everyone was hot on their heels as they entered the war room and they all crammed around the two men as they started their search.

Images came up at a mind-blowing speed, and it became difficult for her eyes to focus on the images flying by in fast forward.

Emme gasped, and Cain froze the screen. “Look, it’s Travis’ car.”

Cleo held her breath, leaning forward as she saw the blond man getting out and he disappeared from the screen.

“Damn it, Cleo, you’re a smart woman. You were right! Guys, don’t lose him now!” Shane looked like he was about to punch the screen.

The men pushed forward, and it didn’t take long for Travis to head back toward his car and it was clear he was carrying something substantial in his arms even though his back was to the camera.

“Don’t lose him. We need to start tracking his car as soon as he puts Mason inside.”

It took only a moment more to see Travis had no intention of taking his car. Instead, he followed the building. The angle was broad in the now darker evening, but he went in-between the buildings instead.

“Shit, can’t find a better angle, boss.”

Nicholas started fast-forwarding the feed they had, and it didn’t take long. When he came back, Mason wasn’t with him. Appearing casual, Travis put his hands in his pockets until he reached his car and drove away in the Miami night.

“Bingo.”

Malco’s low voice was so close to her ear it made Cleo jump, bringing her back to reality, and she saw it. The moment

Travis disappeared inside a building. They now had an address.

When she looked up at Emme, Cleo saw the familiar warrior gleam in her friend's eyes, telling her that nothing was lost. "Team, time to go get Mason back."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CLEO GLARED AT SHANE. “NO WAY AM I STAYING HERE.”

He may be her boss, but she was done letting other people look for her man while she sat back like a lame duck.

Shane sighed and brushed his hand down his jaw. “We don’t know how dangerous it is or what Travis might have in place.” His argument was solid, but Cleo didn’t care; she needed to be there to see him.

Ready to wear her heart on her sleeve, Cleo decided to open up to the team and lay it all on the line for them. Moving toward Shane she looked up at him. “Please, Shane. I love him, and my heart can’t take sitting back and waiting for you to tell me he’s okay.” She had to believe it would end with him being okay because anything else was unthinkable. The tenderness that crossed Shanes’ face made her continue. “If it were Emme in this predicament you wouldn’t sit back and wait.”

Shane glanced across at the woman he loved, and she saw the same fierce love and devotion she did when Mason looked at her. “No, of course not, but I’m trained and so is Emme.” He returned his gaze to her, but he was losing the battle.

“I’ll watch her and make sure she’s safe,” Nick said.

Shane’s eyes swung to his best friend. A million words were silently spoken between the two men. Eventually, Shane nodded and moved his eyes to her, his face stern. “You do exactly what Nick says, you hear me?”

Cleo nodded. “Absolutely.”

With that said she watched as the team grabbed their gear, including weapons, comms, and bulletproof vests before trailing out the door to the three vehicles parked in the back.

She and Nick would be driving Malco and Caitlin. Killian was now fully recovered from his encounter with the poison and sat beside her, leaning his big body into her as if sensing she needed comfort from the racing, terrified thoughts inside her head. Cleo rubbed her hand over the soft fur at his neck, and he turned and licked her cheek, making her smile and laugh, easing the tension coiling in her gut.

Nick turned from his place in the front seat, where he sat beside Malco. “When we get there, we’ll be going in soft. We have no idea what traps he may have set or where he’s keeping Mason.”

Cleo nodded and accepted that this team—her friends—knew what they were doing. “I’ll do whatever you tell me to do. I’m not here to cause problems. I need to be here for Mason.” Her voice felt wobbly as tears burned the back of her throat. Nick nodded sharply accepting her word.

Before long, she saw the shapes of the industrial estate and the warehouses came into view. A shudder went through her to think Mason was here and incapacitated in some way. She just held on to the hope that because Travis believed he was in love with Mason he wouldn’t harm him.

Malco parked behind the back of a warehouse on the furthest edge of the estate, and they exited the vehicle. Shane moved toward them with Wolf and Emme. Mercy was leaning on the hood of the car with a laptop open in front of her.

Shane stood with his hands on his hips in full command of everything and everyone. “This is what is going to happen.” He eyeballed them all. “Malco and Emme, you’ll go in the back and check out the rear of the warehouse. Caitlin and Wolf, I want you to sweep the area for any sign of where he might be holding Mason. Use Killy to your advantage. We have no idea how long we have. Mercy, you and I are going in through the front door. Nick, I want you on the roof in case this fucker comes back or decides to run. Nobody takes one of

ours and gets away with it.” The steely set of his jaw told everyone how personally Shane was taking this. Cleo had always known the people at Alliance were more friends than colleagues, but now she realized they were actually more like family. Shane pinned her eyes with his. “You will wait in this car and under no circumstance are you to leave it. Do you understand?”

Cleo nodded again noting the severity of the situation and wanting not to be in the way.

“Right, let’s rollout.”

Mercy handed comms to everyone except her, which she knew was so she couldn’t hear what was happening and run in to try and save the day. She didn’t like it, but she knew why they did it. The fact was, she wasn’t a badass operative. She was the office manager, and her skill set did not lie in rolling around the floor playing army or diving through windows. She could find a one-cent discrepancy in payroll and organize a mean spreadsheet, but the rescue would have to be left to the professionals. She loved Mason far too much to put him at risk with her ill-planned attempt to play the hero.

Locking the doors, she watched the team disappear in different directions as if they hadn’t been there just seconds ago. Her eyes strained to see them, but she couldn’t, they had vanished from sight. Now alone with her thoughts, Cleo tried her hardest to push the fear that was suffocating in its intensity to the side. She needed to stay positive, and she and Mason would get through this stronger than ever.

She had no illusions it would be easy for a man like Mason to not take it personally and as an insult to his ability that he hadn’t known one of his best friends was becoming someone he didn’t know. That he hadn’t seen the threat he posed to them both. She also knew his sweet, compassionate side would wish he’d stopped Travis’s slide into a sick and twisted mindset where his love for Mason had become a need to claim him and see his love returned whatever the cost.

Her heart ached for the pain she knew Mason would feel, but it also hurt for Travis. What must he have gone through to

have made him flip this way?

The silence in the car was eating away at her as she continued to scan the horizon looking for any sign of the team returning with Mason, but all she saw was deserted concrete and metal.

A tap on the window made her jump. Turning she stared into the barrel of a gun pointed at her head. Travis inclined his head and pointed at the door. He wanted her to get out of the vehicle. Her heart hammered in her throat and sweat instantly beaded her brow as the calm, calculated man motioned for her to do as he asked, emphasizing it with a wave of the gun in his hand. Her mind flew over her options—she could stay in the vehicle and risk being shot in the head or she could go with him and hope the team managed to get Mason out before Travis could hurt him and kill her. She had no other option but to slowly open the door.

“Hands where I can see them,” Travis growled, pulling her roughly from the vehicle. She stumbled and would have lost her footing except for the cruel hold he had on her arm. “Start walking, and if you even think about trying to alert your team, I’ll shoot Mason and make you watch.”

Cleo had no idea if he was bluffing, but she had no intention of finding out. Walking slowly by his side, she cast glances at the man who’d seemed so sweet. Was there any chance to redeem him? Could he be saved? A good man had resided in him at some stage, but he had gotten lost somehow.

“How long have you been in love with Mason?” She kept her voice soft, not wanting him to think she was trying to let the team know where she was. She didn’t think he would answer but was surprised when he did.

