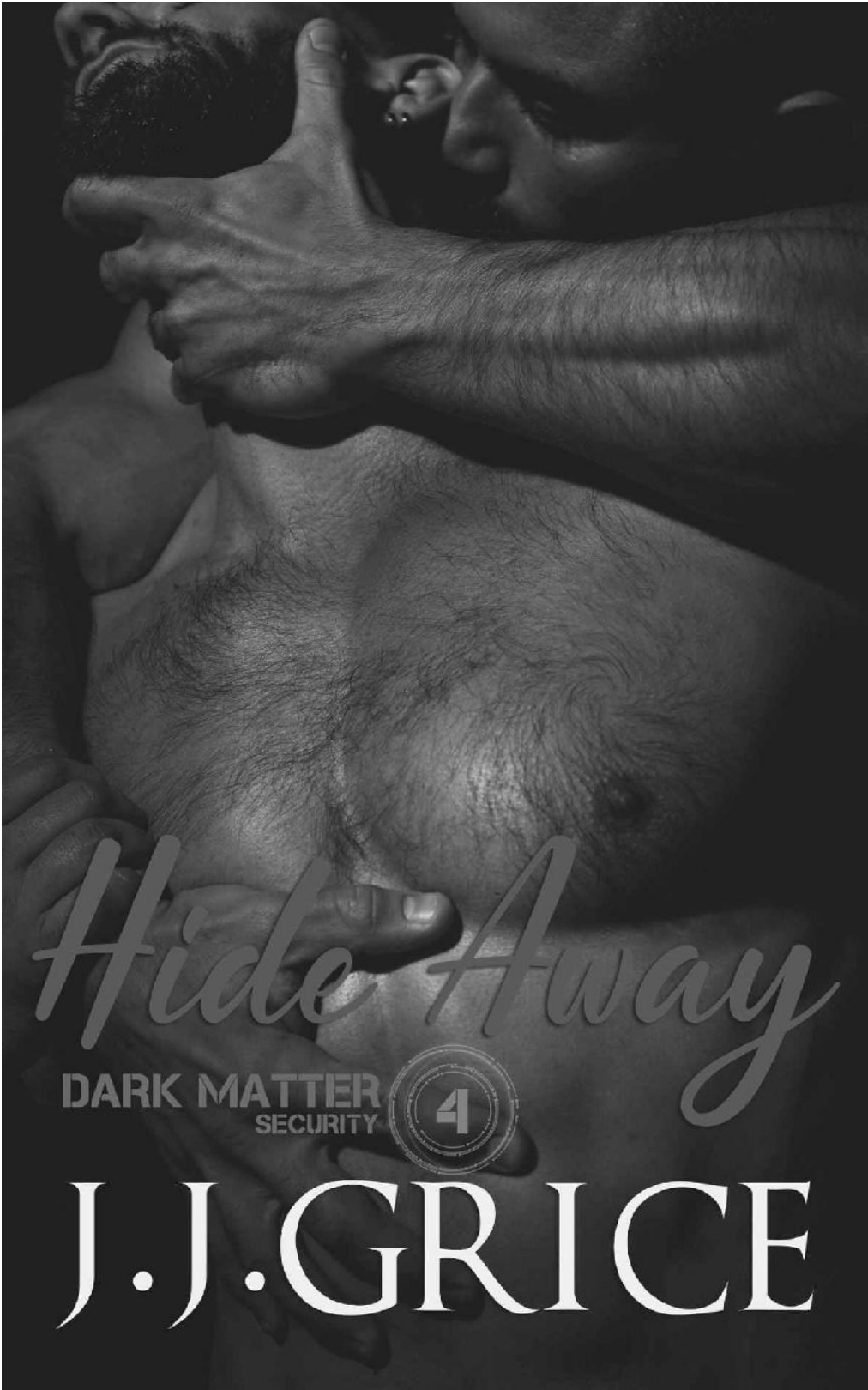


Hide Away

DARK MATTER
SECURITY



J.J. GRICE



Hide Away

DARK MATTER
SECURITY



J.J. GRICE

CONTENTS

Prologue

Four Months Later

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Bonus!](#)

[Dark Matter Security Team](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by J.J. Grice](#)

COPYRIGHT

2022 by Jennifer Grice

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, places, events and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance of actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

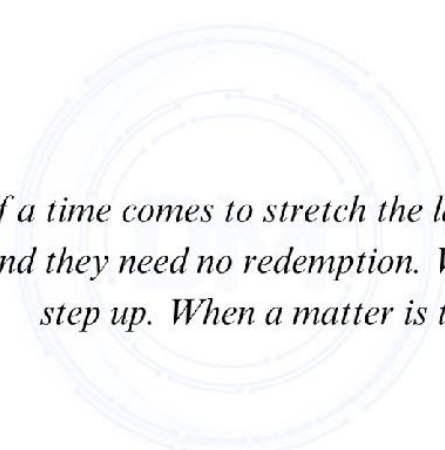
Edited By: Emily Lapeyrouse

Cover Design By: Magen McMinimy of McMinimy Design

Formatting By: Victoria Ellis of Cruel Ink Editing + Design

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to those who love with all their heart.

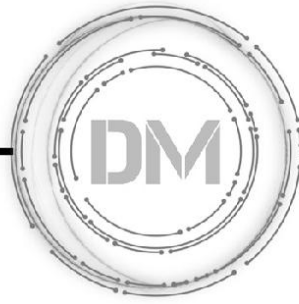


*If a time comes to stretch the law, they have no boundaries,
and they need no redemption. When others back down, they
step up. When a matter is too dark, they're darker.*

*When an unknown threat tries to take his life, the choice is
to fight back or hide away.*



DARK MATTER
SECURITY



DARK MATTER SECURITY

PROLOGUE

Jax

I WISH I COULD JUST TAKE THIS GUY OUT. PEOPLE LIKE HIM don't deserve to fucking live. Even if you

take away the shit he pulled with Wyatt and the way he killed his own fucking parents and his brother, he's still a piece of shit wife-beater. This bastard is basically the definition of evil. But, no matter how much I want to do the world a favor, and kill this fucker right now, I can't. I know Alec and Wyatt have their reasons for not just taking him out. They want to get Lillie away from him and his associates, they want to make sure she's safe before we go any further with our plan.

I watch as Ian Mansfield gets into a car waiting at the curb of the airport with his boss. His boss might be a total asshole and a serial cheater, but as far as everything else goes, he's mostly on the up-and-up.

As soon as the car pulls away from the curb, I walk to the waiting line of cars. I know which hotel they're going to, so all I had to do was make sure he got on and off the plane. I'll catch back up with his whereabouts when I get to the hotel.

It only takes me a little over twenty minutes to get to the overpriced and far-too Americanized hotel and I walk in just in time to see Mansfield getting on the sleek elevator. I pull out my phone and send a quick text to Tanner. *Room number?*

His reply is almost immediate. *6098.*

I make my way to the bank of elevators and wait with the crowd of tourists. I really don't understand some people. Why would you come to Paris and stay in an American owned hotel? There's zero history or French architecture within these walls. Even the food they serve in the hotel restaurants isn't anywhere near authentic french food. I shake my head, trying to hide my annoyance with all these people. They're also the type of people that will expect everyone they come in contact with to speak perfect English. *Ignorant Americans.*

I park myself in one of the plush lounge chairs at the end of the hall where a large sitting area is placed. I have a perfect view of Mansfield's end-of-hallway room and the bank of elevators. I swear Tanner couldn't have made this shit easier for me if he tried. I pull out my book, using it as a shield. It's almost ten at night when Mansfield leaves his room and I don't even have to question where he's going. He's in France and his wife is back in the states. Of course the bastard is going to go out and try to find a good lay. I wait a few minutes after he's gotten on the elevator before getting on myself.

The lobby is overcrowded with filthy rich Americans dressed to the nines and ready to go out on the town, probably to somewhere that's just as Americanized as the hotel. I find Mansfield outside waiting for a car and grab the next one.

"Where's everyone heading off to?" I ask the driver as soon as I get in and he's quick to answer with a list of the popular places for nightlife. At least popular for this crowd. I must look like I'm on the prowl for the night because he explains that one of the clubs is the perfect place to find a ready and willing woman. The way he says it makes my skin crawl. But, unfortunately I know that's exactly where I'll find Mansfield. *Predictable fucker.* I tell him to take me there, and he gives me a sick smile that makes my stomach churn.

The moment he pulls up along the curb, I know we're in the right place. The flood of people lining the building and the fancy-ass cars that file along the street is almost ridiculous. I pay the driver then get out of the car.

I get inside the club and make my way through the crowd. Mansfield is parked by the bar, already chatting up a couple of

women. I almost roll my eyes at how fucking predictable this jackass is.

The music in this place is too fucking loud, the bass is basically shaking the whole building and it smells like sweat and sex in here. I have to force back my gag as I work my way through the bodies of people and toward the back exit. It's not necessary for me to actually stay here and watch the bastard get his rocks off. I only really need to make sure he stays where he should be in order to give Cole plenty of time to get Lillie far enough away.

As soon as I step through the back door, I pull out my phone and call the one person I can't handle going too long without talking to.

"Hey baby." Gunnar's velvety voice on the other end has an immediate smile pulling at my lips.

"Hey sweetheart. You busy right now?"

"Nope. I just grabbed some dinner and was hoping you would call." *Fuck, I love this man.* It's not uncommon for us to be away from each other for an extended period of time, thanks to our job. But even when we are apart, we do our best to keep in contact as much as possible.

"I miss you, baby." He lets out a long, contented sigh and I can almost hear the happiness in just that simple sound.

"I miss you too, Jax."

I lean against the brick wall of the club and lift my head to look up at the sky. Paris is a beautiful place, but unfortunately I've never been here for any other reason than work. Which means that when I do come here, I spend most of my time at places like this shit hole. It's always been a goal of mine to be able to come back here with Gunnar for an actual vacation. I know all we have to do is ask Alec for the time off, and we can more than afford it. But with the fact that it's two of us, it makes it harder for us to want to do it. We don't like leaving our team shorthanded. But that doesn't change the fact that I'd like to take a proper vacation with the love of my life one of these days.

“We should come to Paris soon, just me and you.”

I can practically hear the smile in his voice when he replies. “I would love that, baby.”

“Let’s start planning it when I get home, yeah?” I breathe a sigh of relief over how easily Gunnar agrees to everything I have planned. We talk for a few more minutes before we hang up and I go back into the club to make sure Mansfield is still here.

When I find him out on the dance floor practically humping one of the women he was talking to earlier, it’s obvious he’s not going anywhere for a while. And when he does, it’s going to be so he can get laid. I shake my head at his bullshit, but make my way back out through the exit. I just want to get to my motel, get some sleep, then as soon as Cole says he has Lillie a safe distance, get the hell back to my man.

I start to walk toward the front of the building so I can get the fuck out of here. But I barely reach the corner when suddenly something heavy hits the back of my head hard, and the world disappears.

Gunnar

I can’t panic. I know better than to panic right now. I’ve been trained to handle shit like this. But these aren’t normal circumstances. I do my best to focus on taking out all of Banner’s men as they begin to overtake the house. I glance back over to where Jax and Nicole were hiding behind the flipped table. The only thing I see though is Jax lying lifeless on the floor. Nicole is gone. *Fuck.*

Seeing my boyfriend like that sends a new wave of anger flowing through me and I begin firing my gun with even more purpose, taking out at least half a dozen of Banner’s men. A bullet grazes my arm, but I ignore the sting.

It feels like for-fucking-ever until the gunshots and screams begin to calm down. Cole is quick to check on

everyone once he has Lillie calmed down. The place looks like a warzone, but my only focus is Jax. I scramble over to him, silently begging for him to be okay. After everything we went through after his attack in Paris, I refuse to lose him like this. I refuse to lose him at all.

Lillie quickly follows me over to Jax, tears streaming down her face. “What can I do?” She asks in rushed, panicked words. I pull in a quick breath because I can’t panic. I’m trained for this, I need to keep my fucking head.

“Apply pressure.” I motion to his stomach where the brunt of the blood is coming from.

“Fuck, baby.” I whisper as I take in his blood soaked body. His eyes try to open but unfocused, I can tell that even that small action is a feat. His mouth parts slightly and I already know nothing will come out. “No baby, don’t speak. I’m going to get you taken care of.”

I call out for Cole who immediately rushes over to us from where he was checking on Willow and Anya and curses under his breath when his eyes lay on Jax. My gaze goes to the blood falling from his arm and my worry heightens even more.

“Cole!” I jerk a nod to his arm and he looks down at it, almost surprised by the sight. He just shakes it off and says, “I’m fine.” Lillie starts to let go of Jax to tend to her boyfriend, but seems to think otherwise, and goes back to applying pressure and helping where she can.

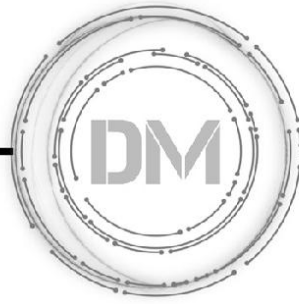
Grant comes over with his phone to his ear for a moment before he pockets it. “Doc is on his way.” I look up at our newest colleague and nod my head in thanks. If Doc is on his way, I don’t want to waste any time. Without giving it another thought, I carefully scoop Jax into my arms and head out the back door and down the steps. Cole helps me get Jax settled onto one of the hospital beds we keep down here and I do everything I fucking can not to lose my cool.

“Gun-” Jax’s voice comes out as a croak, and just the sound of it hurts my fucking heart.

“You’re okay, baby.” I sit in the chair next to the bed and lean in close to him. “Doc will be here soon. You’re going to be okay.” At this point, I’m not sure if I’m trying to convince him or myself.

“You’re going to be okay.” *He has to be.*

Four Months Later...



CHAPTER ONE

Jax

I'M SUCH A FUCKING ASSHOLE. THIS FEELS AMAZING, IT REALLY does. But a guy can only get head so many times before he just wants to flip his man over and fuck him like a complete savage. That's all I want right now. I want to bury myself deep in his ass and show him that I'm still the man he fell in love with.

"Hey." Gunnar's smooth voice breaks me from my self pity. "Where'd you go?" I look down at the love of my life, his blond hair in disarray from my fingers combing through it repeatedly and my dick in his hand, still glistening from his mouth. He's looking up at me with his soft blue eyes full of concern.

"I'm good, sorry." I cup his cheek in my hand, hating that he noticed my inner turmoil.

"Are you not enjoying this?" *I really am such a fucking asshole.*

"Of course I am, baby." I trace my thumb along his plump bottom lip, admiring how fucking beautiful this man is. *How the hell did I get so lucky?*

"Talk to me, Jax." He lets go of my dick and climbs up the bed so he's sitting next to me. I have to swallow down the emotion I feel when he looks at me with eyes full of pity. This isn't who I am. I've never been this man. I'm not weak and

I'm not helpless. But right now, and for the past eight months, that's exactly what I am.

"I'm sick of this!" I finally cry out as I slam my head back against the pillow.

"You're-" Gunnar clears his throat and I look up at him seeing the emotion clogging his beautiful features as he swallows thickly. "You're sick of me?"

Fuck.

"No!" I jackknife back into a sitting position and try to ignore the pain that radiates through my body from the sudden and jerky movement.

"God no, baby! Not you. This." I motion my hands up and down my body and where the bright red scar on my torso is for emphasis, and his shoulders immediately relax.

It's easy to forget how sensitive Gunnar really can be. All of our friends and colleagues look at him and see the strong, tough, easy going guy with a deadly mind and a penchant for murder. I look at him and see the man that was afraid to admit his feelings for me and whose hands visibly shook the first time he told me he loved me. In the midst of all this bullshit, I've managed to confuse the two.

"You're getting better, Jax." His voice is soft and he places his large hand against my cheek, cupping it gently within his palm.

"It's been months, Gun." I was finally starting to heal and get ready to go back to work when Banner attacked the house. Getting shot four times basically erased all of the progress I had made. I had to start the healing process all over again.

"It's gonna take time, babe. Everything that happened, it was hard on your body."

I don't miss the way he avoids addressing anything that happened directly. He never addresses it head on. Every time anyone tries to really talk about it, he has a hard time stomaching it. I can't say that I blame him. I saw the pictures that were sent to Alec right after Pierre found me in the hospital. And that was after I had healed for over a week. Then

I saw myself in the mirror when I finally woke up. I looked like I had been put through a blender, then thrown in front of a train, then put back through a blender.

I'm also well aware that there were moments when Gunnar, along with the rest of the guys, thought I was dead. I tried to imagine myself in his position, and I couldn't handle even the thought of something like that happening to him. I would burn the fucking world to the ground.

"I'm not the man you fell in love with." He pulls his hand away, straightening his back and I know instantly that was the wrong fucking thing to say.

"Like hell you're not!" His voice is practically a roar and it's not often that Gunnar raises his voice, especially at me. "Just because you have a few more scars than before and your body needs more time to heal, does not take away from the fact that you're the man I fell in love with and still very much love to this day!" His ocean blue eyes turn thunderous with rage, and I immediately regret what I said.

"I know, I'm sorry." I hold my hands out, as if I'm trying to placate a raging toddler. "But come on, Gun. You can't honestly tell me that you don't wish I could at least take charge like before." I'm not necessarily a strict top and Gunnar's not exactly a strict bottom either, but it's never been lost on me the way he thoroughly enjoys when I would take control of him. It's always been both of our preferences.

"Is that all this is about, Jax? Sex? Because I don't really give a shit. All I care about is that you're alive. Even if it takes years before you're able to fuck me again, I won't care as long as I know you're okay and you're here with me."

There's only one person on this entire fucking planet that has the power to crack through my exterior, and he's sitting right in front of me, looking at me with the sexiest blue eyes I've ever seen in my life. I pull in a deep breath and release it on a long exhale, ignoring the stinging pain in my lungs. Doc said they're getting better, but they still hurt like a bitch. *Just like the rest of my body.*

“I know, I’m sorry.” I lower myself back to the pillow and close my eyes, wishing none of this shit was happening. What makes all of this worse is that I have no fucking idea why it happened to begin with, and who did it. I managed to get a glimpse the guy who jumped me, but I had no fucking clue who he was. And now, when I try to recall what he looked like and pull him to the front of my mind, I can’t. The whole event is like flashes of movies broken apart. Everything going black. Waking up on the side of a road. Hard kicks and stabs. Then nothing.

“We’ll find him, Jax.” I’m not surprised that he could tell what I was thinking, he usually can. I nod my head against the pillow, suddenly feeling the exhaustion trying to take over my body.

Gunnar lies down next to me and pulls a blanket over us before intertwining his fingers with my own. He doesn’t try to push me to continue what we were doing, and I don’t know if I appreciate or hate it. I always want him. Before the attack, I pretty much had a permanent hard-on when Gunnar was around. He still turns me on constantly, but my frustration with myself weakens it more than I would like.

Contrary to what he says, I’m not the same man I was when we first met. But I’m determined to get back to how I was. How we were. I won’t lose the love of my life because of this bullshit.

I refuse to lose him at all.

“Hunter and Beckett, I need you two in Dallas by Monday. You’ll meet up with Connors. He’ll give you the details of the job.”

This is the first meeting I’ve sat in on since I’ve been back. There really hasn’t been a reason for me to, since I can’t do anything right now. Alec insisted I come to this one though, so I’m trying to hold out hope that my bench-sitting is coming to an end. I fucking hate feeling so damn useless.

“No one else can go?” My eyes snap to Gunnar at his question, but I do my best to mask my irritation. He’s afraid to leave me alone because of our conversation the other night and though I can understand why, I’m not okay with it. I’m not a fucking child who needs looking after.