“Almost since the day we met. I knew he was straight, but Mason never saw me as broken or dirty. He just saw the person, saw me for who I was inside instead of the homosexual embarrassment my family saw. I fell in love with him despite knowing it couldn’t be.”

“That’s awful your family felt that way. I’m sorry. Did Mason know you were gay?”

Travis shook his head. “No. After my first real boyfriend died of a heart attack when he was in his late twenties, I kept my sexuality hidden. And I’m bi-sexual, not gay. Merrick was everything Mason is. Sweet, kind, funny, loyal.” Cleo heard the love in his voice and then the heartbreak. “Then he was gone, and my entire world fell apart. If it weren’t for my job, it would have killed me. Then I met Mason, and he healed something inside me.”

“He cares about you,” Cleo admitted and wondered if pointing out it was purely platonic would be a good idea.

“He loves me, he just can’t see it because of you,” he growled. Cleo flinched at the hate in his words and tone. Travis was unstable, and she needed to find a way out of there.

As they rounded a corner, a small Winnebago came into view that had partially been hidden by a tarp. Looking back she saw there was a second entrance to the alleyway beside the warehouse he’d held Mason in.

“What are you going to do with me?” she asked as she noticed a black fur snout with Caitlin holding the leash on the far-left corner of the warehouse. Travis hadn’t spotted her, so she drew his attention away.

“Mason needs to grieve your death and see for himself you’re gone so he can move on. Once we get somewhere safe, I’ll kill you, and Mason can begin to let you go and see how much he needs me.”

Cleo swallowed the bile sloshing in her belly at the way he spoke of her death as if it was as easy as putting the bins out for collection.

Travis opened the door of the motorhome and shoved her through. She fell to her knees, the coarse carpet biting into the skin on her hands and a choked sob of fear fell from her lips. Looking up, she saw the prone figure of the man she loved on the bed, his hands bound and bleeding, his eyes closed, chest almost still.

Her eyes froze on him. More than anything she wanted to crawl to him but didn’t want to anger Travis any more than he

was, lest they both end up dead.

As Travis turned away the most beautiful set of eyes gazed at her with such surprise, followed by intense love, she thought she would faint from relief. He was alive. He was okay. But then he shook his head sadly, and the light went out of them as he turned away from her, pain like none she had seen before on etched on his face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

AT FIRST MASON THOUGHT HE WAS HALLUCINATING, STILL fighting to emerge from whatever substance Travis had injected him with. His hallucination turned into the most horrific nightmare when Cleo materialized, very much alive, before his eyes. She wasn't dead. Travis had lied to him, robbing him of all hope. Hope had returned but not for long. Now bound and gagged, he looked around at his surroundings before assessing the situation the best he could from his place on the bed.

It was the weapon in Travis's hand that finally lifted the last wisps of the drug from his mind. He twisted on the bed, desperate to get free, but it was no use. Travis was a professional, one who would take into consideration every single detail to achieve his mission. From the look of pure fright on Cleo's face, Mason knew he would have to be even more cunning, better than he had ever been, to save Cleo and make sure she lived. Mason knew what Travis wanted to do, kill Cleo in front of him so he could cut the link between them. Mason had to play it differently in order to find a way to take the upper hand.

Turning away from Cleo, breaking eye contact with her when she had so much hope and fear in her eyes almost crushed him. However, his reaction had the expected result with Travis.

"Mason, don't turn away from the inevitable. From your destiny."

Cleo gasped, and there was some shuffling before his love was pushed into the corner of the small room. She fell hard, knocking her head against the wall, but turned immediately to reach him before stopping abruptly. Travis must have aimed his gun at her.

A firm hand on his shoulder forced him on his back. Travis towered over him, that same hurt and desperate look on his face. "I'm sorry I drugged you, but there was no other way." His hand traced the contour of his face, and Mason forced himself not to react, not to flinch away. On the contrary, he leaned into the touch and let his eyes close, forcing the bile in his throat down. "How I wish you could see me how I see you, Mason. Your blindness is pushing me to extremes."

Mason let his desperation seep out, allowing tears to fill his eyes. His reaction stunned Travis who removed his gag. Gulping air, Mason felt his tears escape. Travis' attention was on him, and he intended to keep it this way.

"Travis, I don't know what to say." And it was the absolute truth. Still vulnerable, he had to find a way to pull the threat away and silently prayed for Cleo to remain immobile and silent so that she'd be forgotten.

Travis' face softened as he cupped his cheek. "How often I dreamed of seeing you so open to me."

Mason nodded. "You should have told me earlier. You would have prevented so much pain. You are so important to me, Travis. It's tearing me apart to see how much you held back, how much you hid from me over the years. We lost so much time."

Falling to his knees, Travis brought Mason to a sitting position. His eyes gleaming, he let the gun fall on the floor, allowing him to cup Mason's cheek. "Oh, how much I want to believe you. How I want this to be real and true."

Mason knew everything he held dear hung in the balance when he leaned forward and kissed his former friend. Travis' sudden intake of breath confirmed to Mason that he held the key that might save Cleo.

Despite his body rebelling against the intimate contact, he reined in his reaction and traced the seams of Travis' lips with his tongue. Travis slid closer between his legs and circled his hips with arms, deepening the connection, a visible sign he was entranced.

As Travis started sliding his hand over his thighs and under his shirt, Mason leaned back. "Send her away. I don't want her here. I only want you."

Would his former friend fall for his lies? His heart pumping, Mason waited as Travis debated his request. Before he could rule it out and grab his weapon again, Mason used his last trump card. "Keep my hands bound, I don't care. I know you will take care of me, and at some point, you'll see that I'll take care of you. That you are becoming my world too."

Travis shuddered and leaned his forehead against his. "You know I never wanted to hurt or kill her. I just wanted you to see me. To love me."

Mason's heart hurt for Travis. He hated to see him hurting this much but also realized how disconnected from the notion of right and wrong he was. In his first sincere gesture, Mason kissed his forehead. "I know. Sorry for being a slow learner."

This time, it was a sob that came from his lips. "Yes. Yes, you are." Travis looked up at Cleo who had surely turned into a frightened mouse. "You. Get out. Now."

Even if Mason would have sold his soul to look at her one last time, he instead leaned his head against Travis's chest and hoped with all he could that she'd understand and obey without making a fuss. They were in a dangerous and challenging situation, and the risk to their lives was still very high. All he wanted was to at least save one. Hers.

Movement behind him confirmed Cleo was indeed moving, making her way around the bed in the confined space. Smart woman. Proud and desperate, he heard the door open and shut and knew she was safe.

Travis lifted his head with his hands and gave him a chaste kiss. "Do you feel this new chapter for both of us?"

The smile he gave him was false, but he could bide his time to take care of this threat against Cleo. “You have a way of making that chapter quite suspenseful.”

With a laugh, Travis got to his feet. “I never saw myself like that, but I guess desperation was the cause of it. You should rest now. I’ll take the wheel and get us away from Miami. Then, we’ll be able to talk.” On those words, Travis closed the bedroom door on him, and soon, the engine roared.

Mason restrained himself from acting. A quick look around told him there was nothing to help free him from the tape. Also, he wanted Travis to be convinced of his sudden change of heart a while longer. Long enough for them to leave Miami and make sure Cleo was safe forever.