I glance over at Alec who’s staring at Gunnar with his jaw squared and his dark eyes angry. He doesn’t like being questioned or second guessed. Alec is a good guy at his core, but he has a temper, and a short fuse to that temper. He works his jaw a couple times before finally answering.

“Probably. But I’m sending you and Hunter.” Without any more argument Gunnar nods his head and Alec moves on from the conversation. I keep my gaze focused on our boss and do my best not to look anywhere else. I can feel Gun’s eyes on me, but I refuse to acknowledge him and the bullshit he just tried to pull, at least not until we’re alone.

Our relationship isn’t a secret from our team, but we don’t exactly flaunt it. Though I have been fully out from the day I started working for Dark Matter, Gunnar wasn’t. He knew he was gay and had even been in previous relationships, but it took some time for him to become comfortable sharing those details of his life. The military tends to condition you to still follow the *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell* way of thinking, and it took Gun a while to let that all go.

“Collins leaves on Sunday for four days.” I watch as the youngest member of our team squirms slightly in his seat. He may seem laid back and easy going, but he’s not the type of person who likes to have a lot of attention on him, at least not in this way. “When you’re finished, I’ll need you to go straight to Ohio on Thursday and meet up with Tanner and Cole.” Collins nods his head and starts to look a lot more comfortable since Alec is just doling out orders and not talking about anything personal.

We’re all allowed vacation time whenever we feel we need. Though there’s not many of us that actually use it. This job is our stress reliever. Collins usually seems to take a few days here and there. Hunter also usually takes a few days a year off. I don’t know what either of them do and it’s none of

my business. Every once in a while Gunnar and I will take a weekend off and get away, but it's not a regular thing since we usually feel bad about leaving the team short two men as opposed to just one.

“Who are we meeting in Ohio?” Cole asks, even though I'm sure Tanner is well aware of who their contact is going to be for whatever the job is.

“Dent.” Most of the men around the room stiffen and sit or stand up straighter at that name. Dent's not a bad dude per se, but his business practices are pretty damn questionable. And that's saying something coming from a room full of mercenaries and hit men.

“It's just a job, not a marker. He was contacted, but he doesn't have enough manpower at the moment.”

“That's what happens when you accept any and all jobs that come your way,” Gunnar snorts and everyone grumbles in agreement. That's always been one of the biggest issues our team has had with Dent and his, they accept every job without really vetting them. We don't turn down many, but there are lines we all refuse to cross. If there are lines for Dent, he hasn't come to any of them yet. At least not that we know of.

“It'll be a quick one,” Tanner adds, “in and out in a day or two tops.” Cole and Collins both give him sharp nods. Even if it was a longer job, I doubt either of them would take issue. Every single one of us in this room has a reason for why we do what we do. It's cathartic.

Alec finishes going over a few more things before calling the meeting, but before I have a chance to get up and leave the room Wyatt grabs my attention.

“Hey Jax, you got a sec?” Even though Alec is technically the boss and owner of Dark Matter Security, he and Wyatt are basically partners and Wyatt has just as much power as Alec does. So when he asks something of us, we do it.

“Yeah, of course.” I can see Gun lingering sightly by the door as he talks to Cole, but I ignore him while I watch Wyatt move chairs so he's sitting across from me. Tanner already has

his computer open in front of him and is typing away so quickly his fingers are practically blurs. After a second, everyone else leaves the room, including Gunnar, and Alec joins us at the table as well.

“What’s up?” I ask, trying not to show any nerves. It’s not like I’ve done anything wrong. But with how long it’s been taking for me to heal, I’m pretty sure I’ve become more like dead-weight than a valuable asset.

“How you doing? Doc says you’re healing well.” I clench my fists in my lap, trying not to get pissed at the fact that this may just be a pity meeting. I know their concern is genuine, but I’m so fucking tired of everyone being so damn worried about me.

“Fine. I feel good.”

“That’s what we like to hear.” I’m a little surprised to hear that from Wyatt. Alec is usually the one wanting to push the line, not his partner. Not that I’m pushing the line because I really am starting to feel good.

“We wanted to talk to you about coming back to work.” Alec says, and I sit up a little straighter, excitement coursing through me at the thought of getting back out in the field.

“Doc hasn’t cleared you for anything too physical, but we could really use you here with the surveillance side of things.”

I try not to be too disappointed. As much as I want to get back out in the field, what Wyatt and Tanner do is just as important as what the rest of us do. It’s usually what keeps our asses from getting caught. And being here, working on the computers, is better than laying in bed all day feeling sorry for myself.

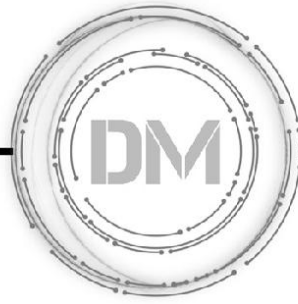
“Well, you know computers aren’t really my thing.”

“That’s okay,” Tanner finally speaks up. “You’ll be doing more of the monitoring and stuff like that. But we can show you what we need you to know.”

I nod, knowing that none of these men would put me in a position to fail. We’ve been working together for the past nine years and they’ve always had my back. I should know that’s

not going to change. I take just a second to examine all three men. They aren't only my colleagues and bosses, they're my friends. They know me well enough to know that the past few months have been absolute hell for me. They're offering me a way to contribute without pushing myself more than my body is ready for. I'm thankful as hell for that.

"I'm in."



DARK MATTER SECURITY

CHAPTER TWO

Gunnar

JAX IS PISSED. I CAN'T SAY I BLAME HIM. HE HATES BEING babied, and I know that's what I've been doing lately, whether I actually mean to or not. Almost losing him once was bad enough. But it almost happening a second time, was just a fucking nightmare. I refuse to let it happen again. And maybe I've been going a little overboard, but I really don't care. He can be as angry as he wants, as long as he's alive.

When I hear the front door open and slam shut, I know I'm about to hear it from him when he gets up here. I considered waiting for him at the main house to help him walk home, but that wouldn't have helped with the whole, him being pissed at me thing.

"What the fuck were you thinking!?" Jax practically yells as he shoves the door to our bedroom open. I immediately hold my hands out in an attempt to placate him.

"I'm sorry, okay? But-"

"No! No, Gun. There is no *but*. That was bullshit!" He slams the door shut behind him, but doesn't step further into the room. "I'm not a fucking baby!"

"I know that! But I have a right to worry!"

"I'm fucking fine, Gunnar! There's nothing to worry about!"

I pull in a heavy breath because I'm sick and tired of him acting like this. He acts like what happened wasn't a big deal and I should just get over it.

"Is that what you think, Jax? That there's nothing to worry about? Because last time I checked, the guy who attacked you is still out there and we still have no fucking clue who it was or why they did it! To me that sounds like there's something to fucking worry about!"

"God!" he screams, throwing his hands above his head in frustration, but I refuse to back down. I cross my arms over my chest and widen my stance, preparing for whatever fight my boyfriend wants to have. I know I'm right, and as much as he may hate to admit it, I won't stop until he does.

"We're never going to find him if you keep me locked away in a fucking tower like Rapunzel!" His words have my body tensing even more, because I know exactly what he's hinting at. This isn't the first time he's mentioned it, and I won't let that happen.

"We're not using you as bait, Jax! The bastard will show himself eventually."

"You sure about that, Gun? We don't even know what he wants. Maybe his whole plan was to kill me. Maybe he thinks I'm dead so he's just moved on with his life."

It's a theory I've thought about a few times, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm not going to let Jax purposely put himself in harm's way just to catch this asshole. We have other ways to do it. Right now, Alec has every single one of his contacts keeping an ear out for any intel that might point us to this guy. It doesn't help that we don't have any video or photos of the fucker. Jax says he saw his face, but his memory is still a little fuzzy from the attack so we can't get a clear description.

"I'll find him, Jax."

"That's not your job, Gunnar."

"Like hell it's not!"

This is the side of him that always drives me insane. He's so fucking independent and always feels like he needs to handle shit himself.

“Believe it or not, Jax, we're partners! I'm not going to let you handle this shit by yourself, and neither will the rest of the guys!”

“The rest of the guys aren't treating me like a fucking glass doll that could break at any moment. You of all people should know how much I fucking hate that!”

“You may not be glass, Jax, but you *are* broken.”

The thunderous look that crosses his face tells me that my choice of words just made things worse. But I really don't care. Whenever he tries to brush everything off, the image of him beaten, bruised, and bloody or lying on Alec's kitchen floor with multiple gunshot wounds, pale and practically lifeless, flashes through my mind.

“I'm not broken! I'm the same man I was before all this bullshit. I'm still just as capable as before to give you what you fucking need!”

Our relationship has never been just about sex, but with the fact that we haven't been able to do that for months now, I'm not surprised that it's really starting to bother him more than it should.

“Is that what your anger is all about, Jax? Sex?!” I step forward, putting us only a couple feet apart instead of half the room. “You need to prove that you can still give it to me? Fine! Then fucking do it! Bend me over the fucking bed and punish me! Punish me for giving a shit about you!”

Without another word, Jax angrily eats up the empty space between us. His hand grasps on to the back of my head and slams his lips against mine in a punishing kiss. His tongue doesn't ask for permission to enter, it demands it. And as always, I comply. I place my hands tentatively on his shoulders, making Jax growl against my lips.

“Stop being fucking gentle with me, I sure as hell won't be with you.” His words send a jolt of need and desire through

me. As much as I've tried to be patient, I'd be lying if I said that it hasn't been hard not being with Jax like this. It's not that I mind giving him blowjobs *-because I fucking love it-* or having sweet make-out sessions in bed late at night or on the beach when he needs some fresh air, but I've missed having my man dominate me the way he's so fucking good at.

My arms wrap tightly around his neck at the same time his hands grip my hips and slams me against him while taking me in another searing kiss. I have a momentary flash of worry come over me that he may be being too aggressive, but before I have any more time to think about it, Jax pulls away and practically throws me onto the bed.

“Clothes off!” His low, menacing growl has shivers crawling up my spine and I hurry to follow his orders without a second thought. Once I'm completely naked, my head resting against the pillows, Jax takes his time letting his eyes roam over every inch of me. A trail of hot embers burns my skin with every touch of his eyes, and my breathing begins to come out in heavy pants. My dick is already rock hard and begging for attention, I can feel it leaking and it's obvious that Jax notices too when his eyes darken as he stares at it.

Jax finally begins reaching for his shirt and I send up a silent *Thank You* to the universe because my man's body is sexy as fuck. Even through the attacks, and the weight he's lost from not being able to eat for too long, even with the new scars that marr his body, he's still breathtaking to look at. Looking at him while he's naked is one of my favorite pleasures. But before I get the chance to do just that, Jax glares at me.

“Roll over.” I cry out in frustration, which only makes him smirk. I know he's doing this on purpose. I told him to punish me, and he knows how much I love his body. Not being able to see it is a punishment in itself.

I hear the rustling of clothes as they fall to the floor and as desperate as I am to turn around and watch, I know this game. I also know that this is what Jax needs right now. As concerned as I may be, I remind myself that I'm doing this for him. So I force myself to let go of my reservations, try to

enjoy this moment, and relax. I let out a long breath and close my eyes just as I feel the mattress dip behind me.

A warm body blankets my own and on instinct, I fist the sheets beneath me to avoid rolling over and grabbing at my man.

“I’m not a delicate flower, Gun.” Jax’s words are whispered close to my ear, his warm breath fanning against my neck.

“I know.”

“Do you?” he asks as he pulls away. “Or do you need a reminder?”

Before I can respond, a loud *smack* fills the room and my ass immediately begins to sting in the most delicious way. I cry out, but barely have time to catch my breath before Jax repeats the same action on my other cheek.

“Fuck, Jax!”

“I may have to take it a little easier than before, but I’m more than capable of taking care of you, Gun.” There’s still an edge of anger in his voice, and I’m desperate to ease it.

“You do take care of me.”

“No, I don’t. Because you won’t let me. You’ve been taking care of me.”

“I don’t mi-” Another heavy hand hits my ass before I can finish my sentence.

“I never said you did mind. But I do.”

This time, I stay silent, knowing that he needs to work out his aggression. Jax would never hurt me, that’s a knowledge I’ll be able to take to my grave. And if after this, he needs to rest and recuperate, then I’ll make sure he does. But this is something I can do for him, I can give to him. His body begins to blanket mine again, his already solid cock sliding up my thigh and settling against my ass as he leans over me again. His lips trail over my shoulder blade and up my neck before biting down so hard I’m certain there will be a mark. His hands roam over my body and I close my eyes to relish in the

comfort that feeling brings. There's nothing else in this world that can ground me the way Jax's hands on me do.

"I love you, Gun. I know you love me. But our dynamic has been off and I fucking hate it. Everything was ripped from me, and I won't let you, or us, this, be ripped away any more."

I feel myself growing more and more breathless and needy with every word he speaks. I know what he means. Our love may not have changed, but our dynamic has. I hate it as much as he does. But I'd still take it over him not being here at all.

"Then take it back." I breathe out. "Take me back."

Jax leaves one last trail of kisses down my neck before pulling away. The loss of his warmth against my back leaves a longing forming in me. Before I can protest, he grips my ass cheeks and within seconds I feel his warm tongue sliding down my crack. It slides up and down a few times, before he circles my hole and my body bucks with need for more.

I open my mouth to cry out, but I know the rules. If I ask, he'll stop. Just like out in the field, Jax's self-discipline is off the charts. I've only seen him struggle with it once, a memory that will live inside of me forever.

Instead of crying out, or begging for what I need, I bite down on the pillow beneath my head and allow my boyfriend to manipulate my body in the best way. His hands, his tongue, the vulgar sounds coming from him as he practically feasts on my ass.

My hands are clenching the bedsheets, I'm biting down so hard on the pillow that my teeth are starting to hurt. My dick is so hard and I know I'm leaking pre-cum like a damn faucet. After a couple more minutes, Jax must be able to sense that I'm barely holding on, because he pulls away and climbs off the bed. I hear the telltale sound of the dresser drawer opening and closing. The bed dips again, and only a second later Jax grabs my hips and lifts me so my ass is higher in the air and I feel warm liquid drip down my crack.

"This is going to be rough, quick, and dirty." I let out a long, slutty moan at his words because he knows I fucking

love it when he takes me savagely. When he uses me.

“Fuck me, Jax.” His hand slaps against my ass again, and the sting is a welcome feeling.

“I’m fucking you because I want to. This is punishment for you, Gun. We’ll see if I even allow you to come.” I hold back a cry of desperation, because I already feel my orgasm building inside of me. Every time he speaks to me, it edges closer and closer. It’s only a matter of minutes before I’m not able to hold it back anymore.

Jax begins working my hole, sliding his finger in and out. He doesn’t waste time before adding a second, then a third. He does the bare minimum to ensure he won’t hurt me, but no more than that. His fingers disappear, and I’m left feeling empty and needy.

Thankfully, it’s barely a few seconds before I feel something prodding at my slicked up hole and I’m torn between excitement, need, and fear. It’s been months since Jax has been able to fuck me, and I’m not stupid enough to think it won’t hurt at least a little bit.

His fingers dig into my hips so roughly that I’m sure the bruises are already forming. Without any buildup, he pushes in and the rough sting is instant. Two long, desperate moans fill the room and my knuckles turn white from how roughly I’m gripping the sheets.

Jax pulls out, leaving barely the tip at my entrance, then on a rough, punishing thrust he slams back in. He repeats the action over and over, stealing my breath every time. His hips slam against my ass and I relish the soundtrack of skin slapping skin, moans and groans spilling from both our lips, and the recognizable sound of his dick sliding in and out on repeat.

“Fuck, Gun.” Jax cries, and even though I can’t see him, the picture is clear as day in my mind. His head thrown back, his neck straining, teeth clenched, his skin bright red from exertion. Just the idea of that visual has my cock begging for relief.

“Jax, baby. I need to come.” I can hear the pain and desperation in my own voice, so I know he can hear it too. “Please!”

His hand snakes around my front and he brings it to my neck, squeezes just tight enough for me to feel it. “I don’t know if you deserve it.” There’s a hint of menace in his voice, and when I glance behind me, his eyes are so dark right now, they’re practically black. “Your ass is my favorite thing in the world, and you tried to keep it from me.”

There’s a part of me that wants to argue, to tell him that it’s what was best for him. But the only thing I can manage past my lips are more pleas.

“Please, baby.”

He gives my neck one more tight squeeze before letting go and moving his hand down to my aching dick. The moment he wraps his hand around it, stars dance in my vision.

“Yessss!”

Jax continues to pump in and out of me, more and more fervently, and his hand matches the rhythm he set. Every time he slams into me, his hand squeezes my shaft even tighter. It’s only a couple minutes before the sensation of tingles dance up my spine, my balls become heavy and draw up and I’m calling out his name as I come undone. Jax keeps working me as I ride out my orgasm. He pushes me down onto the bed, not caring that I’m laying in my own release, not that I care either. His thrust becomes more urgent and desperate, his rhythm and pace completely gone as he chases his own orgasm. He pulls out and slams back into me roughly just as he calls my name and I can feel him filling my ass.

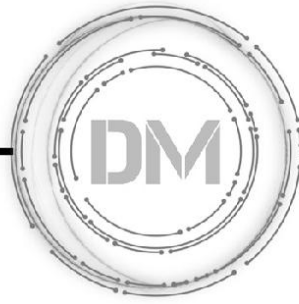
“Fuck, Gun!”

It takes a couple minutes for both of us to calm our breathing, and once Jax is able to move again, he slowly pulls out and I want to cry at the loss. He’s gone and back a minute later and I feel the warm washcloth over my ass. He uses his hand to motion for me to roll over, then he wipes my stomach as well.

When we're both cleaned up, Jax climbs back into bed and pulls me to him. Neither one of us speaks, just listening to the calming sound of our breathing filling the otherwise silent room. Something about the way he presses his lips to my forehead helps lull me into a deeper, calmer sedation.

"I'm not broken." His whispered words break through my foggy mind and the ragged, heavy way they come out is like a punch in the heart.

"No, you're not." I say resolutely. "Even if you were, I'd still love every single piece of you."



CHAPTER THREE

Gunnar

Seven Years Ago...

I'M NERVOUS. I DON'T GET NERVOUS OFTEN, BUT A NORMAL job interview can be nerve-wracking as it is, so one like this is just downright terrifying. When I received the phone call last week from one of my old captains, I was a little confused by his cryptic words. I didn't leave the Marines because I hated it or because I wasn't good at my job. I left because of an ambush that only a few of us made it out of alive, and even then, just barely. Though I managed to escape with minimal injuries, I decided to take the out that was offered to me. Especially after finding out that the fucking people who ambushed us and killed half my men were put on the Do Not Touch list. *Such fucking bullshit.* I've been searching for a job, but all the ones I've looked into so far, I know I'll end up bored out of my skull. I'm not cut out to be a fucking mall cop or a security guard at Target.

So when Dawson called and said he had an interview lined up for me for something a little more intense, I decided, *what the hell?* After I confirmed with him that I'm good with it, I received a text message two days later with nothing more than an address. I had to search up the actual directions myself.

I turn my rental car onto the street my handwritten directions tell me. The ocean is almost in perfect view and I can't help the smile that twitches at my lips. Besides my

family, the ocean is really the only thing I miss from back home. I don't actually miss California, but there were certain aspects I enjoyed. My early morning surfing being one of them.