HER HEART IN HER THROAT, Cleo ran out of the RV as fast as possible, retracing her steps toward the car in sheer panic. She didn’t have a cell phone and wasn’t convinced Travis wouldn’t have a change of heart and kill her.

How much time had passed since Travis had kidnapped her? Was the team still looking for Mason or had they noticed her sudden disappearance? Cleo was wondering if she was in the right area, unable to find the car when someone grabbed her shoulder.

The sheer terror that engulfed her made her scream at the top of her lungs.

“Hey, hey! Cleo, it’s me!”

It took a couple of seconds for Malco’s voice to slice through her brain. When it did, she turned and fell into his arms, trying to relay what had happened at the same time. Malco’s usually calm demeanor and strength helped her regain control over herself and finally make sense.

Nodding, he pulled out his cell phone before grabbing her hand and walking in the opposite direction. “Shane. Found Cleo. Travis has Mason in an RV a few streets over. Probably driving off as we speak. Tell everyone to be on the lookout.”

One block over, Malco ushered her into his car and Cleo didn't have time to put her seat belt on before he burned rubber getting on the road.

Immediately, he turned toward the area where she had last seen the RV. Cleo yelped when he made another sharp turn. "What are you doing?"

"If they're not where you last saw them, it means they're on the run. If I were Travis, I would try to get out of town as quickly as possible, and that means using the closest highway."

His reasoning made sense. Malco touched his ear to relay the information, and she heard that Mercy and James would stay behind and comb the area to make sure, while Caitlin and Alex headed back to base to check out the cameras and satellites. The others would make their way toward Malco's position.

The speed at which Malco was navigating the small streets made her tense at each turn, but she didn't dare ask him to slow down. Mason was still in danger, and every second counted.

They reached Interstate-95 in record time, and just as they merged into the traffic, Malco got a call from Caitlin and put her on speakerphone. "Tell me you're on the interstate."

Malco swerved to pass two cars, and they got so close, Cleo thought she would hear the sound of metal scraping on metal. "I'm on the Interstate, but I don't know if I'm going in the right direction. I'm heading north, but I could be wrong."

"No, keep going. We just started scanning, and we can see at least five RVs heading north that are still within the city limits. Nothing headed south. Will keep you updated. Shane and Emme are five minutes behind you. The others are ten minutes away."

Malco cut through all three lanes, never stepping off the gas pedal. "I see an RV in front of us."

Cleo looked up and frowned as they closed in. "No. It's too small. And there was a big window at the back where the

bedroom is.”

Bypassing a big truck, Malco accelerated amidst a symphony of horns. Ignoring her queasy stomach, Cleo focused as far as she could on the road, scanning it for the RV.

“Shit!”

Cleo was about to ask Malco what was wrong when he braked suddenly to avoid something on the road, making her grip the dashboard. Then, the car surged forward again, making her whip back into her seat. “What happened?”

“There was stuff on the road, it looked like metal and glass.”

More honking brought her attention back to the road, and she saw an RV in the distance, riding the center lane. Malco pushed the car, and as they got closer, she could see a shadow moving inside. Mason must have tried to kick the window out as Travis drove, but there was still glass shards and sharp metal pieces all around the edges.

Mason appeared at the window. With his arms still bound behind his back, he struggled to cut the tape on the glass.

Cleo could see blood trickling over the back of the RV, and cried out. Just as he finally got free, Malco pressed hard on his horn. Mason looked up, and several expressions passed over his face before it settled into his warrior’s look.

He did a few signs with his hand, and Malco cursed under his breath, getting closer to the van and gave him a sign.

“What, what? What is he saying?”

“He wants to stay there and take care of Travis. Which is a bad idea. The middle of the interstate is too great a risk. Civilians could get hurt if things go wrong.”

A ringing came from the dashboard before Shane’s voice came through. “The cops have been alerted and a special squad is on its way, heading for the highway. Can you confirm the RV’s location?”

“We’re right behind it. I have a visual on Mason. He broke out the back window.” Malco added some other landscape

indications so Shane could relay them to the police.

“The tactical team will take care of the RV, stay put. They are only a few minutes behind you.”

Cleo grabbed Malco’s arm. She spoke to Shane as much as Malco. “I saw Travis. He’s unstable. If he sees the police, and there’s a chance he might lose Mason, I don’t know how he’ll react.”

“I can’t pull the cops. The man is too dangerous. If there is a way to get Mason out, it’s now or never. That’s the only solution.”

Malco drove even closer to the back of the RV’s bumper. He signed something to Mason who didn’t seem happy but nodded.

“What are you going to do?”

Malco didn’t answer right away. Mason disappeared from view for a second. Then he draped the comforter over the window opening, and Cleo understood.

It was like watching a movie in slow motion. Her heart was firmly in her throat. They were doing sixty on the interstate, and were surrounded by cars. Mason made his way out of the RV and landed on the hood of the vehicle with a hard bump.

As Mason hooked his bloody hand by the window, Malco decelerated steadily. As he carefully made his way to the side of the road, sirens wailed, and over ten cop cars passed them by.

“Get in the back, Cleo, quick.”

Swiftly, she slid in the back as Mason finally got inside.

“Quick! Follow them!”

Malco didn’t have to be told twice. Merging back into traffic at the speed of light, Malco was on a mission.

Mason turned into his seat and reached out to her. “Are you all right?”

All the emotions and fears she'd had since he'd disappeared bubbled up, making it impossible for her to speak. She linked her hand with his for a moment and nodded. They were both alive, if barely, but the reunion she was desperate for had to wait as the phone rang again.

“Sitrep.” Shane’s voice was cold as ice.

“Got Mason. He’s with us, and we’re tailing the RV.”

“Keep your distance. Let the tactical team do their work. The highway patrol is about to close the Interstate ahead.”

Minutes passed, excruciatingly slow. Cleo kept Mason’s hand in hers as they saw a line of blue and red blinking lights in the distance beyond the RV. The vehicle started to swerve, but there was nowhere to go. Cars alongside screeched to a halt, some of them hitting each other, but with the cars decreasing their speed, it helped to avoid any major accidents.

It was obvious Travis knew what was going on as he finally brought the RV to a stop. For a long time, the doors remained closed, but even with the distance between them, Cleo could see a flash of blond hair through the destroyed back window. The man had gone to the man he loved. Had it been to kill them both, try to protect him? Only Travis knew. In an unexpected way, her heart ached for the man. Even in his deviant way, he had loved and wanted to be loved, a very human emotion that unfortunately wouldn’t be fulfilled.

More police vehicles whizzed by their stopped car, followed by a black truck indicating the arrival of the SWAT team. They had to be half a mile from where the RV had been brought to a stop. Mason let go of her hand and got out of the car, Cleo got out too, as did Malco, all three focusing on the scene unfolding out of reach.

Noise and voices were blurred as black shapes with weapons surrounded the RV. There were yells, but Cleo couldn’t discern the words. She didn’t have too. The dark circle tightened until the side door opened. It all happened so fast, none of them could react.

All she could see was Travis disappearing from the back room and opening the side door, one hand in the air as he came into view. But the situation turned deadly when Travis revealed a weapon in his other fist.

The air froze for a moment, and the tactical team fired. In an instant, it was over.

It happened so fast, it was hard to comprehend until Travis' tall frame was falling onto the road. He was dead and the whole thing felt anticlimactic to Cleo.

Standing in the middle of the Interstate, Cleo couldn't utter a word, her thoughts still overcome with emotions and adrenaline. All she could do was step toward Mason, who was still as a statue and hadn't said a word or moved a muscle as his best friend was killed.

Gently, she touched his back, in a silent show of support and comfort. Cleo felt him shiver and inhale sharply before turning around and taking her into a tight embrace. Her world had righted itself again. Whatever lay ahead, Cleo was ready to fight with this man by her side.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE HOT WATER SLUICED OVER HIS BODY, WASHING AWAY THE dirt and grime of captivity, but it couldn't erase the guilt he felt. Cleo had nearly been killed because of his ignorance and blind faith. Travis was dead—killed because he hadn't been able to see how his friend was unraveling.

He endured so much grief for the man Travis had been—kind, compassionate, and a good friend and colleague. He had failed him, and he had failed Cleo.

Cleo. Just the thought of her made him feel so many emotions. Love, sadness, relief, guilt, desire, need. But mostly he felt unworthy of her.

He had barely looked at her since they'd watched Travis get killed on the interstate. He had held her so tight wanting to absorb her into his body, to feel her against him, soothing him in a way nobody else ever had. He knew Cleo had sensed him pulling away as they gave their statements to the police. He couldn't bear to see the look of disappointment in her eyes when she realized he wasn't good enough for her. Like a coward, he had used the excuse of a shower to escape when they got back to the Agency.

He would have to face her, he knew that, but he just needed more time. Finally, the water ran clean, and he had exhausted his excuse. Stepping from the shower, he draped the towel around his hips and stepped to the mirror in the men's changing rooms. He looked tired, there were dark circles around his eyes, a testament to how he felt inside. What he needed was twelve hours of sleep, some food, and a cold beer.

He would need to debrief Shane and Emme about everything, but that could wait until the morning. Pulling on some trousers and a shirt, he sat to tie his shoes. After running his hands through his wet hair, he walked toward the exit and out into reception.

It was deserted, and he instinctively looked around for Cleo, wanting to see her face or hear her voice. He followed the sound of low voices toward the conference room, his heart thudding in his chest. He stepped in, and four heads turned to him, but none of them were the one he needed to see. He beat back the disappointment at seeing only Shane, Emme, James, and Caitlin instead of the woman who owned his heart and soul. Maybe this was how it should be, he had been avoiding talking to her, and now she was making it clear she couldn't be with him either.

“Where is Cleo?” The question was out despite not being ready for the answer and hating his weakness.

Emme smiled as she spoke. “Malco took her and her grandmother home.”

Her apartment. Mason nodded while his heart shattered even more. “Good, she must be tired.” What he wanted to do was punch the wall and take out all his frustrations and anger on something, but he didn't. “I'm going to head out. Can we do the debrief first thing?”

Shane pinned him with a stare, seeming to read his mood and nodded. “Yes, get some rest, and we can catch up tomorrow.”

Mason walked toward the door, snagging the spare keys for the company truck on his way. He would get Knight to meet him in the morning and retrieve his car. He drove to the nearest burger bar and ordered an enormous burger and fries. He added in a large chocolate shake for good measure.

Back at his place, he put his key in the lock and took a breath, dreading the silence he knew would greet him. He had gotten used to Cleo being in his space, relished seeing her stuff mingled in with his, the small touches she'd added to soften his harsh existence.

Pushing open the door, he almost threw his food in the air when he came face to face with the woman who would forever own his heart. The same heart that was banging out of his chest as if sensing its mate and trying to get to her.

She looked so beautiful, her hair was tied back in a simple ponytail emphasizing her bare face and high cheekbones. It was the bright look of hope and love on her face that made him pause.

“What are you doing here, Cleo?” He kicked the door shut behind him and walked past her to the kitchen, putting his food down and keeping space between them so he didn’t reach for her like his hands itched to do. He felt her eyes rake over him, sensed the nerves in her movements. He could smell the scent she wore as she moved closer to him, and he tensed, waiting for her to tell him it was over. He couldn’t face her and kept his eyes down.

“Mason.” Her voice seared his heart.

“What do you need?” He couldn’t look at her.

“Mason, please look at me.” Her voice was imploring him.

Closing his eyes, he drew in a breath and hardened himself to the pain he knew was coming. Better to get this over with now so they could both move on. To what, he had no clue. He didn’t want to move on from her, knew in his heart he never would. He forced his eyes up, and for a second, he wanted to beg her to forgive him for failing her. “Shane said you had gone home.”

Cleo tilted her head at him as she moved closer. “I am home, Mason. This is my home. Wherever you are is home.”

Mason dared to hope as she moved closer, cupping his cheek with her soft hand. The look of open devotion and love was something he had never seen before. A barrier was down, there was nothing between them except utter truth and honesty.

“How can you say that after everything that happened?”

Cleo positioned her body so there was no space between them, every inch of her was touching him, and he allowed

himself to lean into her heat and her strength, taking just a second to garner that for himself.

“I know it was hard for you to watch Travis die. He was a good man once, and I believe he truly loved you, but he got lost along the way. But none of that changes anything between us except making me realize I can’t live another moment without you.” Her eyes were wet with unshed tears, and he felt his heart that had been slowly dying in his chest began to beat again.

“I love you, Mason Bentley. With all my heart, I love you. I never want to wake up without you again. You made me realize running doesn’t solve anything. Staying and facing the fear, taking the biggest gamble, gives the biggest rewards and with you I know I’ve won bigger than I ever thought possible.”

He let his thumbs catch the tear that slipped over and started down her cheek, hating to see her cry. “But I failed you. I let you down. You nearly died because I was so blind.”

Cleo shook her head, her hair whipping back and forth with the force of her movement. “No! You did not fail me. You saved me from Spears, kept me safe and showed me I could have a future that includes loving someone and not just living to work. You gave me back my family.”

He shook his head but held her tighter, not feeling strong enough to push away the woman who had broken through his hard shell. “I don’t deserve you.” She gave him a look that said she was getting pissed, and he smothered a grin. He loved the feisty woman in front of him. “I don’t deserve you.” He put his finger over her lips when she went to speak to stop her. “It’s true, but one thing I’m not is a stupid man. I may never deserve you, but I’m selfish.

“I love you, Cleo, more than I ever thought it possible to love another human being. You make me want to slay dragons for you, to be a better man, a man you can be proud of and I’ll spend every day of my life making sure you know how much I love you, cherish you, desire you.” He watched her eyes go

soft, felt the pulse in her neck pound as he trailed his hand over her throat, loving the feel of her heartbeat so strong.

“Does that mean I can stay?”

The question was tentative, and he regretted he had made her doubt herself. If he had learned one thing in the last few days, it was that life was short and could change on a whim or a word. He wasn't prepared to hold back anything of himself anymore. Cleo was his, and he would spend eternity showing her how much he loved her.

He swung her into his arms, making her giggle and strode toward the hallway determined to show her with his body how much he meant every word. He stopped abruptly as he made it to the hall. “Where's your grandmother?” He wanted to meet the amazing woman that had cared for his Cleo but not right now.

“Malco took her back to my place. Spears is still out there so he'll stay and make sure she's okay. I think he has a soft spot for her. Wolf too from what I got.” The smile on her face matched the one in his heart.

“Good because what I have planned for you will involve a lot of noise.”

Cleo waggled her eyebrows as he threw the door open. “Oh yeah? Show me!”