I'm driving on the empty seaside road for a little over ten minutes before some houses finally come into view. I glance back at the directions, just to verify the correct number I'm looking for and as soon as I do, I start to question if I wrote something down completely fucking wrong. When Dawson told me that my interview is with a company called Dark Matter Security, I expected to end up at some corporate style building, not a beach house on an abandoned, unpaved street outside of Beaufort. I pull my car over against the graveled-curb in front of the house and quickly pull out my phone. I open the text message with the address on it and double check that I wrote it down correctly. Sure enough, it matches. And for some reason that sends a new wave of nerves through me. Nothing about this is going to be normal, or what I'm subconsciously expecting.

I pull in a heavy breath before climbing out of the car and making my way up the well-kept walkway. I muster up every ounce of courage, the same that helped me leave my shitty high school relationship and make it through my years in the Marines.

The Military was never actually a dream or goal I had growing up, but once I commit to something I give it my all. It's why I'm being so picky about the job I take now that I'm out. I don't plan to bounce around from job to job. I'm looking for a career.

Before I make it to the front porch, the door opens and I watch as three men step out onto it, not looking the least bit surprised to see me standing here.

"Gunnar Beckett." The man standing mostly in the front says as more of a statement than a question, though I give him a simple nod.

"Yes, sir." I give him a quick once over, noting the way his eyes are so dark, they're practically black and the large scar

that starts at his lips and goes up his cheeks makes him look scary as fuck.

He holds out his hand for me before introducing himself as Alec Matterson, and the two men next to him as Wyatt Everett and Caleb Tanner. We stand on the porch as they explain to me exactly what it is they do. I can honestly say that when Dawson told me he had a job lined up, I didn't expect it to be with a bunch of mercenaries. Maybe that knowledge should bother me, rub me the wrong way. Hell, maybe I should want to turn around right now and run to the authorities and turn them all in. But I don't. And I assume them giving me all of the dirty details means that they know I won't.

None of what they're saying sits wrong with me. It all makes sense. They take out people of all levels of evil. From child molesters, to serial killers, wife beaters, and even terrorists. The people that the law or government seems to either ignore or let get away with it, they don't.

"We know your situation and everything that went down before you left the Marines." Alec's words jolt my attention back to him and I have no idea how to respond to that.

"If you choose to come work with us," Wyatt cuts in, "the first thing on our agenda will be to take out the men who attacked your team." I'm stunned silent, processing everything they just said. Not to mention the fact that he basically just offered me a job. A job where I'll be able to make a real difference. I won't just be sitting on my ass, pretending to be a badass. I'll be protecting the world from evil, possibly even more so than I did in the Marines.

I quickly try to weigh the pros and cons in my head, but there aren't many con's that I can come up with. Sure, this job is probably dangerous on multiple levels. But at the end of the day, probably not much more than the job I was doing in the military. So without giving it too much more thought, I nod my head. "I'm in."

Tanner and Alec lead me through the house, showing me around. Alec explains that it's technically his place, but they use it as headquarters. Every member of the team has their

own room in case it's needed for emergencies or drawn-out jobs. Some members live here full time, while others have their own place on top of it.

“This will be your room.” He opens the door, showing me a basic room with nothing more than a queen-size bed, a couple night stands, and a dresser. “You're welcome to add what you want, and decorate if that's your thing.”

I shrug my shoulders because I really don't give a shit if my room is decorated or not. A comfortable and safe place to sleep is all that matters to me. And North Carolina is far enough away from California that I feel like I can actually breathe.

“It looks good to me.”

He leads me back through the rest of the house, introducing me to a huge-ass dude named Sebastian Hunter. According to Alec, Hunter has only been working with Dark Matter for a couple months now.

“This started as a small operation. I have a legitimate security company that people hire for bodyguards and shit like that. So Wyatt, Tanner, and I focused on getting that solid and off the ground before expanding this side of things. It's been three of us, and some contract workers for a while. We're finally settled enough to start hiring more members full-time.”

“How many do you have now?”

“Besides myself, Wyatt, and Tanner? There's Hunter, and there's Carter, who has been with us for about two years now.” I nod a couple of times, feeling even more pressure over the fact that I'm one of the first few members he's hired.

As if he's able to read my mind, Alec speaks up. “We know your record in the Marines and you came highly recommended by a few of my contacts. I have no doubt that you'll be an asset to the team.” It feels as if a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I may still be on edge and nervous about this job, but obviously they did their research before I was even invited here. They knew they were going to hire me

all along and for some reason that brings me some comfort and helps calm me.

“There he is,” Alec says with his attention on the opening front door. “Jaxon Carter, meet our newest hire, Gunnar Beckett.” My eyes move to the man who just entered the house and my entire body freezes and I’m pretty sure my heart jumps into my damn throat. I don’t know who he is, but he’s possibly the most gorgeous man I’ve ever laid my eyes on. His dark hair and eyebrows compliment his tan complexion and only accentuate his perfectly white teeth. His eyelashes are like two fans framing incredible brown eyes.

“I- uh-” Holy shit, I can’t even get my mouth to work. I have no idea if he notices because he just gives me a dick-swelling smile and holds his hand out to me.

“Nice to meet you, Gunner. I’m Jax.” I slide my hand into his grip and give him a firm shake while trying to ignore the tingles that shoot up my arm. I try not to give anything away. I’ve never been one to hide my sexuality. When I came out in high school, my family was nothing but supportive. There were definitely some assholes at school I had to deal with, but I quickly became old news once I got a boyfriend and it stopped being something interesting to talk about. In the Marines, I didn’t lie about being gay, but the whole *don’t ask, don’t tell* thing was fully enforced. Of course, that didn’t stop me from having my share of hook-ups. I’m not exactly sure what the policy is here, but that’s something I’ll wait and speak to Alec privately about.

“Welcome to the team.” I’m still completely mesmerized by Jax and how comfortable he seems right now.

“Thank you.” I feel like a fucking moron because I can barely form a complete sentence. I try to force myself not to check him out, even though I really really want to. But as my eyes stay on his, I notice that his don’t stay on mine. I may even puff my chest out and flex a little as his gaze roams down my body. He’s subtle about it, but I’m watching him so damn close that I notice everything. At least I think I notice it. At this rate, I wouldn’t be surprised if I’m just imagining something I want to see because I’m so damn horny.

Alec says something to Jax, who turns his attention onto my new boss. But I can't seem to tear my gaze from the man who has suddenly captured my attention. They talk for a few more minutes, the entire time I try to hide the way my heart keeps speeding up and slowing down at the same time. It's not like I haven't been with plenty of men before. Hell, I had a solid boyfriend pretty much all the way through high school. And I more than had my fair share of hook-ups while in the Marines. But there's something about this guy that has me completely mesmerized. *Jaxon Carter.*

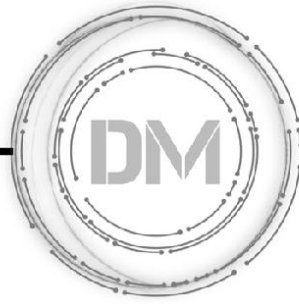
I take in a deep breath in an attempt to compose myself just as Alec and Jax finish up their conversation.

"It was nice to meet you, Gunnar." His gaze stays on mine as he slowly backs away.

"Yeah," I say like a complete moron. "You too."

A crooked smirk lifts his lips, it's borderline cocky, as if he knows exactly what he's doing to me right now. "See you around."

I sure fucking hope so.



DARK MATTER SECURITY

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunnar

MY EYES TRAIN ON THE PIECE OF SHIT STANDING OUTSIDE OF the elementary school, acting as if he has

every right to be here. He looks at his watch again, then around at his surroundings. He knows he shouldn't be here and if he gets caught then he'll be arrested... again.

The problem with that though, is the fact that the guy is fucking loaded and he'll just pay his fancy-ass lawyers to get him out of it... again. Anybody who actually defends people like him is exactly what's wrong with the world. People like them are why people like us do what we do. When Connors gave Hunter and I the low-down of the job, I begged him to let me take out the lawyers too. He unfortunately said no. Turns out the lawyer who actually defended him and got him off the charges, is the one who hired us. According to Connors, he brings us a lot of work. So I guess he can have a pass. His bosses though, the ones that bring in these bullshit cases, are the ones who deserve to take a long dirt nap six feet under.

“So how do we want to go about it?” Hunter's deep voice pulls me from my focus on the piece of shit who's minutes are thankfully numbered, and I turn and look at him. The fucker is always so damn quiet. He's downright menacing with his severely shaved head, short beard, and arms covered in tattoos.

“We can't do it here.” He raises a brow, looking at me as if I'm a moron. We have an often spoken rule that we do our best

not to involve kids, and taking the asshole out in front of an elementary school would for sure qualify as breaking that rule.

My eyes glance back over to the front of the school and for a minute I'm confused, until I see the woman pulling into the parking lot.

“He's on the move.”

Neither one of us says anything as we fall into position and follow our target off of school property and away from prying eyes. The asshole couldn't even manage to hold up the only fucking requirement to get him off the hook. He's not supposed to go with a hundred yards of the neighbor girl he took advantage of. But he keeps showing up, regularly, to see her. He's sick and doesn't deserve to breathe.

We watch him as he walks down the street and gets into a fancy-ass sports car, an air of entitlement surrounding him like he owns the damn world.

“What do you think?” Hunter rumbles. “Home or office?”

“Could be either. You take the office, I'll take the home.” He nods in agreement and we go our separate ways. It takes little more than twenty minutes to get to the dude's house. There's something so damn sick about the fact that he bought a place in the middle of the suburbs, surrounded by children. I don't know if that was his intention when he moved in here a little over a year ago, but I wouldn't doubt it. I've already swept the place for cameras or any other devices. It came up clean. So, I'm just standing in the middle of his living room, looking around the place, trying to figure out how someone could be so sick. I may not be perfect, none of us that work for DMS are, but there are lines we'll never cross. I lost count a long-ass time ago of how many people I've killed over the years, and it'd probably be better for my soul to say I regret them. But the truth is, I don't.

The only ones I may have a second thought on, are the ones I killed while I was in the Marines. But now? Those we target through these jobs? Every single one of them deserves what they get. I hear the lock on the front door disengage and I let my mask fall over me. I stand up straight, but make

everything look completely casual. My body may be thrumming in anticipation, but I won't let it show. I never do.

“Who the hell are you? How'd you get into my house?” He looks around, like he's trying to figure out if he's really seeing someone here. Ignoring the dumbass, I pull out my phone and send a quick text to Hunter.

Got him.

All he sends back is *k*, which means he's already on his way here to pick me up when I finish the job. I pocket my phone and step just a tiny bit closer to this guy. *Craig Howard*. Even his name makes him sound like a fucking leech.

“You know,” I say, as I walk casually over to one of the bookshelves he has. Of course there's not a single book on the shelves. From the corner of my eye, I see the way he focuses on the gloves I'm wearing. I pick up one of the fancy ass glass pieces he has on display. “You'd think that someone that has so much to hide would have a better security system.” He stutters a few times, and I hold back a laugh at how ridiculous this guy is.

“You can't be here, I'll call the cops!”

“And tell them what?” I drop the glass piece on the floor, the shatter making him jump. “That you found a strange guy in your house when you got home from the elementary school.” His face pales and I just shake my head at him. “You gonna tell them that you *just had* to see her? Why don't I dial the number for you? See how well that turns out.” His entire face turns red, if it were anyone else I might be concerned that he was about to have a heart attack. In this case, that would actually help me.

“It's none of your business!”

“No?” I grab another piece from the shelf and throw it down. “I was paid a lot of money to *make it* my business.”

“Money? I can give you money, just give me a number.”

I eye him for a minute, pretending to think about his offer. We knew this would be coming. It always does.

“Yeah, okay.” I shrug my shoulder like it’s no big deal. He scrambles to pull out his phone and if I was anyone else, and he was anyone else, I might even feel bad about how eager he is to save his own ass. Too bad it’s way too late for that.

I give him an amount, and for a minute I think he’s going to argue, but he doesn’t. I ramble off our latest overseas account number, and wait as he goes through the process of finalizing the transfer. It’s not like we have to be concerned about it being traced back to us. Transferring from one offshore account to another isn’t able to be traced very easily. Besides, I doubt any cops are going to look too hard into Craig’s death. They hardly ever look into the deaths of our marks. Because no one actually cares.

“Okay, there.” He lets out a breath and shows me where it says transfer complete. I pull out my phone to another message from Hunter.

Money’s there.

“Very good.” I give him my trademark smile, the one I give to all my marks before I end it for them. Maybe it’s sick, but I always figure they’d like something pretty to look at before everything goes black.

He runs a shaky hand through his hair and lets out a long huff. “So that’s it then? You’ll leave me alone?” He starts to turn away and *my fuck* this guy really is stupid. I let out a low laugh as I step right behind him.

“Not a fucking chance.”

Before he has a chance to even process what’s happening, I grab onto his shoulder and head. I twist his head until I hear the telltale crack, then let go. His body falls to the floor in a heap. I look down at his lifeless body and again it hits me that I should probably feel *something*. But again, I don’t. He deserved this. Someone who repeatedly sneaks into his nine-year-old neighbor’s bedroom, then denies the whole thing when she finally gets the courage to say something, doesn’t deserve to live.

Shaking myself out of my stupor, I step over the pile of shit and get to work finishing the job. I make the entire house a shitshow, grabbing a good amount of items of value and throw them in the small duffel I brought in with me. Contrary to what a lot of people might believe, legitimate burglars don't usually go for the big items like TV's and shit. They're too big and too easy for someone to spot you leaving with. Jewelry, cash, phones, maybe the occasional gaming console, that's the shit to go for. I manage to get into the dinky-ass safe he has in his bedroom and grab out the stacks of bills in it.

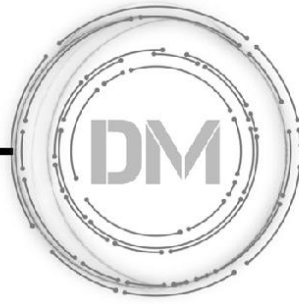
I make one more quick sweep of the place, making sure I'm not forgetting anything that could be useful, then zip up the bag and go out the back door. I don't even bother closing it behind as I make my way silently through a few yards, sure to avoid any doorbell cameras. I make it two blocks over to where I know Hunter is waiting in the car.

I throw the bag in the back before climbing in and letting out a long breath.

“All good?”

I turn, giving him a bright smile, which makes him roll his eyes. We've known each other for years, and he always says it's weird how often I smile. So I'm always sure to kick it up a notch when he's around.

“Yep. Let's get the fuck out of here.”



CHAPTER FIVE

Jax

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN MORE OF A HANDS ON TYPE OF GUY. EVEN when I was younger and in school, I did better at the science experiments that required us to actually do shit, more than the textbook assignments. It's just how my brain has always worked. I'm used to it by now.

That's the exact reason why on Monday morning, when Wyatt was trying to explain how all this shit worked, I felt like my brain was going to explode. But now, as I'm sitting here three days later, actually doing it and putting that information to work, I'm surprisingly kind of enjoying myself.

It's been a long few days with Gunnar being gone and the job he's been put on most recently requiring no contact. I hate to say it, but the separation has probably been good for us, considering all the shit we've been dealing with. I was so fucking angry with him last week. The sex may have helped a little, but it didn't resolve anything. I don't know what it's going to take to get him to stop treating me like I'm so fragile, but I need to figure it out soon before the resentment really starts to kick in.

"How's it going?" Alec asks as he strides into the room, and I'm thankful for the distraction. As upset and angry as I might be with Gunnar, I'm never going to let him go. I just need to get my head right and show him that I'm better.

Wyatt gives Alec a rundown of everything we're doing and I just sit back letting him relay it all. I've only been doing basic intel gathering and surveillance, so Wyatt knows what's going on better than I do. I pay attention to the conversation, wanting to be clued into everything going on. It's been months since I've been allowed to be involved in DMS matters fully, and I'm fucking itching to be back at it.

"I just heard from Hunter," Alec says after a few minutes of going over the other jobs everyone else is on. "He and Gunnar should be back later tonight. Connors ended up giving them approval to take out the firm's partner that keeps bringing in the cases."

Wyatt nods his head, clearly understanding what Alec is referring to. I clench my teeth, trying not to be frustrated about the fact that I'm not in on the details. That's a normal thing. The only three who usually have all of the information on these types of jobs are Alec, Wyatt, and Tanner. Unless they're jobs that involve all of us, like when Wyatt brought the situations with Lillie and Nicole to us, and Alec brought everything with Willow and Anya to the table. Those jobs had the possibility of affecting all of us. Technically, all jobs do, but those ones were definitely special circumstances.

Even though it's normal to be somewhat out of the loop, for some reason right now, it's pissing me off. Probably because I can't take any of the jobs so I'm feeling left out in general.

Alec's phone pings with a text message and when he looks at it, his lips twitch with a smirk. Alec is a scary fucker, with the huge scar on his face that pulls his lips up, almost like the joker. It doesn't help that he's built like a house and he has a damn short fuse for his anger. So when he smirks like that, it looks more evil than playful.

"I'll leave you both to it," he finally says after typing something out and pocketing his phone. Wyatt chuckles and shakes his head, clearly aware that whatever message he just received, came from Willow.

“He’s so fucking whipped.” Wyatt mumbles, and I can’t help but laugh at that.

“And you’re not?” Wyatt looks over at me with another smirk and a look on his face that tells me that he’s not ashamed of it at all.

“Pretty sure we can all claim that title.” On instinct, my body stiffens slightly. Gunnar and I don’t hide our relationship. Especially after everything that happened to me, our team would have to be stupid to not know we’re together. But we’ve never flaunted it. When you grow up in a stuffy environment full of rich, homophobic pricks, then join the military, which has a lot of the same vibes, you get used to keeping your mouth shut. We both know that our team doesn’t have a problem with it. Being gay is pretty damn mild compared to the other personal shit we’ve all been through. Not to mention we basically kill people for a living.

But hearing Wyatt so casually refer to my relationship has my instinct to hide it all kicking in. Instead, I pull in a deep breath and let it out slowly before giving him a nod.

It’s not like he’s wrong. When it comes to Gunnar, I am whipped. I may be angry at him for the way he’s been treating me, but I still know that at the end of the day, I’d do anything for him.

The subject drops and Wyatt and I get back to work, but my mind stays on Gunnar and the anticipation of him coming home tonight. Not having sex became easier and easier the longer we went without it. But after last week, and after finally taking him again the way I love so much, I need it. I need him again. When he gets home tonight, I’m going to have him.

It’s a little after six when Wyatt decides we can call it a day and pick up where we left off tomorrow. I’m thrumming with anticipation as I get ready to leave, before Alec stops me.

“Jax, Doc is here to check on you.” I let out an annoyed breath, but I know the drill. Doc shows up when he’s able to

and Alec won't let me work anymore until Doc gives him the go ahead.

With an annoyed huff, I make my way down to what we consider the infirmary. It's nothing special, it's basically just a basement that's set up as a small area that resembles a waiting room, and two rooms that are both equipped with two hospital beds and other equipment. We're all trained with enough knowledge to help each other if and when needed. But Doc is on call when we have emergencies. It's a well kept secret, because the shit he does for us isn't only grounds for him losing his license, but he'd easily go to jail. Of course, so would all of us. I walk into the basement and find Doc in the room on my left, pulling out a few things.

"Jax," he greets me warmly, but I don't miss the way his eyes wave over me, probably to make sure I'm still in one piece.

"Hey Doc." He gestures for me to have a seat on the bed, and I quickly comply. The sooner I get this over with, the sooner I can get home. "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good, actually." I tell him honestly. He eyes me for a minute, then nods his head, seemingly satisfied with my answer.

He goes through the process of checking my heart rate, my blood pressure, and how my wounds are healing. I breathe when he tells me to breathe, cough when he tells me to cough, and lay back when he needs me to lay back. I've been through this process so much over the past six months, I could probably do it all in my sleep.

"You've still been taking it easy, I hope?" I mumble a low agreement, but he catches onto it quickly. "Wanna tell me what you've been doing that you shouldn't be?"

He helps me to sit up, and I run my hand through my hair in irritation. Not with Doc, but with the situation. "I had sex last week."

He lets out a low chuckle, and shakes his head. "That's fine, Jax. Your wounds are mostly healed and your levels all

look good. Just try not to overexert yourself too much, yeah?”

I nod agreement, feeling a weird sense of relief at that. Maybe now that I officially have the all clear from Doc to have sex, the rest won't be far behind.

“And when do you think I can go back out in the field?”

I watch as he pulls in a heavy breath and releases it in a huff. “I want to give it a few more weeks, at least. But I'd say soon.”

My lips twitch with a smile. It's been months since I've been able to take on a job, so a few more weeks will be a piece of cake.

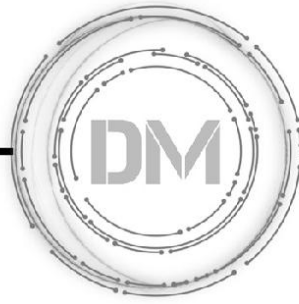
“I can deal with that.”

It only takes a few more minutes for Doc to finish checking up on me and I leave the infirmary feeling better than I have in a while. Knowing that there's actually an end in sight to this bullshit, makes me feel like I can handle being on lockdown. It's the fact that I had no idea how long this would be lasting that made it so fucking difficult to deal with.

My phone pings just as I walk outside, and what I see has a smile pulling at my lips.

We'll be home in about an hour.

I don't doubt he's still a little upset with me over everything that's been going on between us, but I plan to fix that as soon as I have him in my arms again.



CHAPTER SIX

Jax

Seven Years Ago...

I HONESTLY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THIS GUY'S PROBLEM IS. When we first met, I thought I detected a flicker of interest. But it's been almost a month since he's officially moved into the house and started working with us, and he seems to be avoiding me like I have a contagious disease and a hump.

Sure, when we're on a job he's all business and treats me the exact same way he treats Hunter, Tanner, and everyone else. But as soon as we're back home in a more relaxed environment, it's almost as if he goes out of his way to not be in the same room as me. It's getting really fucking annoying if I'm being honest. Technically it's not a requirement for us to be friends, or to even get along, as long as we can still work together. But given the fact that we not only work together, but also live together, it'd be nice if we could at least have an actual conversation. It's fucking annoying.

I throw a punch with more force than really necessary against the bag, and continue going a lot harder than I should for only a workout. I let out my frustrations with Gunnar and his weird iciness on the punching bag.

Just as I stop the assault and lean against the bag to catch my breath, I hear the front door open and close, and I know exactly who it is. Wyatt is home in Seattle and Alec, Tanner, and Hunter are on a job.

Without thinking too hard about it, I pull off my gloves and hurry out of the workout room and make my way to the kitchen and find Gunnar unloading a couple of takeout containers onto the table. I'm actually kind of surprised he didn't take them straight to his room.

"Hey." I step further into the kitchen and Gunnar turns to look at me with his eyes wide with surprise.

"Oh, um, hi. I, uh, I thought no one was home."

"Sorry." I shrug, trying to feign casualness, but my blood is already starting to boil. Of course he's only out here because he thought I wasn't here.

"No, it's- it's fine. I just thought you went on that job." I shake my head, stepping a little closer and ball my hands into fists when Gunnar steps back. I pull in a deep breath, trying to calm myself before I reply to him.

"Nope. That job was just for Alec and Hunter, and Tanner for Surveillance." We have some equipment for surveillance here, but it's usually easier for Tanner to travel on jobs. At least for the moment.

Gunnar's head bobs a couple times, but it's obvious he's just trying to end this conversation. I'm constantly trying to think back through all of our interactions, not that there's many, trying to pinpoint where I may have insulted him. I can't think of anything. The first time we met, I was pretty sure there was a mutual attraction between us, but I clearly read it wrong. Alec and Wyatt are always careful about vetting who they hire and even just work with. So I'd like to think that they didn't hire a homophobic prick. But all signs are pointing to that.

"Well, I'll just take this up to your room and stay out of your way."

"You're not in my way." I'm trying to be nice and welcoming, but of course, Gunnar doesn't make it easy on me and I'm pretty sure my words come out as more of an irritated growl. He doesn't say anything else as he hurries to gather up his food and as much as I try to just let it go like I normally do,

it feels as if something inside of me just snaps. Just as Gunnar picks up his bag of food and begins to walk toward the stairs, I come completely undone.

“What the fuck is you’re fucking problem, man!?”

Gunnar starts with surprise, whether it’s from my words or my angry tone, I don’t know and I really don’t fucking care. I keep my gaze on him and watch as his throat bobs with a heavy swallow and his eyes dart around the room trying to look anywhere but at me.

“I, uh, I don’t know what you mean.”

“Bullshit.” The single word comes out venomous and angry and for the briefest moment, I feel guilty. That is until Gunnar darts his eyes again and my anger just keeps ratcheting up higher and higher. “You act like I have a fucking contagious disease and can barely handle being in the same room as me. What the fuck did I do to you?” His mouth opens and closes a few times, but nothing comes out, so I keep going. “Alec said you aren’t a homophobic piece of shit, but I’m starting to think he was fucking wrong!”

Gunnar’s eyes widen and surprise covers his face. “You-think- and I’m-”

“That you’re a fucking asshole? Yeah! I do!”

“I, uh-” He keeps tripping over his words and I hate the fact that I find it kind of adorable. I should not be thinking of him like that, especially not right now. “I thought you were straight?”

I’m not sure how I feel about that statement. If he thought I was straight, then why has he been acting the way he has been?

“Well, I’m not!” He doesn’t say anything, only stares at me with shock and slight confusion on his face. “So if you didn’t even know I was gay, then what the fuck is your problem with me?”

This time he meets my eyes, but there’s apprehension behind the ocean blue orbs.

“I thought you were straight.”

I resist rolling my eyes. Seriously, what the fuck is this guys problem? “Yeah, you already said that.”

“I uh, I thought I had a thing for a straight guy.” He completely avoids eye contact with me now and I’m struck stupid by his words.

“A- a crush?” Now I feel like a moron, not able to keep my thoughts or words straight. It’s a huge leap from thinking that Gunnar is a homophobic asshole to finding out he has a crush on me.

“I didn’t want to screw up our working relationship.” I can hear the quiver of uncertainty in his voice, and something inside of me roars to life. Some instinct inside of me that has the weird need and desire to protect him. Even if I’m only protecting him from having his feelings hurt.

“And now that you know I’m gay?” I keep my gaze honed in on the way his eyes widen only a fraction and his jaw works as if he’s trying to work something out in his head.

“What um, what do you mean?” I take a step closer, but this time, Gunnar doesn’t try to create more distance between us and I feel a strange sense of satisfaction over it.

“I mean,” another step closer, “now that you know I’m gay, and interested, what are you going to do about it?” Gunnar sucks in a heavy breath before slowly releasing and shaking his head.

“You- you’re interested?” Something tells me that Gunnar isn’t always this unsure. He’s not a self-conscious man. I’ve seen him in action, he has a deadly as fuck mind and doesn’t hesitate when the time comes to complete a job. Of course, knowing that I’m the one making this man lose his head and stumble over his thoughts and words makes me want to fucking preen.

I don’t actually respond to Gunnar. I just step closer, putting us basically toe-to-toe, and raise a single brow in expectation.

The seconds tick by as we stare at each other, electricity jolting between us and lighting up my nerve cells. My dark eyes stay locked with his light ones and before I'm fully processing what's happening, it's as if something between us just snaps. Gunnar's lips slam into mine, my tongue forces its way into his mouth and we're both dueling for dominance. His hands tangle painfully in my hair and my hand flies to the back of his neck gripping it roughly. I use my hips to push him toward the wall and pin him in. I move my mouth down his jaw, nipping and sucking the whole way. Gunnar throws his head back, banging it against the wall while I trail a path of kisses and bites down his straining neck.

"So?" I pull back and see Gunnar's eyes closed and a mixture of need and disbelief on his face. His eyes open and he looks at me with confusion.

"I- What?"

I lean in again, putting my lips right next to his ear. "Now that you know, what are you going to do about it?" I bite down on his ear before pulling back so I can see Gunnar's gorgeous face.

"Uh-" His eyes flicker to one of the camera's in the kitchen and I immediately know what his reservations are. We have cameras all over the place here, just in case. But they only turn on if the alarms go off, or if they're turned on manually for any reason. But Alec wouldn't do that without telling us.

"They're off." His eyes bore heavily into mine as a wicked smirk plays on his lips before he slowly slides down the wall and into his knees. His hands are confident and swift as he undoes my belt and jeans and frees my aching cock. It's a complete turnaround from the man who was stumbling over his words and afraid to tell me he had a crush on me just moments ago. This man now, is confident and one hundred percent sure of himself and what he's doing.

He grips me in his rough hand and I suck in a hiss as his tongue peeks out and licks my slit. I comb my fingers through his golden hair while he practically swallows me whole. I'm tempted to let my head fall back and just enjoy the feeling of

this. Instead, I take the moment to truly examine the man on his knees in front of me. I've spent plenty of time over the past month watching him closer than I probably should have, but he's had me mesmerized since the first moment I met him. Now, looking at him on his knees, his golden-tanned skin glistening with a light sheen of sweat from the humid heat of North Carolina. His eyes are closed as he seems to be enjoying this blowjob just as much as I am.

He twirls his tongue around my crown and his hand plays with my balls in the most delicious way. The sounds coming from the back of his throat vibrate through me and I can't help the desperate moan that falls from my lips. I repeat his name over and over again, and I can feel myself getting closer and closer to the edge. I grip Gunnar's hair even tighter, my knuckles turning white.

"Fuck, Gun-" My spine begins to tingle and my balls draw up. I'm gonna-" I don't even have time to warn him before my body begins to shake and I come harder than I have in a long-ass time. I'm not sure what I actually expected Gunnar to do, but I don't think it was for him to guzzle down every drop I give him. Once I'm completely drained and spent, I pressed my hand against the wall, breathing heavily and trying to hold myself up.

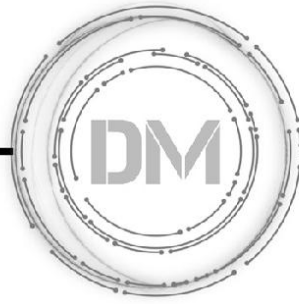
Gunnar slowly begins to stand and without a second thought, I twist his shirt in my hand and pull him to me for another kiss. This time it's slow and careful. I dip my tongue into his mouth, tasting myself and it's the most sensual fucking thing I've ever experienced. He relaxes back into the wall and I press my body against his. My softened cock is still hanging out of my pants and Gunnar is still completely dressed. It's something I need to fix immediately.

"I want you in my room and naked, right now." He looks at me, and a mix of emotions play over his features. I can't quite figure out what he's thinking or how he's feeling right now.

"You, uh, you're not done with me?"

I can't help but be surprised by his words. I just came so fucking hard down his throat, and he thought I'd be done with him already? My eyes stay trained on him and the way his blue eyes flicker with insecurities and need. Need for me. My hand wraps around the back of his neck and I pull him back to me.

“Oh baby, I'm not even close to being done with you.”
And if I'm being honest with myself, I have a feeling I don't think I ever will be.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Gunnar

I WALK INTO THE HOUSE, A LITTLE NERVOUS ABOUT WHAT I'M going to find. I wouldn't say things were bad between Jax and I when I left six days ago, but they definitely weren't great. He let out some of his aggression by fucking me hard the way we both like, and a couple more times before the night was over. But I know my man well enough to know that wasn't enough for him. He may have been frustrated about our sex life, but that's not the root of all of it. He's frustrated with himself, and the fact that he's not functioning at one-hundred percent.

Ever since Jax walked away from his uber-rich family when he was eighteen, he's been self-sufficient. He doesn't rely on anyone else, and that's what he's had to do ever since he was attacked. I know he hates it. Even though I've been the one taking the most care of him, he doesn't like it. From the beginning of our relationship, the precedent was set that Jax was the one that did the taking care of. So having that dynamic switched, especially in such a drastic way, isn't easy for him.

I get to the living room and find Cole and Lillie cuddled up on the couch watching some movie.

"Hey, you just get back?" I nod, already feeling the exhaustion start to kick in.

"Did you eat? There's leftovers in the fridge if you're hungry." Cole's my best friend, and I'm thankful as hell that he managed to end up with a woman as amazing as Lillie.

She's been through some serious shit and instead of cowering down like most people probably would, she came out of it stronger than ever. Their relationship is pretty incredible to watch. In a short time they became each other's entire world and have proven more than once that they'd be willing to die for the other. Cole's been through just as much shit, and I know having Lillie has made things a little easier for him to breathe.

"Thanks, but Hunter and I grabbed something on our way back in." They both nod, and as much as I don't want to do it because I told myself I wouldn't baby him anymore, I can't help it. "Did Jax eat?"

"Yeah, he ate with us. He just went upstairs a few minutes ago." I comb my fingers through my hair and give her a small nod.

"Hey," Cole climbs off the couch and walks over to me. He pulls a little further from Lillie and lowers his voice. "You doing okay? I know this shit has been rough on both of you."

"Yeah." I expel a long breath and try to mask the pain in my voice. Cole is one person I can always be open and honest with. But right now, shit just feels impossible. If there's anyone I can talk to about it, it's my best friend. But if I start now, we'll be here all night. "Just fucking tired." I mean that on so many levels and the way Cole's eyes look at me with pity, I'm pretty sure he understands my full meaning.

His hand clasps my shoulder gently. "I'm always here. You know that, right?" I give him one last soft smile and a simple nod before heading upstairs to where my boyfriend is waiting.

I stop outside the bedroom door, pull in a deep breath, then open it. Jax is lying on the bed with his back propped against the headboard, his thick rimmed glasses resting on his nose, and a book in his lap. I'm always in awe of how absolutely gorgeous this man is. With his full head of dark hair, full eyebrows and thick lashes. He has that naturally tanned skin that makes his golden brown eyes pop. I've never believed that there was such a thing as "leagues" when it came to looks. But if there were, he would definitely be out of mine.

“Hey.” He greets me as he closes his book and sets it on the nightstand with his glasses, when he sees me walk into the room. He seems calmer, more at ease than he was when I left.

“Hey babe.” I close the door behind me and immediately kick off my shoes and start undressing. I relish the way Jax’s eyes roam over me, hunger shining brightly in them.

“You hungry?” The first response on the tip of my tongue is *for you*, but I’m still trying to feel out where we stand right now, so I just shake my head instead.

“Hunter and I grabbed something on our way back.”

Jax climbs from the bed, but there’s a hesitance in his steps as he walks toward me. I hate this tension between. It’s never been like this before. We’ve always been so easy and comfortable with each other and I feel like there’s a wedge between us that I’m desperate to kick out of the way. I open my mouth to express exactly how I feel about it, but Jax beats me to it.

“I’m sorry, baby.” His words make me pause, not because he’s never apologized before, but because there’s so much vulnerability in them, it has me concerned.

“Jax-”

“No, Gun, please just, let me speak.” I close my mouth and nod once, gesturing for him to continue. Whatever it is he has to say, he clearly needs to be able to get it all out.

“I’ve been a jerk. Yes, I’ve been frustrated with the situation, but I was taking it out on you, and that’s not okay.” I stay quiet as his long fingers comb through his hair roughly and he pulls in a ragged breath. “I don’t like feeling like this, Gun, you know that. I feel helpless and useless, and I fucking hate it.”

“Jax, you’re not helpless, or useless.”

He gives me a look that doesn’t even try to hide how much he doesn’t believe my words. “For months I couldn’t even please you, Gunnar. Do you have any idea how that makes me feel? You think I don’t know that you’ve been going to the bathroom after I fall asleep to get yourself off?” Guilt washes

over me, and my immediate instinct is to deny it, but that would be a lie. I haven't done it a lot, but there have been a few times that I just needed the release.

“Jax, babe-”

“I get it, Gun, I do. I can't even be mad at you for it, because I've been fucking useless to you lately.”

I'm officially seeing red at his words. I'll put up with a lot from him, but not this bullshit.

“No! I'm not listening to this shit, Jax! I get that this has all been hard on you, but you're not fucking useless! You're alive and that's all I fucking care about. You think I give a shit if you can fuck me or not? You think I care that I've had to jack off a couple times to get release? No! I don't care, because at the end of the day, you're here. You're alive, and you're in our bed. That's all I fucking care about!” Under normal circumstances, I would probably feel bad about the guilt that crosses his features, but I don't. I feel like we've had this argument so many times over the past couple of weeks, I'm tired of it.

“I can't help it, Gun.” His words are soft and vulnerable, and my body immediately relaxes into a more empathetic stance. I step closer, cupping his cheek in my hand and gently pressing my forehead to his.

“I need you, Jax. I know this has been hard on you, and I'll do whatever you need to help you. But I don't ever want you to question your worth, especially not to me.”

I keep my eyes focused on his, even when he closes them in order to hide his vulnerability. I hear his heavy swallow before his glassy eyes open and focus back on mine.

“I hate everything about me now.”

“Like what?”

He steps away from me, and for a second I think I need to gear up for another fight. But instead, he slowly lifts his shirt and peels it off his body. There's no denying that Jax looks different than he did a year ago. He spent weeks at a time unconscious and was being fed through tubes, so it's no

surprise that he's lost quite a bit of weight. Where he was once lean and muscular, he's now thin and not as defined. What stands out the most though, are the new scars that are still bright and angry. The ones from the first attack in Paris have healed for the most part. But the new gunshot wounds from Banner's attack are still bright red and blotchy from the stitches only recently being removed.

"You used to love my body." My eyes snap to his, and I'm completely thrown off by his comment.

"You think I don't love it anymore?"

His hands gesture over his chest and stomach, showing off the added marks and where his six pack once was. "How could you?"

I take a small, tentative step forward, looking him in the eyes as I drop to my knees. "How could I not?" Before he has the chance to speak, I lean forward and place a soft kiss on one of his new scars. This one is a jagged line across his lower abdomen. Then I repeat the action on one of the smaller ones closer to his side. "I love you, Jax. I may have always liked your body, and the amazing things you did to me with it, but it's you, and your heart that I love." I hear a small gasp escape past his lips as I continue placing soft, quick kisses over every single one of his scars. I can feel Jax hardening beneath his sweats. I don't have to check to see if he's wearing any underwear, because I know he's not. So after a minute, I move my hands to his waistband, and gently pull them down. His solid cock springs free, almost smacking me in the face.

"Gun-" His protest is barely above a whisper, so I ignore it and take his cock in my hand, enjoying the heaviness in my palm. I lick around the crown, enjoying the sound of Jax fighting his own desire. A cross between a groan and a hiss falls from his lips as I continue sliding my tongue down his shaft and up and back around the crown. I lick another path down before licking his balls, and taking them in my mouth. When I pull away, I kiss the base of his shaft then lick away the precum dripping from his tip before I swallow him completely. That action seems to pull Jax from his inner turmoil and his hands fly to my hair. He grips tightly as I bob

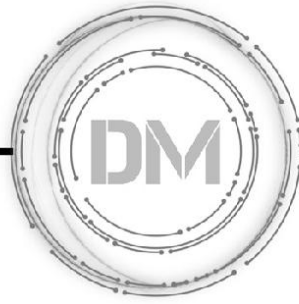
back and forth on his shaft and he begins to take over, bucking his hips fast and fucking my face. I let Jax take full control, knowing that he needs this. He needs to feel like he's in control. Like things haven't changed between us. I use my tongue to swirl it around his shaft as much as I can as he fervently slams in and out of my mouth over and over again. It's not much longer before he's racing to the finish line and before I know it, the salty taste of his cum hits the back of my throat as his release explodes in my mouth and I swallow down every drop. After a moment, his hands fall from my hair and I make sure to lick his dick completely clean.