And he did—all night long. His food and exhaustion were forgotten. The only thing he needed was her in his arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CLEO WAS LOST IN PARADISE AND DIDN'T WANT TO EVER LET go of that feeling. With Mason's strong heartbeat beneath her ear, their naked bodies intertwined under the covers, their own private fortress where nothing else mattered, she was happier than she'd ever been.

She snuggled up, trying to get even closer when Mason's hand started to trace her spine, a sure sign he was awake. Cleo searched for something to say but finally decided to keep silent. What else could be said? After they had said the words, their lovemaking had been another marvelous form of confirmation, one she had freely given and received many times throughout the night.

Mason started playing with a strand of her hair and caressing her scalp, and she purred. His chest moved a little in a silent bout of laughter. Cleo was about to lightly bite his chest, inevitably starting another round of lovemaking when a pounding resonated throughout the apartment.

Immediately Mason tensed, and Cleo scrambled up as he hopped out of bed and grabbed a pair of pants, quickly slipping them on. She put on one of Mason's shirts and was glad it covered her almost to her knees.

Mason took a quick look at his phone and frowned. "Shane's tried to reach me several times. Don't know why my phone didn't ring."

As he left the room, he grabbed his gun. Cleo's swallowed hard, anxiety creeping higher. *What was going on? Who's at*

the door?

Mason told her to stay behind, but when they got to the door, Shane's loud voice instantly reassured her. However, even though Shane being at the door meant it was safe to open, it also meant something had gone wrong.

Mason put his gun in his waistband and opened the door to Shane and Malco.

“Damn, Bentley! Don't you ever fucking answer your phone?”

Air seized in her lungs when she saw Malco. “Weren't you supposed to be watching Nana?”

When she approached the man, he rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. “I was. I dozed off on your couch, and when I woke, she was gone. Left me a note on the kitchen table saying she had unfinished business to take care of.”

Cleo looked at Shane and then Mason, and it was easy to follow their train of thought. “She went after Spears. My grandmother went after Jeffrey Spears.”

Several emotions fought to get out and stopping herself from lashing out at Malco was a feat in itself. “I'm not sure how well she knows Miami. I need to get dressed. Did she take her cell? Do you know where Spears is right now?” Mason touched her lower back, a silent sign to calm down. She realized that with each question, her tone had increased almost to a yell.

Shane nodded. “I already have some of ours manning the coms, trying to triangulate her location with her cell as soon as we find her signal. During the final stage of the Travis incident, I redirected all our resources, and now we're blind to Spears' whereabouts. I have already dispatched people to find him.”

“Is his sister still in the hospital?”

Malco shook his head. “That's the first thing we checked. She's been transferred to a convalescence home for the next phase after her surgery. Spears hasn't been seen with her and there's no sign of him on any of the surveillance cameras so

far. We're checking the flight manifests at the airport and he's not listed there either. He's also checked out of his hotel."

Cleo's first instinct was to run outside calling her grandmother's name, although she knew it wouldn't do any good. Her logical side knew the chance of her finding Spears in a couple of hours was low. It would be the worst kind of luck if that happened.

"Does she know where Spears is? Malco, did she say anything to you?"

"No. When we arrived at your place, she acted normal. She never mentioned Spears or anything else. She cooked enough food to feed an army. I helped her out, cleaned up afterward, and she went to her room for the night. I didn't see her on the phone, but she may have used it when I wasn't there."

Without letting the poor man finish, Cleo turned and headed back to her room. She threw off the shirt and quickly grabbed underwear. Behind her, she heard a deep curse and loud footsteps scurrying away.

Mason entered the room and closed the door with a sigh. "You should have closed the door. Shane and Malco were following you, and you gave them quite the show."

Her naked bottom wasn't on her list of priorities. With her bra on, she searched her stuff for a pair of jeans and sneakers. "I'll say sorry later. Right now, I want to get Nana back."

Just saying her nickname had her throat closing with emotion. When would this hell be over?

Cleo sat on the bed to put her shoes on. Keeping her head low and swallowing reflexively, her laces blurred before her eyes. Fingers fumbling over her laces, Cleo almost repeated Shane's curses.

Big, warm hands covered hers, forcing her to look up. Mason's worry and love were etched on his beautiful face. "We'll get your nana back, baby."

A tear escaped when she tried to smile. "I believe you. It's just..."

The man who held her soul wiped her cheek. “Just what?”

How could she put what she felt into words? “Last night you told me I didn’t deserve you. This morning, I feel like all I bring you is danger and problems. I don’t want to be your problem, Mason.”

His fingertips lingered on her face, tracing its contours before caressing her cheeks. “I know you’re fully capable of taking care of yourself. But deep within my soul, I know we’re stronger together. You’re not a problem. You may see it like that because of Spears, but our meeting was the opportunity for you to resolve your past and not have it dangling over your head anymore. That’s something I can shoulder with you, the team will help as well. Nobody should ever be left to fight alone. Let me help you shoulder that burden, get rid of Spears, and get your grandmother back. I’ll be right here to help you whenever you need me. And I’ll be there for you. Always.”

Cleo didn’t know what to say, but her heart settled, warming her entire chest with the same certainty she saw in his eyes. “I promise I don’t have any other bad guys hidden in my closet.”

A smile tugged at her lips. “And I don’t have any other spurned lovers. That I know of, at least.”

“Good.” Cleo leaned in to kiss him when someone coughed behind the closed door.

“Hey! Caitlin called and your grandmother used her phone. We’re the closest to her current location. We need to move, now.”

WHEN SHE SAW her nana sitting on a bench under a palm tree, seemingly admiring the vast ocean before her, Cleo almost fell to her knees. Surrounded by Mason, Malco, and Shane, she took a deep breath to steady herself and quietly asked them all to stay back.

At this time of day, the beach was starting to fill with people, kids laughing and running around as their parents wobbled toward the water like pack mules.

Cleo didn't say a word when she sat beside her nana, and grandmother smiled. "It seems I got lost, my dear child. Thank you for finding me. I tried to call, but I think I left your phone number on the kitchen counter."

"Nana... why did you leave like that? You gave me the scare of my life! On that note, I'm guessing you were going after Spears. I was beside myself thinking you could be standing in front of that psycho right now."

There was no apology on her grandmother's face when she turned to look at her. Instead, she saw a blazing intensity in her normally warm gaze. "No need to guess, that's exactly what I intended to do. My goal this morning was to find and confront him. I wanted him to know how his actions uprooted my life, destroyed my family, and hurt you, my precious girl. I wanted him to understand the consequences of his actions. I've been wanting to do exactly that for so long." She sighed. "I just miscalculated how big Miami was."

As she talked, her voice started trembling, and tears shimmered, toning down the fire. Cleo instinctively took her hand in hers and scooted closer to put her chin on her shoulder. For the first time, Cleo understood how Spears' actions hadn't only hurt her, but also destroyed her family. Lost in her own suffering and fear, she had forgotten to look out for her grandmother. "I'm sorry for your loss, Nana. I wish I could make all this disappear. I wish I hadn't brought you into my mess."

Mrs. Darwin shook her head and turned to look deep into her granddaughter's eyes. "Cleo, my darling. We're not responsible for the actions of others. I had nothing to do with my son and your mother being drawn into this evil man's clutches and choosing to stay there. Our only role is to survive and fight. That's why I wanted to find Spears. You're my blood. Of course, I want to protect you. And I guess you want the same for me. Otherwise, you wouldn't have sent me that good looking cowboy back in Mesa or the handsome Malco to protect me."