I stand up on shaky legs, my cock is throbbing, but I ignore it. Wordlessly, Jax cups the sides of my neck and pulls me into a deep kiss. There's so much being said in this single kiss.

I'm sorry. Thank you. I love you.

I take every word from it, and return them fully.

When we finally break apart, I grab Jax's hands, noting the dazed and sated look on his face, and lead him back over to the bed. We lay down under the blankets, wrapped around each other in a comfortable silence. Neither one of us says anything else as we're blanketed in the comfort of silence and each other. For too many nights, I could only sit next to one of the small hospital beds in the infirmary while Jax was hooked to different monitors and tubes. I'll never take for granted having him in bed with me ever again. As we lay in the quiet, it's not long before Jax's breathing evens out and he falls asleep right where he belongs. In my arms.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Jax

I SIT QUIETLY AS ALEC ADDRESSES THE ROOM, GIVING THE rundown of the jobs we've recently closed and the new ones coming in. Since I'm still not cleared to go out in the field, I'm more or less only here to observe. I've been helping Wyatt and Tanner the past few days, doing surveillance and intel gathering. I always knew what they did was hard work, but I've still been surprised just how hard of work it's actually been.

"Collins, Cole, and Grant will leave for Dallas first thing in the morning. Dent says it shouldn't take more than a couple of days. Beckett and Hunter will take the Savannah job. Leave at oh-five-hundred tomorrow and be back by tomorrow night."

Everyone nods or grumbles their agreements. I have to admit I'm glad Gunnar isn't going to be gone for more than a day. We've basically cleared the air after the other night, and things seem to be slowly getting back to normal.

"I need someone to go on a supply run today. They're ready to go for us, so it'll just be a simple pick up. Any volunteers?"

I almost laugh at his volunteer's question. We all know damn well that if no one volunteers on their own, we'll be voluntold.

"How many do we need for this one?" Wyatt asks.

“At least two, but four in two cars would be best.” Cole, Gunnar, Hunter, and Collins are all quick to volunteer, so Alec relays what supplies they’ll be picking up, then calls the meeting. Everyone goes their separate ways and Wyatt, Tanner, and I get settled in front of the wall of monitors and get back to work. When new jobs come up, we do our research, making sure the job really is what we’re told it is. Even if it’s not, we take the job, we just change a bit. We began this process about six years ago when we were hired to take out someone that we were told was an excessively abusive husband. It turned out that he wasn’t abusive at all. His wife and best friend just wanted to be free to live their lives together off of his money. Luckily we figured out the truth before we followed through with the job. Now we make sure to vet every job that comes in.

I pull up the picture of one of our new targets and throw it into our facial recognition database, then wait for it to go through the process. After a few minutes, there’s a ping from one of the monitors but when I look at it, it’s not the picture I just put through.

Another picture pops up with the bold words beneath it saying, NO MATCH. My mind becomes blurry as I stare at the face in front of me. I don’t know who it is, but there’s something eerily familiar, something that stands out. But I don’t know why.

“Hey, um,” I swallow, trying to form the words. “Who’s this?” I turn to Wyatt and Tanner, who are both looking at me with wide, guilt-ridden expressions.

“Oh, um, well,” Tanner says cautiously. “That’s the guy who attacked you.”

I snap my eyes back to the picture, searching desperately for any recollection of this man. I only caught a few quick glimpses of him when he attacked me, which is why I only slightly feel like I recognize him.

“You found him?”

“Not exactly.” I furrow my brows in confusion, but wait silently while they explain more to me in detail.

“We’ve found a few pictures of him. One inside and one outside the club, and one at a convenience store. There wasn’t an ID used at the club, and he used cash at the store.” Tanner’s words have me feeling dejected, and Wyatt doesn’t help that feeling.

“And he’s not showing up in any of our facial recognition software. The guy’s essentially a ghost.”

“He’s gotta be a hired gun then, right?” It’s the only explanation I could think of for him virtually not existing.

“Well, that would explain the absence of any leads.” Tanner answers. “But-”

“But?”

“But the physical, and thorough attack would indicate something a bit more-”

“Personal.”

I stare back at both men, not exactly sure how to react to this news. I can’t even begin to think of how it could have been personal when I’ve never seen the guy before in my life. I look back at the picture, doing my best to search deep in my brain, trying to find any morsel of recognition. Foggy thoughts and possible memories seem to try to come up to the surface, but disappear before I can make them out. It feels as if I’m underwater and I’m reaching for the surface, but every time I get close, a wave crashes over me and pushes me back down.

“I don’t know who this is.” I can barely hear my own voice, but I’m suddenly feeling weak and confused. My head is pounding and my mind won’t stop spinning with confusion.

“We know. But we’re not going to give up, Jax.”

“What if we never figure out who he is?” It’s a reality we may have to accept, even if we don’t want to. I know it’s not something any of us would be happy about, myself especially. But if we can’t figure out who is, the only other option would be to hope for a miracle that we just randomly run into the guy on the street. And that’s pretty damn unlikely.

“We will, Jax.” There’s a hard determination in Tanner’s stare and I can’t help but nod along in agreement, even if I don’t fully believe him.

“You know how we work here,” Wyatt speaks up. “We’re not going to let this go until the person who attacked you, and whoever hired them -if someone hired them- is in the ground.”

“And we’re not going to stop until it’s done.” Both men stare back at me with a hard set in their features. They’re not going to let me go until I believe them. And fuck, I want to believe them.

“Okay. What can I do to help?”

“Fuck, I missed that.” Gunnar flops down on the bed next to me, his breathing hard and uneven. We’re both sweaty and exhausted, and I definitely have to agree with him. My body is sated and relaxed, it’s been so long since I’ve felt this good.

“You’re always so fucking pliant, baby. I love it.” He turns his head to look at me, his sweet smile practically blinding.

“You’re the only person who would call me pliant.”

I can’t help but growl at his words. “I fucking better be.”

He lets out a low chuckle, turning his body so he’s partially on top of me and kisses my chest. He’s still careful and mostly gentle with me, but it’s not as bad as it has been. After finding out that Doc gave me the go ahead for sex, and letting me go back to work in some capacity, he’s calmed down a bit with the babying. And I’m so fucking glad.

“You’re the only one I even *want* to know how pliant I can be.”

I wrap my arms around him, pulling him tighter against me and kiss the top of his head. Holding Gunnar like this helps calm me in a way that nothing else does.

I haven’t told him about what Wyatt and Tanner have found, or haven’t found would be more like it. He’s so damn

fragile when it comes to what happened to me, I don't want to worry him more than I need to. Maybe when we have more answers, I'll feel better about cluing him in.

"You okay?" he asks, rising up my body, placing a quick kiss on my lips. "You got quiet."

"I'm fine, baby. Just kind of tired." A wave of concern flashes in his eyes, but he masks it quickly. I hate this. I don't want him to feel like he can't be concerned, I just don't want him to go overboard.

"Gun-"

"I didn't say anything." I can't help but laugh at his quick defense.

"I know, babe. But it's okay to be worried. I just don't want you to treat me like I'm made of glass."

"It's hard sometimes." He sits up, and with a low groan I follow suit and sit next to him.

"What do you mean?" I run my hand through his soft hair, before rubbing my palm along her cheek, rough from stubble.

"I know you're okay now. But it's hard not to worry that something could go wrong. Your body has been through so much, and I can't help but be concerned when I feel like you're overdoing it." Instead of reacting and getting angry, I listen carefully to his words and his tone of voice. Gunnar has always been so open and honest with me, and now I feel like a total dick for doing the same for him.

"They found the guy." His gaze snaps to mine in surprise, and I immediately realize the mistake in my words. "Well, a picture of him at least."

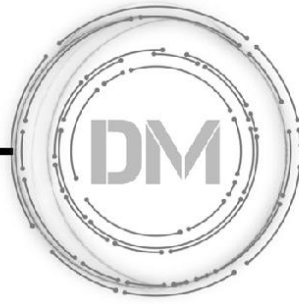
"What do you mean?" His hands tangle into the bedsheets and I continue holding the side of his cheek gently in my hand in an attempt to keep him calm.

"They have three pictures of him from Paris, but he's not coming up in any database."

"Do you recognize him?"

“I’m not sure. A part of me thinks I do, but I’m also not sure if that’s just because I *want* to recognize him.” He nods in understanding and blankets my hand with his.

“I know it’s hard, babe. But we’re not giving up. Whoever this son of a bitch is, I won’t stop until I bury him.” I can’t help but smile at my man. When he’s angry and possessive, he becomes certain and determined. And the blazing look in his blue eyes right now, tells me that he means it when he says that this won’t be over until he has the blood of the person who attacked me on his hands.



CHAPTER NINE

Gunnar

FUCK IT'S BEEN A LONG WEEK. I LIFT MY ARMS ABOVE MY HEAD and wince at the tightness in my muscles. Yesterday's job didn't go quite as planned. None of us expected our target to fight back. Granted, he didn't fight back that hard, mainly because he couldn't, but he did try. Lucky me, I was the closest one to him, so of course I'm the one that ended up getting the brunt of his fight. In the end, his attempt was fruitless, but I didn't leave completely unscathed. Unfortunately, because we couldn't risk any DNA being left behind, we had to call Dent and his men to clean it up. Because of that, we got home a day later than planned. It's a part of the job, but that doesn't make it suck any less.

I pull in a deep breath, ignoring the burn in my lungs from the cold icy air. I close my eyes and listen to the calming sound of the waves crashing against the shore. I've always loved the ocean. It was one of the only things I missed about California when I left for the Marines. When I got out, I had considered moving back, but everything else about the state is a damn cesspool. So when I got the bead on DMS, and the fact that it's based here in North Carolina, I jumped at the opportunity. I've never once regretted that decision. It may get a hell of a lot colder here than in SoCal, but I love it just the same.

"What on earth are you doing out here? It's freezing." I turn to see Nicole walking toward me with a bright smile on

her face.

“I could ask you the same thing.” She’s dressed much warmer than I am, wearing a puffy yellow coat and thick leggings. Whereas I’m wearing a pair of jeans and a thin hoodie over my t-shirt.

“I love the ocean.” She doesn’t elaborate more on my comment, but stops next to me and turns to face the water. It’s as if something magical takes over her and her face becomes a mask of calm. She pulls in a slow deep breath, closing her eyes as she lets it go.

“I love it too.” She gives me another bright smile and I can’t help but return it. It’s taken a while for Nicole to become comfortable with me again. After Banner’s attack on the house, she spent a lot of time blaming herself, and so did Wyatt. The truth of it is though, it’s no one’s fault. We all knew the risks when we took this job. Situations like the one with Banner are just a part of the life we live.

“I never thanked you,” I say after a few minutes of quiet. “For the painting. It’s beautiful.” I force my voice to stay steady and even as the memory of the moment I first looked at the painting of Jax and I on the beach plays in my mind. I unwrapped it while Jax was laying practically lifeless on the hospital bed, the attack from Banner still fresh and painful. I haven’t cried many times in my life, but I cried then.

“I’m glad you like it.” She gives me a beaming smile that most likely is one of the reasons Wyatt fell so in love with Nicole.

She looks past me and her smile grows even brighter. “Hey you!”

I turn to see who she’s greeting, and my heart takes its usual tumble at the sight of my boyfriend walking toward us. He’s been working with Wyatt and Tanner for a couple of weeks now, and even I have to admit that it’s been good for him. He’s happier, and overall lighter. He’s started eating more, so he’s slowly gaining back some of his weight. Now that he’s been a bit more active and out and about more, his

skin is also beginning to regain some of the darker complexion he's always had so naturally.

“Hey, you done for the day?” I didn't even realize what time it was, but now that I'm paying attention I realize that the sun is beginning to dip and the temperature has started dropping even more. I try not to let my protective instincts come out, and tell Jax that we should probably go inside so he doesn't get sick. Instead, I just smile when he says that he is done for the day.

“I was about to head home, but I saw you two standing out here, so I figured I would join you.”

Nicole beams at him, and I watch in comfortable silence as the two of them start talking about something that happened while I was gone. I'm thankful that Jax and Nicole hit it off so well. He's always been a bit isolated, but he and Nicole became friends pretty quickly when she first came here, and their bond has only grown over the past few months while Jax has been recovering.

They talk for a few more minutes, until Wyatt appears at the bottom of steps of HQ. She gives both Jax and I quick hugs, leaving a soft kiss on Jax's cheek before she begins running toward her man. For as long as I've known him, Wyatt's had a sharp edge to him. It only worsened when he ended up having to fake his death and leave Lillie behind. We didn't know at the time that he was leaving Nicole behind as well. She runs into his arms and it's as if they've been separated for months as opposed to a few hours. Then again, if I spent five years thinking Jax was dead, I'd probably be pretty damn clingy for a while too.

I clear away those thoughts, not needing to put another nightmare in my head, and turn back to the love of my life.

“Are you hungry? I can make us dinner.”

“Actually,” he leans in and gives me a quick kiss. “I was thinking maybe we could go out.”

“You wanna go out to dinner?”

“Is that okay? We haven’t done that in a while.” My immediate reaction is to want to tell him no, to say that he should probably get home and rest since he’s been gone all day. Instead of giving in to my instinct, I give my boyfriend a kiss.

“Dinner out sounds like a great idea.” The bright smile he gives me in return tells me that I’m making the right decision.

I definitely made the right decision. Looking across the table at Jax and his bright beaming smile, the genuine laughter that keeps falling from his lips. Everything is perfect right now. I try to think back to the last time everything felt this simple and easy. Melancholy tries to take over when I realize that I can’t even remember the last time we even went out like this, let alone felt this relaxed, but I push it away and focus on this moment with my man.

“Another one?” Our server walks over and gestures to our empty margarita glasses. I look to Jax to see what he wants and I don’t miss the hesitation in his eyes. He’s had two already, though he’s off his pain meds now and only takes over the counter pain reliever when needed, he hasn’t been able to drink for months, so it’s bound to hit him harder than usual.

“One more?” I ask, hoping that he won’t be able to see my own hesitation. Clearly I succeed, because he brightens up and nods at the server.

A few minutes later, we have a fresh round of margaritas and some churros and fried cinnamon ice cream in front of us.

“Oh babe.” Jax practically moans around the spoon, which has my dick standing at attention. “This is fucking delicious.”

He grabs another spoonful and holds it out for me. I lean over the table slightly, and make a show of using my tongue to lick up the spicy sweet concoction. “Mmm, that is damn good.”

I watch in satisfaction as his eyes darken and blaze with heavy desire. Jax continues to scoop up more and more ice cream with pieces of churro in it. Each time, I make my show even more suggestive. By the time the plate is cleared, my dick is rock hard and I have no doubt that Jax's is as well.

"How was everything tonight?" The manager, I assume, stops by our table and asks in an overly bright tone of voice.

"Delicious." Jax's voice is low and husky and I try to hide the twitch of my lips, but fail completely. Jax asks for the bill, and within minutes it's paid and we're rushing out of the restaurant and toward our car. I've only had two margaritas, compared to Jax's three, and though that might still be a lot for some people, I've learned to control my consumption over the years and it no longer affects me the way it does other people. Jax would be the same way if he hadn't been without booze for the past year.

We cling to each other as we walk across the parking lot to where we parked and Jax leans into me, putting his mouth right against my ear.

"You better hurry and get us home, because I am going to fuck you so damn hard tonight." My breath hitches and I fumble to pull my keys out of my pocket and unlock the vehicle.

The entire way back to the house, Jax leans over the middle console, kissing my neck and nibbling on my ear and whispering to me.

"I'm going to bend you over every fucking piece of furniture we have and fuck your ass raw, Gun. I'm making sure you feel me for fucking days." With every new word, my body thrums more and more with need and embers of desire dance over my skin. He bites down on the juncture between my shoulder and neck, and licks the tender spot he leaves.

I pull into our driveway and barely get the car in park and get unbuckled before I turn and attack Jax. I grab the back of his neck and pull him to me roughly. I don't worry about being gentle with him anymore, because I know he hates it. I treat him the way we've always treated each other. With love, but

not with kid gloves. Our tongues tangle and wrestle with each other roughly, our hands grappling for anything they can find and I realize we're both practically humping the air.

“If we don't get inside right now, I'm going to bend you over the hood of this car and not even care if our team is watching.” As hot as that sounds, not only do I not want the men we work with watching us, it's also freezing cold out and I don't feel like having my dick hate me right now.

Without saying anything else, I reach for the handle of the door and shove it open. “Let's go!”

We basically race inside and up the stairs, the entire time Jax is grabbing at me and grinding against my ass. The second we get inside our bedroom, he slams the door shut behind us and shoves me against it.

With his mouth is on mine again, we're all lips, tongues, and teeth as we lick and suck and fight for dominance while we blindly try and undress the other. We're not gentle, or careful as we rip each other's clothes off. Once we're completely naked, Jax takes a step back and his eyes roam over my body. His eyes get hungrier and hungrier with every inch of me he devours with his eyes.

“Fuck babe. I want to lick every sexy inch of you.”

My head rolls back against the wall and a moan tumbles out. “Then do it. Please.”

He reaches forward and grabs my hand, pulling me roughly to him, then tosses me onto the bed. There's no hesitancy on his part as he reaches into the dresser drawer and pulls out supplies. He tosses them onto the mattress next to me, then begins crawling up and over me.

“Do you have any fucking idea how horny I was tonight, Gun?” I shake my head, even though I know he's not looking for an answer. “You're always so fucking sexy when you drink. Your inhibitions are gone, and you're such a fucking cock tease.” He grinds his dick against mine, and we both groan at the connection.

“It never has to be a tease.”

He pulls back just enough for me to see the gleam in his eye. “Oh yeah? Next time you want me to strip you down and fuck you right there in the middle of the restaurant?”

I buck my hips up, needing more friction from him, but he pushes my hip back down with his strong hand.

“Answer the question, Gun. You want me to fuck you in front of a restaurant full of people?”

We don’t give in to very many fantasies outside of the bedroom, mainly for the fact that if we ever got arrested for doing something stupid like public sex, Alec would kill us. But I’d be lying if I said that the thought of Jax taking me in such a public way didn’t turn me the fuck on.

I nod my head and let out a breathy *yes*, which makes Jax give me a wolfish smile before leaning down and kissing me. It’s quick and rough and I know I whimper when he pulls away.

“God, I fucking love you.” Another kiss. “I love how secretly kinky you are, and how fucking perfect you are for me.”

My heart does a flip in my chest because even though I know exactly how Jax feels about me, it’s not all that often that he actually expresses it like this.

“I love you.” The words come out choked and whisper and the way Jax’s eyes soften has everything inside of me melting. Words will never be able to describe how much I love this man and what he means to me.

“But,” he says with a sinister lift of his lips, “no matter how much I love you, I’m not going easy on your ass.”

Anticipation thrums through my body, mixing with the alcohol that already has my excitement and my horniness peaking higher than usual. My breathing begins to pick up and my chest is rising and falling so quickly that it’s practically slamming into Jax’s as he lowers himself flush against me and takes my mouth in another heady, needy kiss.

Our tongues slide together and his teeth nip at my lips while one of his large strong hands grips my hip and the other

holds tight to the side of my neck. Our dicks slide together, creating a friction that's so painfully good that I have no idea how long I'll last if we keep this up.