Lightness slowly returned to Cleo's heart as her grandmother continued talking. "And I'm not a fool. I doubt

Spears would see the light, and even if he is arrested, my family will never be the same. I pray for my son every day, but I'm under no illusions. This confrontation was mostly for me. A way to let out all the pain and fear that's accumulated over the years."

Cleo nodded, understanding perfectly. "I wish I could do that too. Unfortunately, I doubt Spears will ever see the light. He's dangerous. Please don't try to find him. I couldn't bear it if he hurt you. I can't lose you, Nana. You're the only family I have."

As she had so many times, her grandmother gathered her in her arms, her familiar warmth and calming perfume surrounded Cleo. "You're my blood, child. I would do anything for you. And you're creating a family of your own. From the way your man looks at you, cares about you, he has the same ideas as you. I'm happy for you, my baby girl."

Cleo's heart somersaulted at the thought of building a future with Mason. It was both frightening and exciting, full of possibilities. They sat together on the bench, in a tight hug, as the world bustled around them. Cleo remained there for a long time, cherishing what she had, but knowing it wasn't yet over. "Nana? Until the team makes sure Spears is no longer a threat, please stay with Malco or whoever else is in charge of your protection. No more escaping, okay?"

With a kiss, her grandmother laughed softly. "I promise. And with those gorgeous men you're sending to look after me, why would I want to leave? I should probably cook another meal for dear Malco, so he forgives me."

They both giggled and hugged some more. "Speaking of which, I like it here, with the sea and the palm trees. Do you think you would mind if I found a little place of my own nearby? Would your young man mind?"

Right then, her grandmother answered her silent prayer. Cleo knew she couldn't move back to Mesa, not with Mason, the Agency, and her job. Her only reply was her arms tightening around her.

Enjoying this connection a little longer, Cleo knew she had to get back to reality in the next few minutes. The world would start spinning again, and she had her family to protect. Deep down in her soul, she knew for that to happen, Spears had to be taken down so she could start the next chapter of her life with Mason.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

OVER THE LAST FOUR WEEKS LIFE HAD SETTLED INTO A rhythm Cleo never had before but one she could see herself loving for the rest of her life. Her nana had found herself a small house close to the beach in a community of senior citizens. With Malco's and Mason's help, they had packed up her home in Mesa and moved her into her new place this past weekend.

For her part, life had changed in all the best ways. She spent her nights with the man she loved and her days doing a job that gave her satisfaction and fulfillment. She was surrounded by friends and family every day and more blessed than she could ever have wished for.

Just one thing marred the beauty of her life—Spears was still unaccounted for, and it left a nasty stain on the horizon of her life. Mason wanted her to officially move in with him, or for them to get a new place together, but with Spears hanging over them she was reluctant to do so. When she and Mason took that next step, she wanted it to be with a clean slate. Not with her past hovering, threatening to tarnish it.

Mason was patient with her about it and said he understood, but she also knew he was frustrated with the limbo she had placed them in.

The door to the Agency opened, and her nana breezed in on Malco's arm, who had somehow been adopted by the older woman. Her grandmother sent her a beaming smile. "Cleo, my darling girl! I've come to take you to lunch at The Point."

Cleo was happy to see her grandmother looking more carefree and content than she'd seen her for a very long time. She had failed to see the pain Spears had caused her grandmother and regretted that. Even though her grandmother didn't blame her, she still felt ashamed and vowed to take better care of the woman who had been her everything for so long.

"That sounds wonderful. I love the crayfish they make there. Let me grab my bag." Cleo sent a quick text to Mason telling him where she was going and smiled when she received one back with lots of heart and kiss emojis. It would shock the people they worked with if they knew what a soft romantic he was. The dignified and professional veneer he wore at work was still in place, if a little more relaxed these days, but with her, he was a total sap. She loved it, and she loved him.

Mason Bentley had changed her life in all the best ways, and she'd never get tired of hearing him say he loved her. She'd also never get tired of the way he made her body sing to his tune with the slightest touch. The passion between them was insatiable, and she hoped it never changed.

"We can take my car, that way Malco can stay here and catch up with Knight."

Malco paused. "Are you sure?"

Cleo's grandmother nodded and turned her head to Malco, "My dear boy, it's time you went back to work doing more important things than watching an old woman all day."

Malco grinned. "Mrs. D., you know I love our time together."

"Be that as it may, you need to get back to work. You're cramping my style with the residents at my new abode if you know what I mean." She gave him a wink.

Malco burst out laughing. "I got ya, Mrs. D." Malco winked at her and walked back inside as Cleo grinned.

"Nana, have you got your eye on a man?" Cleo took her grandmother's arm and steered her toward the car at the front.

Her grandmother took her seat on the passenger's side before answering. "Maybe I do, and maybe I don't." With another wink, she patted her granddaughter's hair.

Cleo drove the short distance to The Point trying to get information from her grandmother about this new man.

Once they were seated and their drinks order was taken, her grandmother pinned her with a silent look that meant business. It was the one she used when Cleo was young and trying to hide something from her. "Right, young lady, are you going to tell me why you're stalling moving in with Mason?"

Cleo looked away, surprised. "I'm not."

"Don't lie to me. I've known you your entire life." Her grandmother reached across the table for her hand. "Tell me, child."

Cleo could never lie to her grandmother for long. "I'm terrified."

"Oh, darling girl, why?"

Tears pricked Cleo's eyes. "What if we move in together and everything changes, or Spears comes back and ruins it all?"

"Oh, Cleo, my sweet child. Of course things will change, but that doesn't mean it will be for the worse. Life is constantly evolving and moving, and we have to move with it or get left behind, wondering what could have been. Don't live your life in fear; embrace it. We only get one life, so make the most of it."

"I want to," Cleo admitted, "but what about Spears?"

"Cleo, have faith in those around you. Your young man loves you, and I have no doubt he and his friends will stop at nothing to make sure that threat is neutralized. Mark my words it will all work out. Have faith, my girl. Do you love him?"

"With every bone in my body." That was an honest answer.

"Do you trust him?"

"Completely."

“Then, there you have it. Move in with him, make a life together, and trust the rest will work out.”

Cleo mused on her grandmother’s words as they ate lunch. Perhaps her nana was right, and she should blindly trust it would work out. Or more importantly that it would work out because Mason would make it so.

IN THE THREE weeks since her lunch with her grandmother, Cleo had been playing her words over and over in her head and concluded she was right. Not that she should have doubted her. Her nana was the wisest person she knew and had never steered her wrong.

She’d planned to take Mason to the beach that evening and tell him she wanted them to take the next step but her plan had been thwarted when he’d called half an hour earlier to say he had to work and would she meet him in the conference room at the office at three.

It was Saturday afternoon, and with her plans now on hold, she’d agreed, assuming he was working overtime on whatever mission he’d been working the last few weeks.

It had been top secret, and he and Shane—along with Malco and Mercy—had spent hours locked away in the conference room working on it.

She knew the new government contracts they had won there would be eyes-only work that even with her clearance she wouldn’t be allowed to see, and guessed this was one of them.

The Agency was silent as she stepped through the door and saw Mason step from the conference room and walked toward her. “Hey!” She greeted him as he reached her and took her in his arms and kissed her long and deep until she leaned into him.

“Um, I needed that.”

“Bad day?”

“No, just that I always seem to need you.”

“So why am I here?”

“I have someone here to see you, but before we go in, I want you to know that whatever happens here today I love you more than anything in this world and always will.”

“You’re scaring me, Mason.” Her heart pounded at his words as if sensing something was happening.

“Don’t be afraid, beautiful. I’d never do anything to hurt you. I just want you to know I will always support you.”

“Okay.”

Cleo was partly intrigued and slightly frightened, but she trusted Mason and knew he would never hurt her. He leaned in and kissed her again and his scent enveloped her, the taste of him grounding her as much as it made her want to fly.

She pulled back and gazed at the handsome man she loved. “Let’s find out what you’ve been up to then.”

She held his hand as they walked to the conference room. She stopped at the closed door sensing that something important lay behind that door. Something life-changing and knew whatever came next, she would be okay because she had Mason at her back.

She turned to him. “When this is done, I want to talk to you about us looking at those new homes in Kendal.”

Cleo watched as the smile she loved split his face. “Does that mean you want us to move in together?”

“Yes, I do. I want us to take the next step, Mason.”

He pulled her closer and looked at her with so much love. “Have I told you how much I love you today?”

Cleo looked up and pursed her lips in mock thought. “I don’t think you have.” It was a small lie.

“Well, how remiss of me. Let me rectify that. I love you, Cleo Darwin. More and more every single day.”

“I love you too, Mason. Now, let’s get this show on the road so we can go home.”

Cleo held Mason's hand, and she pushed down on the handle of the door. It swung open, and Cleo couldn't stop the gasp that came from her as she saw her mother and father sitting with her grandmother, Shane, and Emme. She turned to look at Mason, tears already blinding her eyes.

"Go, baby, they have a lot to say, and I think you should listen." Mason steered Cleo inside and gave her a gentle push in her parents' direction.

"Cleo?" Her mom stood on uncertain legs, her father beside her.

Cleo glanced at her nana who nodded, the wet tears in her eyes a testament to how she felt. "It's okay, Cleo. They are here to make amends."

Cleo walked toward her parents, noting the way they had aged in the years since she'd seen them. Time had not been as kind to them as it had her nana. "I don't understand?" She looked to Mason for answers as she knew she always would.

"We contacted your parents and discovered they were trying to get away from Spears, had been trying for years with no success. We helped them get away, and they helped us get enough evidence to shut Spears and his entire organization down. As we speak, he's in FBI custody, and his compound is being dismantled."

Cleo could hardly believe the words he was saying, but she knew he would never lie to her. The magnitude of what he was saying hit her. It was over, the cloud lifted, and all that lay in her future was rainbows and sunshine and the man she loved.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

“SERIOUSLY, MASON, WHERE ARE WE GOING?” Cleo crossed her arms over her breasts and gave the man in the driver’s seat beside her a pointed glare. He swung his eyes to her as his hand landed on her bare thigh, making her body tingle with anticipation. It was always the same between them when he touched her. Her body lit up like a fourth of July fireworks. She hoped it would always be this way.

“Have some patience, woman. Do you not get the whole concept of a surprise?”

“Uh, hello! Do you know me? I’m not a patient person.”

Mason chuckled and squeezed her thigh, making her want to squirm with desire. “I know, Cleo, but I promise this is a good one.”

“Fine, but it better be.”

He left his hand on her skin, knowing what he was doing to her as they drove away from the bustle of Miami toward the suburbs. It had been a wonderful and emotional year. Her parents were now living in a small house close to her nana. The relationship between her parents and her grandmother was slowly being repaired. Her relationship with them was better, although she knew in her heart her nana would always be the one she turned to. She was glad they had gotten away from the evil Jeffrey Spears, and the man had finally gotten what

he'd deserved. Life without parole for all the crimes he had been responsible for—some of which she had never even suspected.

Her job at the Alliance Agency was fulfilling, and she loved it with every part of her being. Some days it didn't feel like work but like helping out friends and getting paid. And that was what the people there were—friends who she loved to death.

As for her and Mason, life was perfect. He was the man she had wanted all her life. He made her feel secure and cherished and desired without stifling her. They just needed to find a house. Their hunt for a place hadn't gone to plan and they were still living in his apartment. She loved it there as it was where their journey began, and she would always have a soft spot for the place, but she wanted something they could grow into as a family, especially now.

Her hand moved down to her stomach, which was still flat with no sign of the life she knew was growing there.

A few days of nausea and a missed period had made her run out for a pregnancy test early that morning. She still hadn't told Mason, was waiting for the right moment.

He pulled up on the outskirts of a new expensive housing development that had been sold out for the last year. The homes were everything she wanted—spacious with a big back yard, big open plan living, modern fixtures, as well as space between the homes giving them privacy.

She sighed as he pulled into the drive of the corner lot. Her belly fluttered with a seed of hope. “What are we doing here, Mason?”

He ignored her and exited the car going around to open her door and taking her hand, led her to the front door. He simply grinned and nudged her into the hallway that led into a large combined kitchen and dining room and family space. As she moved, she noticed the back bi-fold doors were spread open, allowing her a full view of the sunset as the sun went down over the horizon blasting the evening with a riot of oranges and purples which took her breath away.

Mason followed behind her smiling until she stepped out onto the deck and gasped as her eyes landed on the hundreds of lit tea light candles on the lawn below, and spelling out MARRY ME?

Cleo gasped, her hand going to her mouth as she felt hot, happy tears hit her eyes. Turning to look at Mason, she found him on one knee, a beautiful amethyst and diamond ring in a velvet box in front of him. “Cleo, from the moment we met, I knew you would change my life. But I never expected my dark staid life would be filled with color and beauty so blinding that I’ll never wake up again and not know I’m the luckiest man alive to have you by my side.”

The tears were openly falling down her cheeks now as she heard the man she loved to make the most beautiful and heartfelt declaration. “Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife and living every day with me here in this house as we face our bountiful future together?”

“Yes, Mason, of course, I will marry you.”

Cleo fell on him, almost knocking him backward, but he caught her, and she knew he always would. She turned her face and met his kiss before breaking away and putting her lips to his ear and giving him the best gift she could—the news he was to become a father. His face was awash with surprise and delight as he held her tighter and looked at her with such reverence and love. She knew she would never find a better man to be her husband and her child’s father. He was her lover, her hero, and her very best friend. Whatever they faced, she knew she would be okay because he was by her side.

THE END

SNEAK PEEK: DEADLY ALLIANCE

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“THIS MEANS OFFERING HIM FRESH MEAT, AKA ME.”

The way the girl smiled as if it would be a walk in the park made Shane almost grind his teeth to dust. “This is no joking matter, Miss Wallace. Women are dying. And not taking this seriously could endanger you or members of your team and put civilians at risk.”

“He felt the Fortis team closing in even if nobody moved. Shane had to admit he may have gone a little far. But part of him couldn’t take the risk of letting that bastard go. The autopsy report came to mind, as well as the picture of Misty—pale, her beautiful hair in a mess and very dead on the slab.

Ignoring everybody in the room, Emme came to stand in front of him, and Shane stood in response. Barely reaching his shoulder, Shane had to admit that she had a significant dose of courage behind the fire in her eyes.

“Do you think I’m an incapable fool who would put my friends—my family—in danger? Do you think I’m incompetent or unskilled?”

“How many missions have you done? How often have you put your life on the line to save your teammates or an innocent’s life?”

“Oh, so you’re keeping count. Courage is defined by body count and the amount of blood you shed?”

“This is not a game!” His voice boomed way stronger than he’d intended, but the girl didn’t flinch, and even shouted back at him.