“Jax, babe, I need you.”

He pulls back with his dark eyes boring heavily into me and a sexy, sinister smile curving his lips. “You always need me.” He leans back down, scraping his teeth down my neck. “Don't you, Gun?”

I buck my hips up, slamming into his and we both groan out loud. “Yes!”

Before I can register what's happening, Jax grips my thighs and lifts my legs up so that my knees are resting against my shoulders. On instinct, I grab my knees, creating more room for Jax as his head descends down and I feel his tongue begin to circle my tight hole.

I toss my head back against the pillow, grinding my teeth as I take in the incredible feel of his warm wet tongue sliding up and down my crease and circling my ring of muscles.

“Jax!” He ignores me as he continues his assault and I keep crying out in need. My dick is leaking precum so much that my stomach is a sticky mess. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

His large finger circles my hole then breaches the first ring and I tighten my hold on my knees to keep from dropping them. As much as I want him to stop, I just as badly never want him to stop.

He slides his tongue up, licking my balls and taking them in his mouth.

I don't care what anyone says, as hot as one night stands and hook-ups can be, there is nothing better than making love to someone you're in a committed relationship with. You take the time to get to know each other's likes, dislikes, needs, and wants. Whether you're having a quickie, a long drawn out love making session, or sloppy drunk sex, it gets better every time.

His mouth closes around my dick and I can't keep myself calm any longer. I let go of my knees, causing my feet to fall to the mattress and my hands fly to his hair grasping his soft

strands in a tight hold. There's a soft hiss that comes from his mouth that causes a vibration to flow through my dick.

I pant desperately as he works my dick in an expert way. I'm thankful for the extra drinks we consumed tonight because it's helping me from coming prematurely. A couple minutes of him working me to and from the brink, he pulls away and reaches over for the lube in our nightstand.

"How much prep do you want, baby?" he asks as I feel the warm liquid dribble down my crack. I shake my head quickly, too desperate to be smart about this. I might be sore tomorrow, but I don't care.

"None, just fuck me." His finger works to spread the lube evenly around my hole, and he looks at me with a raised brow.

"You sure?"

"Yes! Fuck, Jax!" My body heats hotter and hotter with desperate need. "Fuck me, now!"

His finger pulls away and I almost cry out from the loss but he quickly replaces it with his dick. As soon as I feel his thick head begin to breach my entrance, I practically sigh with relief.

He slams himself in and I'm so damn horny, I barely even register the stinging pain accompanied by it. I grip Jax's shoulders when he holds onto my hips tighter and repositions us so his dick slides even deeper into me.

"Shit, Gun! You're so fucking sexy! You look so fucking perfect all the time." He slams into me harder and harder with each thrust and every word he says has my dick tightening more and more, desperate for some kind of attention. "So fucking pretty, and I get to ruin you. Debauch you in the most delicious fucking way."

"Jax, please!"

"You need to come, baby? You need release?"

"Yes!" His strong hand immediately grips my dick and it only takes two strokes before I'm exploding all over Jax's hand and my stomach. Jax pulls his dick out almost

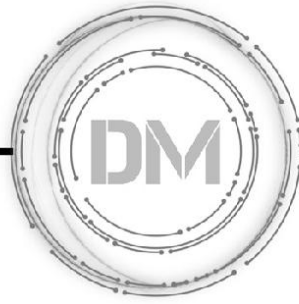
completely, then slams back in and lets go of his own release deep inside of me.

He falls on top of me, resting his forehead against mine. Our breathing mingles together as we stare into each other's eyes. I look into Jax's deep, dark eyes, nothing but love and desire shining back at me.

In the back of my post-orgasmic brain, I know that this is only the calm before the storm. That any day now, there's an all-too-large possibility of our entire world exploding around us. But in this moment, looking into the eyes of the man I love before he leans down, giving me the sweetest kiss, reminding me how right this is between us, I can't bring myself to be concerned. I won't allow the dangers from the world outside our door impede on this moment, this perfect love.

“I love you, Gunnar.”

“I love you too, Jax.”



DARK MATTER SECURITY

CHAPTER TEN

Gunnar

Six Years Ago...

I WIPE MY SWEATY PALMS ON MY JEANS AGAIN AND PULL IN A deep breath. I shouldn't be this nervous. It's not like Jax would be mean about this. He might be a little twisted when it comes to our job and taking out our targets, but he's not cruel. Especially not to me. I should feel confident and comfortable with what I have planned, but I can't help the little fear in the back of my head. The little voice telling me that I'm an idiot for even thinking I should do this. The voice telling me that this thing between Jax and I is fleeting and will more than likely end at any moment. Most likely tonight if I actually follow through with my plan. Even with that thought though, I can't help but want to follow through with this. I want him to know everything. I want to lay it all for him and give him the choice to either accept how I feel, or end things now. I tell myself that I have to be willing to accept whichever option he takes.

A hard body presses against my back while strong hands grip my hips. Jax's warm breath flutters over my ear and neck and sends familiar shivers over my body.

"You ready to go, baby?" I nod my head and turn in his arms, wrapping mine around his neck. He leans down, giving me a soft, sweet kiss before pulling back and taking my hand. He leads me out of his room and down the stairs. The house is

practically abandoned right now since Hunter is on a job and Wyatt is home in Seattle. Alec and Tanner are here, but I'm not sure where they are. Jax has a job to go on tomorrow afternoon and I have one the following day. So we decided to take the opportunity of a night off to get out of the house and do something together.

I don't know if I would say we're actually dating. We rarely have the time to do anything outside of work. Sure, we have plenty of sex and it's fucking explosive. But does good sex really make a relationship? That's the main reason why I'm nervous as fuck about what I'm planning on doing tonight.

Jax drives us to our favorite hole in the wall Mexican restaurant and I'm a little surprised when he climbs out and comes around to open my door for me. We've been here a few times with the other guys, but usually when it's just the two of us, we grab takeout and go back to the house and eat it in bed.

We follow the young girl to a booth in the corner of the restaurant and Jax slides in next to me. We're quick to order a pitcher of margaritas and some chips and salsa. I know we're not going to overdo it with the alcohol, but nothing says we can't still enjoy ourselves. Jax's hand immediately finds my thigh under the table and I lean into it without conscious thought. It's as if I'm always starved for his touch. He doesn't deprive me of it. He's always willing to touch me, kiss me, fuck me, pretty much any time I want. Yet, it's as if I can't get enough.

"I'm glad we were able to do this." His husky voice murmurs in my ear and a small smile plays on my lips.

"So am I." I turn to face him and his lips immediately find mine. He takes me in a sweet and slow kiss and I try not to be surprised by it. I wouldn't say Jax is afraid to show PDA, but he doesn't do it all that often. We do our best to stay discreet in front of the rest of our team, though they know that we are together. Or hooking up at least.

"So," I say after our drinks and chips arrive. "I was hoping we could talk about something."

Jax nods his head after he swallows down a chip and takes a large mouthful of his margarita.

“I was hoping we could talk about something, too.” My stomach drops at his words. I know what I want to talk about, but I have a terrible feeling that Jax isn’t thinking about the same thing I am right now.

“Oh, okay. You um, you go first.” I try not to let it show how nervous I am about what he might say. I pick up my margarita glass and take a healthy swallow of the bitter-sweet icy concoction.

“Well, I was thinking-” Before he can continue, our server steps up to the table to take our order. As much as I want to get it over with and just hear what Jax has to say, I’m also not in a hurry to hear it. I want to delay the end of us for as long as possible. I want to keep him as mine until the last possible second. We’ve been hooking up for about six months now, but it hasn’t been long enough for me. I’m not sure if any amount of time will be long enough with him.

We order our food and when the server walks away again, I internally cry out for her to stay at the table. Jax is quiet for a couple of moments as he drinks more of his margarita and scoops up an insane amount of salsa onto a single chip and eats it in one bite. I pull in a steady rhythm of breaths while I wait for him to continue.

“Gun? Baby, are you okay?” Between his gentle tone and the pet name I’ve come to love so much, I almost lose it right here in the middle of a damn restaurant. I’m not usually an emotional guy, but when facing the thought of losing Jax, I’m a fucking wreck.

“I’m fine.” I have to practically choke out the words, and it’s clear that Jax doesn’t buy it even a little bit.

“What’s wrong, Gun?” I shake my head quickly, but instead of just accepting it, Jax grabs my hand and brings it to his lips. “Baby, what’s going on?”

“Nothing.” I force an even voice, channeling the mask I wear when we’re on a job. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Well-” Now Jax sounds unsure and nervous, which has my brows pulling together and confusion filling me. “Well, you know how Alec has been talking about hiring a few more guys?” I nod my head while trying to make out what he could be heading to. Has he met them already? Has he fallen for someone else? That thought has my gut turning. For some reason, that idea makes me even more sick than just the idea of him being done with me. It makes me feel... replaceable.

“Well, he’s going to need a room for all of them. I know we have plenty of space right now, but I don’t know how many he plans to hire. So I figured maybe we could make one more room available.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I would prefer we start building our own place, but we would still need a room at HQ for emergencies. But there really isn’t a reason for us to have separate rooms.” My mind is spinning with everything he’s saying and I need a moment to work it out in my head. I pick up my glass and finish downing its contents while Jax just waits patiently.

“You want- You want to move in together?” A look of panic crosses his face, and his breathing becomes slightly heavy.

“Oh, well, I just thought- But if you don’t want to-” I can’t help the loud bark of laughter that escapes as relief floods me. I turn my body to face Jax full-on and my gaze hones in on his pinched brow line. I gently slide my thumb over the adorable wrinkle that’s taken residence there before placing a soft kiss between his eyebrows.

“I thought you were going to end this.” Jax jerks back and gives me a look of both anger and confusion.

“Why the hell would you think that?”

“I, uh,” I shake my head not knowing what to say. He just told me he wants to move in together, and the last thing I want to do is screw it all up. “I don’t know. I guess I just wasn’t sure if we were on the same page with all of this.”

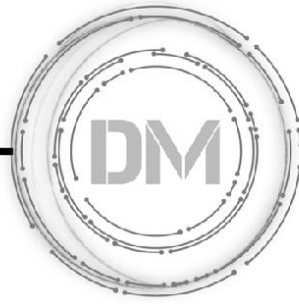
“And what page are you on?” His question comes out soft and gentle, and I can feel my hands begin to shake with nerves. I’m not a nervous person on a normal basis. I can pull a trigger or stab a knife without even a moment’s hesitation. But this, right here, this isn’t in my comfort zone. I’ve had one relationship in my past and if I think about it, the whole thing is a blur. I don’t remember exactly how we got together, nor do I remember when we said *I love you*, or even made a commitment to each other. It just kind of *happened*.

That relationship is long over though, and very much in my past. Being with Jax is a completely different experience. It’s raw and real and everything I feel toward him is a brand new experience.

“Gun?” I suck in a heavy breath and beg my body to stop shaking with my nerves as I meet his eyes.

“I love you.” Everything inside of me freezes as I watch Jax for any sign of how he may be reacting to my words. After a moment, his mouth curves into a bright smile. Just the sight of his blindingly white teeth has me letting out a calming breath and smiling back at him.

“Don’t you know I love you too?” He rests his forehead against mine, and it suddenly feels as if everything is right in the world. At least right in my world.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jax

I WATCH AS THE MEN ON OUR TEAM SHUFFLE INTO THE ROOM, but once everyone is seated, there's one person noticeably missing. When Alec walks in, closing the door behind him and taking a seat at the head of the table with Wyatt and Tanner on each side of him, my hackles begin to rise.

“Where's Gunnar?”

“On an errand.” Alec's quick, no nonsense response has every man at the table straightening up. Cole and I eye each other, because clearly something is up.

“We need everyone involved in this conversation to have a clear, unobstructed opinion.” Tanner speaks up. “And we know that Gunnar doesn't. Not on this matter.”

The truth of what he's talking about hits me with a jolt, and I know my eyes widen as I look at the three men staring back at me.

“You found him?” Wyatt gives me a sharp nod, but nothing else in response. The room is so still and quiet that the only sound being heard is our silent breathing.

“Who- who is he?”

Wyatt, Alec, and Tanner exchange looks, clearly working to silently communicate something between the three of them. I watch, not even breathing, wishing like hell I could read their

minds right now. I've always been good at reading people and knowing what they need or want. Many times I've even been able to tell what they're thinking. Except for these three. They've always been good at hiding exactly what they're thinking and feeling, and right now I'm pretty sure they're working extra hard to hide it. Finally, they turn back to me, their faces still completely unreadable and the next thing out of Alec's mouth is the last thing I ever expected to hear.

“Your brother.”

I can't decide if I should laugh or be pissed off right now. In my head, I know that Wyatt and Tanner are damn good at their jobs. But clearly someone fucked up somewhere.

“Sorry boss, but that can't be true.” They keep staring at me, no one speaking or blinking. It's fucking unnerving. “I don't have a brother.”

Tanner adjusts slightly in his seat, but otherwise remains completely unreadable. I watch closely, my brows raised almost mockingly as I wait for them to reply.

“Actually,” Wyatt says cautiously, but Alec finishes the sentence for him.

“You do.” This time, I don't bother trying to hide my surprise as he elaborates. “Turns out your dad got his high school girlfriend pregnant before he went off to college. The baby was put up for adoption.” I wish I could say I'm surprised by his explanation, but I'm really not. I don't know if the adoption was my father's idea or not, but honestly I wouldn't put it past him or my grandparents to force something like that. My parents' marriage was never one made of love, it was solely out of convenience and status. But they had no problem pretending like they were fated soulmates or some bullshit like that. It's what looked good to the world.

“So what happened to him after he was adopted?”

Tanner immediately shakes his head. “He never got adopted.” I hear a few of the other men in the room wince and shift in their seats.

“Okay, so what the hell is going on, then? I’ve never even met the guy, I didn’t know he existed. Why did he attack me?”

“That’s something we don’t know.” I look back at Wyatt, waiting for him to elaborate, but again, it’s Alec who finishes for him.

“We have to presume that someone hired him. Somehow found your connection, then exploited it.”

“So why did it take so long to figure out who he is?” I ignore the guilt eating at me from the knowledge of having a brother I never knew about.

“He’s changed his name. A lot. In and out of juvie since he was ten, prosecuted as an adult for assault when he was fifteen. Released at eighteen.” I listen with rapt attention as Tanner explains this guy’s life to me. Bile builds in my throat hearing about how rough life has been for him. Sure, people make their own choices and they can choose to be worthless criminals or not, I’m definitely no boy scout. But from day one, the odds were against this guy. “Started using a new alias after that. Went to prison for armed robbery six months later. Five years in, then another new alias.”

“Was his name ever legally changed, though?” Cole asks and Tanner shakes his head.

“Convicted felon. He couldn’t change his name, not legally. But falsified documents made aren’t exactly hard to come by.” He gives a pointed look to Cole, who just rolls his eyes.

“So he has connections?”

Wyatt shakes his head. “No. Which is why his documents couldn’t stick. They’re garbage.” A few grumbles and nods of understanding go around the table.

“So if someone paid him to attack me-”

“We need to figure out who.” The venom in Alec’s voice isn’t exactly surprising. We may be a bunch of mercenaries and murderers, but we’re a family. If someone goes after one of us, they go after all of us.

“So who are his known associates?” Collins has stayed quiet until now.

“He doesn’t have any.” Tanner answers. “As far as we can tell, this dude doesn’t have a loyal bone in his body.” I try not to snort at the irony of that. Even if he wasn’t raised by him, apparently this guy is just like dear ol’ dad. I walked away from my trust fund and the family business, and joined the military when I was eighteen. I haven’t seen or heard from him since. For all he knows, I could be dead and he wouldn’t even blink an eye.

“So it could be anyone.” Hunter’s deep, irritated rumble comes from the end of the table. He’s an interesting guy, not exactly known for having a short temper, but he really hates not having control of a situation. Tanner nods his head in response, but everyone stays quiet, most likely processing the information we all just learned. I have no doubt that none of us will give up until this shit is resolved. I may have let my doubts set in while I was still stuck on the sidelines, but I should have known better. These men won’t let this shit go. Which brings another question to my mind.

“Why isn’t Gunnar here?” Again, Tanner, Wyatt, and Alec exchange a couple looks before turning back to me and Alec answers my question.

“Because we need a unanimous vote for our plan.” His answer has both Cole and I sitting up straighter in our seats and nerves begin to roll through my body. I’ve never been afraid of getting my hands dirty, but something tells me that this plan isn’t going to be so simple.

“What exactly is the plan?” Cole asks, and I’m sure his best friend protectiveness is kicking in. Neither one of us likes the idea of lying and hiding things from Gunnar, but I want this shit over with.

“We need to draw him out.” Alec says easily. “He has no known residence. He stayed in France for a while, but just returned to the states last week. He probably thinks he did his job and Jax is dead.”

“So,” Wyatt jumps in. “We need to show him that he failed. Then once we get a bead on where he is, we’ll bring him in.”

“We have people looking for him, but that could take a while. So until then, we’re going to have our associates spreading the word that you’re alive. If it doesn’t catch his attention-”

“It’ll catch the attention of whoever hired him.” I finish Tanner’s sentence and all three men nod.

“We’re not going to let him get away with what he did, but our number one priority is to find who actually put the hit out.”

My body thrums with anger. This entire situation has been total bullshit. Sure, we all have our fair share of enemies, it’s territory of the job. But why the fuck was I singled out? And why the fuck do I have a brother I never knew about? Who the hell would go through that much trouble to research and figure out that I have a brother, just to have them attack me.

“Hold on-” I say sharply, and the room goes silent, all eyes on me. “Why him?”

Alec’s brows dip. “What do you mean?”

“If someone wanted me dead, why didn’t they just hire a professional? Why the fuck did they go through the trouble to figure out I had a brother and pay him to attack me? I doubt it’s because of money.” Everyone shakes their head, agreeing with my observation. “The only thing that makes sense in this case is if it already is, or if they wanted to turn it-”

“Personal.” Wyatt finishes my sentence, and my mind is rolling with confusion and frustration.

“So we need to work on finding connections.” Tanner throws in.

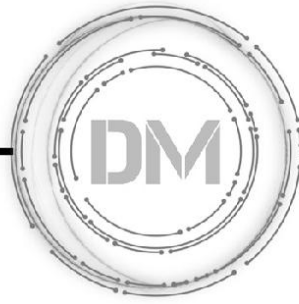
“Start looking into it. We’ll stick with our original plan, but we’ll see if we can’t get further ahead by finding some sort of link.”

“One more thing,” I say before Alec can call the meeting and he raises a brow at me. “I don’t want Gunnar left out of this. I get why you didn’t want him here right now, but I won’t leave him in the dark.”

I watch as Alec clenches and unclenches his fist, not liking the idea of me going against him. But he knows as well as I do, that leaving Gunnar out completely could make things worse in the end. I wouldn’t be surprised if it would piss him off so much that he quits. Or even worse, leaves me. I won’t let that happen. Alec must go through the same thought process as I do, because eventually he lets out a resigned sigh and nods once.

“But he needs to keep his head on straight. This might be personal, but when we’re doing the job, it’s business.”

“I’ll keep him in line.” He eyes me for a moment before nodding his head in acceptance. I pull in a heavy breath knowing that the next conversation I have with Gun is not going to be an easy one. The only bright side to all of this shit is that it’ll all be over soon. *I hope.*



DARK MATTER SECURITY

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gunnar

“YOU NEED TO CALM DOWN, BABE.” JAX’S WORDS ONLY SEND another wave of anger rolling through me.