“No, it’s not a game. People are dying!”

Lance shuffled in his seat. “Well, they’ve got the lover part down perfectly. It’s like they’ve been together for the last fifty years. Your plan is doomed, Rhodes.”

Zack raked his blond hair in annoyance, his gaze went to Beatrice who shook her head. “Listen, Shane. You don’t know us. I get that. But I wouldn’t have suggested Emme if I didn’t believe in her skills and talent. You know my team’s reputation, and Beatrice is a friend. Like you, I’m one of the people who want this madman to be stopped quickly. I also know that it’s personal for you, so I will let that insult go. That is if you’re ready to give Emme a chance and she’s kind enough to forgive you your insult.”

The Fortis leader might have a point, but Shane still had serious doubts. However, he knew when he had been outnumbered and chastised. Sighing deeply, he uncrossed his arms and looked at the petite ball of anger simmering before him. “I’m sorry if I was out of line. I’m ready to give you a chance as Zack speaks so highly of you.”

Shane heard Lucy snort but didn’t look away from the fury in front of him. She looked like she debated whether to stomp her foot or punch him in the face.

“That doesn’t even qualify as an apology.”

“That’s the only one I can give you right now.”

EXCERPT FROM: Maddie Wade & India Kells. Deadly Alliance: An Alliance Agency Prequel (A Fortis Security/Purgatory Crossover Novel)

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SNEAK PEEK: KNIGHT WATCH

Alliance Agency: Book 1

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KINGSLEY KNIGHT CROSSED HIS ARMS OVER HIS CHEST, AS PRIDE and contentment settled inside him. He never could have imagined this feeling of achievement twelve months ago. The last year had been one of the most difficult of his life, but in some ways, he didn't regret what had happened or the choices he'd made because they'd led him here.

He looked out across the training field at the fantastic team he was part of as Cain Davies showed Emme Harris, his boss lady, how to adjust her aim for a larger caliber weapon. Cain was an ex-undercover ATF agent and had been a recommendation by Lance the head of the Purgatory organization where Shane, his other boss, had started his career outside the military. At thirty-two Cain was considered young to have burned out, but Kingsley knew the strain that undercover work could have on people. Cain had jumped at the chance to sign with the Agency, and they were lucky to have found him.

Knight felt Shane's best friend Nicholas Hale move to stand beside him. Shane and his fiancée Emme co-owned Alliance Agency. They had founded the company after getting together a few months earlier, following a joint op between Purgatory and Fortis Security. The op had gone wrong in so

many ways, but it had also brought the couple together, and nobody could doubt the team they made—both personally and professionally. Nick had served with Shane in the Navy as a SEAL, and it was his baby sister's murder that had been the focus of the joint op.

“Still can't believe you've made the jump to join us Yankees.”

Kingsley turned, lifting his eyebrow at Nick in greeting, before turning his attention back to the field. Rubbing his hand over his full beard, he wondered again if he should shave it and the mop of wavy midnight hair on his head that desperately needed a cut. The heat was already sticky in the early spring of Miami compared to the much lower temperatures of the UK. He finally answered Nick. “Indeed, I'm still coming to grips with it. This heat is relentless. The food is good though, although I may need to slow down on the burgers and tacos,” he replied with a smirk as he patted the flat muscles of his abdomen. The fact was Kingsley Knight was in perfect shape. Years in the Navy as an underwater explosive expert had honed his body so it was all muscle and sinew with not an ounce of extra fat.

Nick rolled his eyes, but Kingsley could still feel a shadow on the man. Shane had told him that his friend had gone through a lot and still needed time and work to recover fully.

His eyes caught on Caitlin Carter as she took Killian, her German Shepard, through his paces. When he had met her, she had been training Killian to replace her last dog Mayhem who had recently retired. As a K-9 handler with the LAPD, Caitlin had years of experience to go with her well-earned reputation as one of the best handlers and trainers on the force. Growing up with two prestigious veterinarians as parents had set her in good stead for her job. He watched as she gave Killian—who for shits and giggles she called Kill for short—a series of commands that he obeyed with a blinding loyalty. Knight thought that a few more K-9s on the team would be a good call. That was something to discuss with Shane and Emme for sure.

Over on the assault course, the rest of the team were going through their paces. Malco Aguilar, another member of the group, was stretching his muscles off to the side before he attached the running prosthetic that gave him more absorption and energy return than a regular one. As the hostage rescue expert, he was one of the best and had an unparalleled reputation. Losing his right leg below the knee from a land mine trying to save an eight-year-old girl from her crazy, drugged up father, while working for the Green Berets, had not stopped him in the least.

However, Kingsley knew better than most that people only allowed you to see what they wanted you to see. The new team was a mix of different backgrounds that perfectly fit the diversity of work the Alliance Agency wished to attract.

Emme and Shane wanted to expand hard and fast, and they had a flight out of Miami that night to meet a contact of Shane's about a contract with the FBI. It was lucrative and would involve them signing an NDA which wouldn't be a problem as most of them still had top security clearance from their previous lives.

Kingsley cast an eye at Nick as he watched Alex Webb race Wolf Murdock over the course.

It had been designed by Zack, Emme's former boss at Fortis who was also an ex-SAS commander. They were some of the toughest bastards around, and this course showed why. With it built over the hilly terrain at the back of their new base of operations it meant the operators had to use agility and strength, not just brute force and muscle. It was why Caitlin, Emme, and Mercy—the three women on the team—had some of the best times on the leaderboard.

Wolf raced over the ropes with speed, but Webb had the edge as they crawled through the wet tunnels with barbed wire overhead. It was neck and neck by the time they sprinted for the finish with Webb coming in a split second faster.

Shane, who had been standing on the sidelines away from him and Nick, watching his recruits train, started to walk toward the competitors, a grin on his face as the two men bent

at the waist and sucked in oxygen. They had been training together for a month now, and Kingsley could see they were starting to think cohesively as a unit. Kingsley knew Shane wanted everyone to be able to read each other. It could be the thing that saved their lives one day.

EXCERPT FROM: Maddie Wade & India Kells. Knight Watch: An Alliance Agency Novel: Book 1

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Thank you for reading Hidden Obsession. If you enjoyed reading it as much as we enjoyed writing it, please consider leaving a review. Reviews can be as long or short as you wish and help other readers find new books.

If stalking an author is your thing and I sure hope it is, then here are the links to my social media pages. If you prefer your stalking to be more intimate, then our groups Maddie's Minxes and India's Sanctuary will welcome you with open arms.

Once again thank you for reading Hidden Obsession, we look forward to sharing the next installment from the Alliance Agency with you.

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Maddie Wade is a married mum of three children. She was born and raised in Hereford. Maddie loves to spend time with her family and friends, eating out, going to the cinema and generally just enjoying life. She is an avid reader and is never found without her kindle, or smartphone. Maddie is a huge advocate of all things martial arts and got her black belt at age 14 years. She has also studied Jujitsu and has encouraged her children to do the same.

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INDIA KELLS

India Kells is a romantic suspense and paranormal romance author from Montreal, Canada. Her idea of heaven is cozying up on her sofa during cold winter nights, reading lots and lots of books. Inside her wild imagination, she weaves stories filled with the adventures of kickass women and courageous alpha men. When India's not writing about sexy thieves, dashing soldiers and cunning villains, she's traveling the world to find inspiration for her next stories. Human nature is her greatest muse!

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