“Don’t you *dare* tell me I need to calm down!” I don’t give a shit that I’m yelling and I have no doubt that Cole and Lillie can hear us, even from downstairs. “Not only are they trying to use my boyfriend as bait, but you were going to fucking keep it from me! That’s not fucking okay, Jax!”

“I was never going to keep it from you. But we needed a unanimous vote.”

“Yeah, and you know damn well that hiding the meeting from me was just sneaky and underhanded. Total bullshit!”

I’m fucking seething right now. I came home and found Jax sitting in the living room, looking uneasy and nervous as fuck. My hackles immediately began to rise, and when he brought me to our room and told me everything that happened while I was gone, anger took over and now I’m just fucking pissed.

“Gun-”

“No! I’m sick and fucking tired of everyone acting like I don’t have a right to a damn opinion on all of this. You’re *my* boyfriend, Jax. You’re the love of *my* life! I’ll be fucking damned if I just sit back and let you guys make all the decisions in this.”

“That’s not-”

“It fucking is!” I roar, officially done with this bullshit. If I take a step back and really examine the situation, I can understand where they were all coming from. But that doesn’t make it all okay.

“We’re supposed to be a team, and you purposely left me out just because you thought I would disagree with you all.”

“And don’t you?”

“Hell yeah, I do!”

Jax lets out a frustrated sigh, but I don’t even care. He takes a step closer, and on instinct I back away a step. His face begins to turn red in anger, and on a normal day I would be quick to apologize. But I refuse to back down this time.

“It’s dangerous, Jax. You’re finally doing better. Finally almost back to one-hundred percent and I’m not about to stand by and let you derail all of your progress.”

His hard features soften, and the small act causes my body to relax slightly. Though I’m still wound up and angry.

“We need to do it, babe. It’s the best way to finally end this once and for all.”

“Wyatt lived five years with Banner thinking he was dead. It’s not impossible.”

“Yeah, and look how that turned out!” He yells and a choked sob tears from my throat as the image of Jax’s almost lifeless body flashes in my head. Besides when he was attacked in Paris, and we had no idea if he was dead or alive, that moment in Alec’s kitchen was the worst of my life.

“We can find another way!” I know I’m grasping at straws right now, but I refuse to accept that there’s not another way to go about this. I won’t willingly agree to use the love of my life as bait for who apparently is his fucking brother. But that’s a whole other mess to deal with later. The possible outcome if it all goes sideways is too much to bear.

“No we fucking can’t! And this discussion is over, Gun! It’s my life and if I want to risk it in order to put an end to this

bullshit, then I fucking will!”

Without saying another word, I surge forward. Pure fucking rage coursing through my veins as I wrap my hand around Jax’s neck, using the leverage to shove him against the wall. A moment of shock flashes in his eyes before he quickly covers it with defiance and looks back at me with challenge in his eyes.

“Don’t you dare say that again.” My voice comes out as a low growl and I lean in, applying just enough pressure to his throat that his cheeks begin to redden slightly. When I ease off, I use my body to hold him in place and put my lips next to his ear.

“I’ve said it before, but apparently I need to say it again.” I push my body tighter against his, not surprised by both of our reactions to the rough and close proximity. “I. Will. Not. Lose. You.” I punctuate each word with the grind of my hips and Jax lets out a low moan from the contact.

“Gun-”

“If you insist on doing this,” I cut him off, my voice still full of venom. “Then I’m going to be by your side the entire time.” He opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him off with my lips, taking him in an aggressive, angry kiss. “It’s the only way.”

When he finally relents with a small nod, I ease away from him, loosening up on the pressure. Jax immediately takes advantage of the space between us by reversing our positions and slamming my back against the wall, his hand quickly connecting with my throat.

“You know I fucking hate it when you manhandle me.” There are flames dancing in his eyes and I can’t help but let out a low chuckle because even though I may not do it often, Jax loves it when I try to take control.

“You fucking love it.” He slams his mouth against mine, his tongue teasing my lips apart before he slides in and our mouths attack each other.

“No,” he says, pulling away roughly. “I fucking love *you*.” I don’t have a chance to respond before he’s kissing me again. His hand leaves my throat and he begins pulling at my clothes. I slap his hands away and shove at his shoulder. Jax’s jaw sets in anger because he hates when I don’t give him what he wants. Our relationship has always been a battle of wills, and today I’m too pissed off to give him the upper hand.

“You wanna fuck me, Jax?” His jaw twitches as his eyes harden and burn with anger but he gives me a sharp nod. “You think I’m just going to let this go? I’m going to just forget that you lied to me and tried to tell me that I don’t have a right to be upset about this?”

“Gun-” He says my name in warning, but I ignore. It’s not often that I fight back like this, but apparently he’s forgotten exactly who I am.

I may come off as an easy-going, fun guy. And most of the time I try to live up to that reputation. But moments like these are when I need to show the other side of me. The dark side.

“Strip.” I’m not surprised when he easily complies, removing his clothes in a blur. When he’s standing in front of me naked, I force myself to keep my face like stone.

“On the bed.” Once he’s laying on the bed, I walk over to the dresser, opening the top drawer where we keep our supplies. I give him my back as I pull out the items I decide on a whim that I’m going to use. Then, still without looking at Jax, I remove my clothes one item at a time. I take pleasure in the low groans coming from him every time I reveal a new body part. And when I’m completely naked, still not facing him, he practically cries out in frustration.

“Gunnar, get over here.” I spin around, my gaze snapping to him in irritation.

“No! You aren’t in charge right now, Jax.” He lets out a heavy huff, but I keep going. “You want to put your life in danger? You want to act like I don’t fucking matter?” He opens his mouth to speak, probably to disagree, but I cut him off and keep going. “Then I’m going to show you how much I matter. I’m going to punish you, the same way you tried to

punish me just for loving you!” His mouth snaps shut, probably because he knows that now is not the time to argue with me.

I grab the handcuffs off the dresser and walk toward the bed. Normally when we want to restrain the other, we use the midnight blue silk strips because they’re easier for us to undo if we absolutely need to break free. But I’m not allowing that today. I’m not letting him free himself and take over like he usually does. Not this time. When he sees the shimmering metal in my hand, his eyes widen and he swallows audibly. This simple piece of metal gives him the exact message I wanted to get across. *I’m in charge.*

“Hands.” He raises his arms to allow me to cuff his wrists to the headboard, and when he’s secure in place, I back away from the bed. I swipe the lube off of the dresser and watch as Jax shifts against the mattress. It’s a pretty rare occurrence that I get to fuck him. In our entire relationship, it’s only happened a few times because we both know what we prefer and it’s to have Jax’s cock in my ass. And even with my anger and hurt and frustration today, that’s still what I want.

I go over to the large plush chair that we have sitting against the wall on the side of the bed. I take my time as I lift my feet onto the arms of the chair, revealing myself so clearly to him. I’m generous with the lube on my fingers, knowing that I don’t want to have to take too much time on prep. I keep my eyes on Jax as I tease myself open and begin to fuck myself with my fingers. I make a show of moaning and groaning with every additional finger I add. I take satisfaction in the way Jax’s dick hardens impossibly more and he shifts his body searching for friction. A whimper falls from his lips when I begin scissoring my fingers to open myself up even more, and I use my free hand to stroke my dick. I wipe the precum that drips out with my finger and bring it to my lips. I moan at the taste, and Jax clenches his jaw so hard I wouldn’t be surprised if he cracked his jaw. I continue the torture for a few more minutes before deciding that I won’t be able to hold out much longer if I keep this up.

I stand from the chair, and walk over to the bed on wobbly legs. He tracks my every movement with his eyes and when I climb onto the bed, I don't miss the way his hands jerk, clearly trying to reach for me. I raise myself up on my knees, hovering over him with my ass directly above his dick.

"I don't care if it's *your* life or not, Jax. You're mine. Which means that it's *my* life, too." He begins to speak, but I cut him off again. "It's mine too!" I grip his dick in my hand, and he lets out a strangled moan. "Say it, Jax. Tell me the truth."

Another heavy sob slips past him, but this time he nods softly. "Yes, Gun. It's your life too. We're one."

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, I lower myself down, taking him inside of me easily. We both let out long, satisfied moans once I'm fully seated. I lean down, fusing our lips together as I gently rock my hips, giving us both some friction. When I pull away, Jax lifts his head trying to follow my lips. But I use my hands to push down on his shoulders as I begin to ride him with more and more fervor. We're nothing but moans and groans as I continuously shift my hips, hitting my prostate and making fireworks dance in my eyes.

"Fuck, Gun. I need to-"

I lift myself off of him, leaving his tip just grazing my asshole and I begin stroking myself.

"You wanna come, Jax?" He nods desperately. "I shouldn't let you. I should make you hate me the same way you've been trying to make me-"

"Gun-" I ignore his protest, shutting him up with a hard kiss before bringing his bottom lip between my teeth and biting down roughly. Then I put my lips next to his ear, licking just beneath the shell.

"Lucky for you, I'm feeling generous." I increase my strokes on my own dick just as I slam myself back down on his and we both scream out with need.

"Come, Jax! Come now!" As if we both have no choice but to obey my commands, he begins pulsing inside of me just

as heavy ropes of cum shoot from my dick, coloring his stomach and chest. He fills my ass with his own release, and we both let out contented sighs.

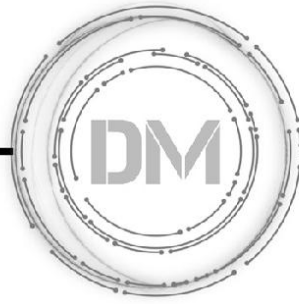
After a moment, I slowly climb off of him, going to our bathroom for a towel. I don't unlock the cuffs until I have us both cleaned up and I'm climbing back into bed with him. His arms immediately pull me to him, and I let out a contented sigh. No matter how frustrated, angry, or hurt I am, being wrapped up in Jax like this always makes it better.

"I'm sorry," he whispers into the quiet of the room. Our breathing is slowly beginning to even out and my heart rate is almost back to normal. I swallow the heavy lump in my throat, desperate to not fight with him anymore. This isn't who we are, or how I want us to be. We don't have secrets and we don't fight. Not like this.

"I can't lose you." My voice is soft and quiet, but when his arms tighten around me, I know he heard me.

"I won't let that happen." I roll to my side, needing to be able to look into his eyes. He looks back at me with nothing but love and sincerity shining through.

"I'm going to hold you to that." He gives me a soft smile, both of us knowing that it's a promise he may not be able to keep, but also knowing that it's a lie we both need right now. If I lose Jax, then the grave my men will be digging for him will need to fit two. I won't live without him.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jax

I HAVE A BROTHER. EVEN WITH EVERYTHING THAT'S GOING ON, and the rest of the information I was given, the fact that I have a brother is still hitting pretty hard. I wouldn't be surprised if my father has dozens of illegitimate kids out there that no one knows about. But this is one that most likely, quite a few people knew about since he was young when it all happened. Tanner gave me a bit more information this morning, including this guy's -whose name apparently is Ben - age and birth date. He's six years older than me, which means that he was conceived just less than a year before my parents got together and were married. The whole situation is crazy and surreal. If I felt like subjecting myself to my family and their bullshit, then I would reach out and tell them exactly what I think about all of this. But there really wouldn't be a point. They wouldn't care. Hell, I doubt they would even take my call.

I can't stop looking over the file Tanner gave me, even though I know there's no reason for me to keep dwelling on this. This dude may be my brother, but he's also the guy who attacked me in Paris. I refuse to allow myself to become emotionally attached just because we have some of the same blood flowing through our veins. I'm not naive to what will happen to him when we do find him, and I won't even blink an eye when it happens.

I slam the folder shut and shove it away from me, needing to get his stupid fucking face out of my head. We don't look that much alike, but there are most definitely similar features, all of which come from our mutual sperm donor.

Whoever his birth mother is, she must have fared on the lighter side given his light red hair and paler skin. But the thicker eyebrows, long lashes, and broad shoulders come straight from Jonathan Richmond Carter. The man who is, unfortunately, my father.

"None of this is your fault, Jax." Tanner's voice pulls me from my frustrating thoughts. I turn from my spot at the table and look at the man sitting in front of the bank of computers.

"Then who's fault is it, Tanner?"

He lets out a sigh and runs his hand through his ridiculously thick hair. There was a time when I found Tanner insanely attractive. He has this Clark Kent look to him with his dark hair, thick rimmed glasses, and solid build. But to my dismay at the time, I figured out that he isn't gay. Of course, once I met Gunnar, any crush I had on Tanner went out the window.

"No one's. Making enemies is a part of the job. Whoever decided to hire this guy is the one who made it personal. We'll figure it out, get this shit resolved, and move on with our lives like we always do."

I know he's right. I'm not the first man on our team to have someone come after him, and I sure as hell am not going to be the last. But I can't help but let this all get to me, given the extreme damage they've done.

"How'd you get the information about him being my brother, anyways? You guys said he wasn't showing up in any databases." It's a question I've had since they gave me the information yesterday, but I was too focused on Gunnar's reaction to worry about it.

"I got a tip." He says it casually, and turns back around to face the computers again. As much as I want to know details, it's clear he's not looking to talk about it. So I let it go.

“Any word on his whereabouts?”

Tanner looks almost relieved at the change of subject and turns back to the banks of computers and begins typing away.

“Not yet. We’ve gotten a few hits on where he’s been, but when we look, we come up empty. I’m trying to put together a pattern to try and narrow down where he might be heading so we can beat him there and gain the element of surprise.”

I nod, knowing that if anyone can get this shit figured out, it’s Tanner. The dude is a fucking genius. Which may possibly make him even more dangerous than the rest of us.

“Just keep me posted and let me know what I need to do.”

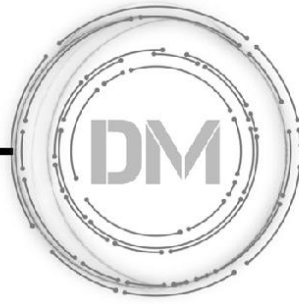
“Will do.”

Any conversation about what’s going on right now is cut-off when Wyatt enters the room and they fall into prepping for other jobs, researching possible new clients, and setting travel schedules. I’m sure to most people on the outside, all Dark Matter does is run around killing people. But there’s so much more that goes into it. There’s so much that needs to be done in order to keep us from getting caught and going to prison for life. It’s the reason why Wyatt and Tanner make so much damn money. It’s basically their job to keep us all safe and in line. And that’s a big-ass job for two men.

It’s a little less than an hour later, when the rest of our men file into the room for our usual team meeting. As if on instinct, Gunnar falls into the chair next to me and his hand discreetly goes to my thigh, causing desire to course through me at even the simplest of touches.

My mind flashes to last night, and the anger that he was exuding. What got to me more than the anger though, was the hurt. There was so much hurt in his eyes when he realized what everyone’s original plan was. That they intended on leaving him out of this. I know he’s still angry, but I also know that he’s a professional. He won’t let this affect his job or doing what he’s assigned to do. It’s been agreed upon that he’ll be involved in the job for my retaliation, so I know he’ll be okay. I just hate that he was hurt like that to begin with.

I snake my hand under the table, placing my hand over his. When he flips his hand over, putting our palms against each other and lacing our fingers, I squeeze gently. When he returns it with his own soft grip, I know that he's okay. And more importantly, we're okay.



DARK MATTER SECURITY

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gunnar

OF ALL PEOPLE I COULD HAVE BEEN PUT ON THIS JOB WITH, it's some sort of sick joke that it ended up being Collins. It's not that he's a bad guy or anything, at least not any more than the rest of us. But it's kind of hard to just let go of the fact that he accused my boyfriend of being a fucking mole within our organization. When Jax went missing and Lillie's husband figured out too quickly that she was gone, he jumped to bullshit conclusions. It's understandable. Unless you truly know Jax. He's too fucking loyal for that shit.

“What the fuck is he doing?” Collins' confused question has me snapping my head to the restaurant where our current mark was just eating lunch. Now the bastard is walking quickly to the back of the restaurant toward the back emergency exit. Way too quickly for my liking.

“Think he spotted us?”

“Jackass like him is probably paranoid as fuck because he knows enough people are after him.”

I nod in agreement as we both silently make our way to the rear entrance of the ridiculously expensive restaurant. I've never given a shit if people flaunt their money with fancy meals and expensive purchases. But when it's not your own money, I have an issue with that.

“Should we try to cut him off?” I think about Collins’ question for a second. I’m ready for this job to be over so we can just get the fuck out of here and go home. But we still need to be smart about this.

“Nah.” I say, changing directions to where our car is parked instead of the way our target went. “Let him think he was just being paranoid.” A sinister smile takes over Collins’ face and I have to admit, it’s scary as fuck. Collins is what most would consider a pretty boy. But the giant scar that starts on the bottom of his jaw and goes down his neck to who-knows-where, steals away from that clean cut look. He’s a good looking guy, even if he is a fucking jackass.

We get in the car, and Collins immediately begins driving toward the area where the guy lives. Of course the fucker lives in one of the fanciest parts of town. If you have tens of millions of dollars of *other people’s* money at your disposal, then why wouldn’t you?

“How do we want to play this?” Collins asks as we turn into the neighborhood. “Home break-in? Or just clean sweep?”

Alec is usually pretty good at giving us free reign of the jobs we do. So unless the client that hires us specifies the type of scene they want set, we usually just do what feels right for the job.

“Make it look like he was targeted. Clean sweep, but take any cash or major valuables.” Collins nods his head in agreement as he turns down the street of the house we need. He doesn’t slow down as we pass it, but I keep my eyes open, taking in every detail of the street.

“Twelve cameras total,” I say as Collins turns off of the street and drives a few blocks away before parking. “He has one on his doorbell and one on his garage.” I continue giving Collins the details as he types out a text relaying the same info to Tanner and Wyatt, and probably Jax.

His phone dings almost immediately and he’s quick to check it. “Tanner says 11:30pm tonight.”

I nod my head, trying to hide my irritation at the fact that I'm stuck here with Collins for another eleven hours.

“How about we chill and grab some food, yeah?” He must sense my hesitation because he lets out a long sigh and shakes his head.

“Come on, man. How long are you gonna be pissed at me?”

“I'm not pissed at you.”

I can taste my own lie and Collins doesn't miss it either, judging by his harsh laugh. “Okay, so you just downright hate me then.”

I pull in a heavy breath, not particularly wanting to have this conversation but I know damn well I can't get out of this right now.

“I don't hate you Collins, but-”

“I get it, Gunnar, I really do. But I mean, can't you at least try to see where I was coming from?”

“I do.” I don't mean to snap at him so harshly, but this conversation is only bringing up memories that I'd much rather suppress but know that I can't.

“I do get where you're coming from,” I say after taking a calming breath and letting it out slowly. “But that doesn't change the fact that you accused him of being a fucking mole.”

“I didn't want to believe it, okay? But we were backed into a corner and I didn't know what to think.”

The thing is, I'm well aware that everything that happened, it all pointed at the time to being Jax. I'm also aware that the main reason I didn't even allow my thoughts to go there was because I'm in love with him. I know him better than anyone else, so I knew that the possibility of him being a traitor was zero. Sometimes it's hard to separate my knowledge of Jax and everyone else's lack of knowledge of him.

“I get it, Collins, I do. But-”

“He’s not just a colleague to you.” I swallow harshly and turn away, not wanting Collins to see just how emotional this conversation is making me.

“None of you are, we’re a family.” His head moves up and down a couple times, but I don’t miss the way he avoids eye contact.

“Right, family.” I barely hear the words he speaks because they come out as a soft whisper. Collins always comes across as a pretty chill guy, happy and fun, but there’s always a dark side to him. A secret we all know he’s hiding. There have been a few times I’ve been tempted to ask him, but I never do. And seeing the haunted look in his eyes, tells me exactly why I haven’t.

“Look Gun, can we just start over?” Collins’ pained voice practically stops me in my tracks. There’s really no reason for me to continue being angry over something that’s over and done with. At least for the most part.

“Yeah.” I agree, just wanting to put this shit behind me. “Let’s just let it all go.”

Collins lets out a loud, relieved breath and I watch as his shoulders relax. “Cool, great.”

“So,” I say, needing to change the subject. “Lunch?”

Collins and I make our way through the pitch black neighborhood, keeping quiet while still trying to act nonchalant. It’s unlikely we’ll be spotted given the time of night and the type of neighborhood this is. You’d think that people with wealth like this would be more cautious, but it’s usually quite the opposite. They’re convinced that their homes are so secure that they have nothing to worry about. They turn off their security notifications so as to not be disturbed while they sleep or entertain guests. They also tend to think that the rent-a-cop patrol car that comes around every hour is plenty to keep intruders out.

We get to our target house, noting the music and loud voices coming from across the street. There's well over a dozen people milling around outside of the house. Whoever's house it is, they even sprang for waitstaff to be outside with their guests. Floodlight lining the walkways, creating a pretty nice ambiance.

"Looks like someone's having a party." Collins grins at me because we both know that this will work in our favor. Just as we begin to breach the perimeter of the house, a text comes through on my phone.

All clear.

We make our way to the front door knowing that all the cameras in the neighborhood have been cut off, so we don't have to worry about being seen. We have no doubt that plenty of the party-goers will see us, but we also know that there won't be a solid description if they're even questioned. When you're a man that steals millions upon millions of dollars from some of the richest people in the country, as well as those barely making ends meet, people tend to not give a shit about your death.

Collins pulls out his kit and immediately begins picking the lock, fifteen seconds later we're stepping into the ridiculously large house not actually giving a shit if we're seen or heard. As always, we did our research. For a paranoid fucker who knows damn well that people are after him, he takes little to no precaution to protect himself. The jackass doesn't even own a gun.

"Hey, you're in the wrong house. The party is across the street." Collins and I both laugh at the moron who's sitting far too comfortably on his couch watching porn, his pants undone and everything.

"Oh, nah man." Collins says, full of chill. "We're in the right place."

I watch in amusement as it takes him way longer than it should to realize what's happening right now. As soon as it hits him, he clambers to his feet trying to hold his pants up and hastily get them buttoned back up.

“You- you need to get out!”

“Oh yeah?” I take a step closer, holding in my laughter when he stumbles over his own feet trying back away. “Or what? You’ll call the cops?”

Collins and I both laugh out loud at that suggestion because he knows damn well he can’t call the cops. He calls them for a home break in, and next thing he knows, he’s behind bars for embezzlement, fraud, and a laundry list of other things.

“I- I-”

“You- you-” Collins taunts as he steps closer as well. It may not be as obvious to the naked eye, but I don’t miss the way his fingers are twitching to reach for the giant-ass knife he has tucked behind his back.

“What- what do you want? Money?”

I stay quiet as Collins barks out a loud laugh. It’s obvious that this guy is just as stupid as we thought he was. He might have been smart enough to spend years embezzling from his clients and so-called-friends. But he lacks any sort of common sense.

“And exactly whose money are you going to use? Yours?” I chuckle, but still stay quiet as Collins moves forward more. “Oh, wait. You don’t actually have any money. At least not your own.”

I watch as the fucker turns red with either anger or embarrassment. I can’t really tell which one because he also looks terrified as fuck. It’s always entertaining to watch as people realize exactly what kind of fate they’re about to meet. He only has himself to blame.

“No, I don’t need your stolen money.”

“In fact,” I jump in, taking another big step toward the coward, who is basically backed into the wall now. “I think we’ll be returning all the money you stole. Especially to those who really need it.”

The one thing about this guy is that he's an equal opportunity crook. He stole from the wealthy and from the poor. He didn't care what their bank balance was, he just wanted it for himself.

"Yes, yes. I will."

Collins lets out a low, evil chuckle. "I think you misunderstood him. *You* won't be doing anything." Before he even has time to process what Collins just said, my partner pounces on him. I walk away, knowing Collins is more than capable of handling that part. I get to work casing the house and grabbing anything of serious value. I don't even want to know why this fucker has a collection of diamond jewelry, but it's ours now. And so is the cash he has stored in his safe. I hear the begging and pleading coming from the living room, and try not to listen too hard to Collins as he preps to off the guy. The fucker loves to see his marks suffer, and who am I to judge?

My phone begins vibrating and I immediately pick it up without looking. "Yeah?"

"We need an account number." Even though he's all business right now, hearing Jax's voice always helps calm the inferno inside of me.

"Overseas?"

"Most likely Caribbean." He continues talking, explaining that none of the stolen funds are in any of the accounts we've recovered, so we have to dig a little deeper.

"Want me to have Collins beat it out of him?"

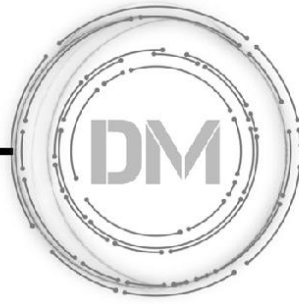
"If you have to." Luckily instead of it having to come to that, I rifle through the papers on his desk and find something promising.

"Try this one." I rattle off the account number and wait while Jax pulls it up.

"Bingo."

Once Jax assures me that the money is safe and sound with us now, I grab everything I snatched up from around the house

and walk back out to the living room. Collins glances over at me in time to catch my quick nod and a sinister smile takes over her face. The thick scar on his jaw bulges out and he looks like a downright monster right now. He pulls the knife from behind his back, a sick gleam in his eye while the guy lying bruised and bloody at his feet looks even more terrified than before. I don't hear any of the whispered words Collins says to him, but the sound of the large, shining knife slicing through the skin of his throat is hard to miss. And impossible to forget.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jax

GROWING UP, I ALWAYS HATED MY LIFE. I HATED MY FAMILY and everything they stood for. Most people look at shows like *The O.C.* and *Gossip Girl*, or even *Gilmore Girls*, and get a glamorized view of being high powered and wealthy. Those shows give off the stigma that money is the biggest issue most people have. That when you're a teenager in high society, life is all about debutante balls, partying, having sex, and defying your parents. But that couldn't be further from the truth. In the world I grew up in, if you defied your family and their wishes, being cut off or having your car taken away was the least of your worries. Usually betrayal like that ended up with days locked in your room with no food or water. If you were allowed to leave, it was because there would be eyes on you. A social gathering of some kind that you had to act like you wanted to be at.

The day I told my parents I was gay when I was fifteen years old, was followed by me being tied down to my bed and my father parading naked women around me to show me what I would be missing. Then I was left in my room for four days without even the ability to go to the bathroom. When I was finally "released" it was because it was my parents' anniversary and they were having a party for all of their high society friends. I was forced to spend the entire night dancing with their friends' daughters and pretending to be straight.

The day before my eighteenth birthday, I snuck out of the house and went to the local Army recruitment office. The next morning, I packed my bags and told my parents I was leaving. As I expected, they told me that if I walked out their door then I shouldn't even dream of coming back. I told them to fuck off, and I haven't looked back since. It was a sad and twisted reality that I grew up in, and even living the way I do now I feel more free than I ever did in Connecticut.

And the only saving grace I felt about my life was the fact that my parents never had more kids, so they didn't have anyone else to subject to their sick torturous ways.

Staring at the monitor, seeing the face of the sibling I never knew I had, I can't help but wonder if his life would have turned out differently if he had grown up the way I did. Would he have ended up with a better life, or would it just have been a different path to take to get him where he is now.

"How do you want to play this?" I'm a little surprised by Alec's question, since he's usually the one giving the orders. None of us ever question him because he's good at what he does and he knows how to best use our individual strengths.

"I have no fucking clue." I can't seem to move my eyes from the screen in front of me. Ben is shackled to a chair in our fucking basement. It's so fucking surreal knowing that we found him. I search inside of me, trying to find even a small piece of sympathy for the guy. But there's nothing. Looking at him, all I feel is anger for what he did to me and the only thing I seem to want is vengeance. But I need answers first.

"Well you know the information we need. Think you can hold off on doing him in until we get it?"

Instinct tells me to say yes because I'm so fucking tired of being sidelined on jobs, but I'm not stupid. If I fuck this up by letting my personal feelings get in the way, then I'll be back on the bench while the rest of my team handles this whole thing.

"Honestly, I'm not sure." Alec gives me a sharp nod, but I don't miss the look on his face before he turns away. *Satisfaction.*

“Then we won’t send you in there alone.” As if they were waiting for our cue, the rest of our men begin shuffling into the meeting room. Everyone except for Tanner, who I’m also watching on the camera while he’s sitting in a chair in front of Ben, keeping him unconscious until we’re ready to take action.

“What’s the fucking plan?” Gunnar’s growly voice should not be turning me on like this, not in front of everyone else. But I can’t help it. I fucking love it when he gets possessive and even a little bit psycho like this.

Alec ignores the borderline insubordinate way Gun asks the question and simply carries forward relaying information to everyone else. “Jax isn’t going in there alone.”

“I’ll go in there.” Alec lets out a loud bark of laughter and shakes his head at my boyfriend.

“You think I’ve suddenly become stupid?” Gun’s body stiffens at Alec’s sarcasm, and there’s no hiding his blatant anger right now. “The last fucking person I would send in there with him is you. The point is to have someone in there who will control their anger, not kill the bastard before we have any fucking answers.”

I know everyone in the room is probably holding their breath the same way I am. Gunnar has been the loudest and most passionate about finding out who did all of this to me, so being told that he can’t follow through with that isn’t going to sit well with him. His jaw practically cracks with how hard he’s clenching it, and his knuckles become splotched with red and white as he opens and closes his fist. Different answers and emotions swim through his gray eyes before they suddenly clear and are back to the vivid blue I love so much.

“Once we have the information, I want in.” Alec doesn’t usually handle demands very well, but when he looks over at Wyatt, I know they’re having some sort of silent conversation about whether or not to give in to him. Wyatt slightly lifts his brow and Alec gives a single, small nod before turning back to Gunnar.

“Okay, but not a second sooner.” Gunnar nods in agreement and everyone in the room seems to visibly relax,

even if only slightly.

“Hunter, Collins. You’re going in there with him. Tanner’s staying down there, but out of the room. We’ll have the sound on and watch from here. The second we get a the name we’re looking for, Gunnar will join you and we’ll finish this fucker.” Alec pauses and looks over at me, almost as if he’s making sure I’m okay with that outcome. I give nothing else away than a simple nod. Once it’s officially determined how we’re going to play it all, Hunter, Collins, and myself head out of the room and down to the basement.

Thoughts and confusion swirl through my stomach as I descend the steps, taking me closer and closer to my attacker. I’m about to meet my brother, the brother I never knew I had. I’m about to meet him, then I’m going to kill him. *Talk about family drama.*

When we reach the door of the room where I know Tanner is waiting for us to take over for him, I pause, needing a moment to really gather myself.

“You ready for this?” Hunter’s deep voice rumbles from behind me and I don’t miss the note of sympathy in his words. That could be there for multiple reasons, the fact that this is the person who attacked me to the brink of death or that it’s my brother.

“Lets get this fucking shit over with.”

I turn the knob and open the door, immediately hit with the smell of stale blood and piss. Ben has only been in here for a few hours, but it’s not uncommon for someone being held captive to be scared enough to piss and shit themselves. From the intel Tanner gathered, this guy isn’t actually in our type of business. He’s just someone who was able to be bribed and exploited easily. I have no doubt that he never thought about what the consequences of his actions could end up being.

I look down at the man that for all intents and purposes, is my brother. I try desperately, grappling with even the tiniest bit of conscience that I have, to feel sorry for what’s going to be happening to him. But as his head lolls to the side and I again see only a slight resemblance, one that only serves to

remind of the person I despise most in the world, I don't feel any sort of remorse for what's about to go down.

"He keeps fading in and out," Tanner informs us as we walk further into the room, Collins shutting the door behind him. "Pussy couldn't even handle a little burn torture." Tanner's sick laugh reminds me of what a complex guy he really is. He seems calm, and preppy on the outside with his perfectly styled hair and polo shirts, but deep down he's just as sick as the rest of us.

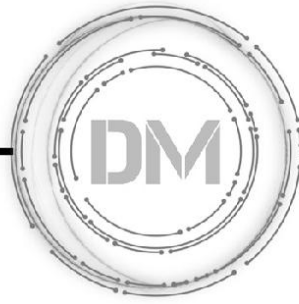
Hunter lets out a low grunt that may also have been a laugh, but it's hard to tell with him. Tanner leaves the room and I walk over to the sink set up in the corner of the dimly lit room. There's not much to the space and the walls are barren. There's a single sink in the corner sitting on a small cabinet where we keep a lot of the supplies we need when we utilize this space. I grab one of the small buckets from it and fill it with some ice cold water. When I walk back to the center of the room, I don't hesitate to toss the water in Ben's face, making his entire body jerk and his eyes fly open.

"Wh-" He tugs at his restraints, but seems to realize quickly that he's not going anywhere. His head jerks around and his eyes widen more and more as he takes in my two team members. When his gaze lands on me, his entire body stills and his eyes practically double in size.

"Hello, brother." He flinches at my words, and for some reason it's very satisfying to watch.

"How- how are you-" His words come out broken and stuttered and his voice is hoarse, probably from the methods Tanner used to keep him unconscious. "You're dead."

"Or," I say, squatting down in front of him so we're eye to eye. "You're really fucking bad at killing people." I maintain eye contact with him while I reach around to my back and pull out my knife. It's modest compared to some, and downright tiny compared to all of the ones Collins has. But it's enough to intimidate this fucker. "Unlucky for you though, I'm not."



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Gunnar

I STARE AT THE SCREENS IN FRONT OF US, WATCHING AS MY boyfriend tortures his own brother for information. I can't say I haven't been concerned about how he's handling all of this. Jax is a master at compartmentalizing. But I have no doubt that one day, all the emotions he's avoiding are going to catch up to him and hit him hard.

"You're going to die." Jax's voice comes through the speakers, and it's chilling hearing the complete lack of emotion in the words. "But first, you're going to tell me who hired you to come after me."

"Why would I tell you if you're going to kill me anyways?" Everyone in the room lets out a round of low chuckles, because this stupid fucker seriously thinks he's going to make us rethink our plan. But I just continue to stare blankly at the screen as Jax leans closer and speaks in a scary as fuck tone that could easily make a grown man shit himself.

"Because, if you don't, then my good friend Collins here is going to pull out one of his many knives." He gestures to Collins, who is in fact twirling one of his giant-ass knives between his fingers. "He's going to make a whole bunch of tiny little knicks all over your body. Not big ones. No, no. Just big enough to sting and be super fucking painful. Then Hunter over here, is going to mix up one of his special acids and flick it all over your skin. Not only will it burn your skin, but when

it gets into your bloodstream from those lovely cuts, it's going to feel like an inferno has been set off inside of your body until you're begging me to finally end it all for you."

I have to hand it to the guy, he tries to hide it but the fear is evident in his eyes. He may not say it out loud, but he knows what the right choice is for him to make.

"You're bluffing." Jax shakes his head in mock disappointment as he takes a step back and Collins steps forward with an almost giddy look on his face. As tough and dangerous as most of us are, I'm not surprised when the men around me either cringe or turn away when Collins begins doing exactly what Jax promised he would. Ben begins screaming out and crying in pain, but that doesn't deter his aggressor. If anything, it spurs him on as he begins to move faster and faster. Hunter is at the sink in the corner of the room, slowly mixing together an acidic concoction, but I can tell by the ingredients he's adding that it's not the one Jax threatened Ben with. No, this is the one we'll need once *I'm* through with the fucker.

Jax continues speaking in his low and menacing voice while Collins continues to create small nicks all along Ben's skin. His pained cries fill the room from the speakers and the different angles of the camera's ensure that we don't miss any of what's happening downstairs. We have a view of Hunter mixing the acid, Collins' sickeningly gleeful face as he flicks his knife, Jax's dark and scary calm face as he speaks low, and more than anything we have the perfect view of Ben and his tear soaked face.

"I'll ask again, who sent you after me and why?"

"I- I don't know why." He doesn't stop trying to struggle against his restraints, but his jerky movements are visibly becoming weaker and weaker by the second. "He just- he said you deserved it. You ruined his life."

Every man in the room with me shifts closer to the screen and I can feel Cole move in tighter next to me, probably in case I need the support. Alec and Wyatt both perk up with interest. Of course there have been plenty of people whose

lives we've ruined over the years, but it would have had to be pretty damn personal for someone to retaliate in this manner instead of just straight-up killing him.

"You've gotta be a little more specific there, brother." Jax adds a small laugh to the sentence and Ben very obviously flinches at the use of the word *brother*.

"I've ruined a lot of lives in my time."

Cole shifts even closer to me, his arm brushing against mine as a reminder that my best friend is here. He's always here for me. So I lean into his warmth while I wait with bated breath for the three men to get the information we need.

"Fuck!" Ben cries out as Collins makes yet another tear in his skin. At this point, his body is covered in glistening marks. Only trace amounts of blood are beginning to leak from the cuts because of the way Collins inflicted them.

"Just give me a name and it all stops."

"Fuck!" Collins begins making a trail of cuts down the fuckers lower abdomen, getting dangerously close to the appendage that no man wants cuts on.

"Okay! Fuck! Okay, fine!" Collins pauses for a moment, lifting his head to look at Ben, who's breathing heavily with a rapidly rising and falling chest. Collins looks over to Jax with a slightly raised brow, but my boyfriend gives nothing away.

"Name."

Ben pulls in heavy breaths over and over again, and closes his eyes for a moment, most likely to gather his thoughts. He opens his mouth to reveal the name of the person who hired him, and the name he speaks has my mind racing and my entire body freezing.

"Conaway."

I feel numb as I descend the steps to the basement, needing to get some more information before I kill this fucker. There's no

way I heard him right, no way all of this was caused by the name I thought I heard. Alec asked me who he was talking about, but I couldn't answer him. Everything around me was white noise and static as I processed what he said. As I processed *who* he said.

I pull in a heavy breath, attempting to calm myself before I give Tanner a sharp nod in greeting, turn the knob and step into the room. The different smells hit me immediately. Blood, acid, and piss fill the air and I have to force myself not to curl my lips in disgust. Jax slowly turns to face me, our eyes locking with silent communication flowing through us.

I should have known that this was all my fault, that at the core of it, I'm the one to blame. I'm the reason the love of my life was attacked and left for dead on the side of a small road in France. Ripping my eyes from his, I turn to the piece of shit shackled to the chair in the center of the room. Tiny droplets of blood trickle from every cut on his body and his head lolls slightly to the right when he tries to hold it up.

"You actually let this guy get the drop on you?" I turn my head in time to catch a slight smirk on Jax's face, though his eyes are still hard and angry.

"He was a coward and jumped me from behind." He shrugs like it's no big deal, but I know he's pissed at himself for letting it happen in the first place, and if I'm being honest, I've been pretty pissed too. But now is not the time to get into that conversation.

"So," I say, turning back to my next victim. "Why did Conaway hire you?"

Just saying his name makes my stomach turn and bile rise in my throat. Maybe I should have suspected a day like this would come, but I figured he would have done the same thing I did. Move on and forget.

"He said- he said you deserved it." His words become weaker and weaker as he speaks. "That you should feel the loss you made him feel." I try not to roll my eyes at his words. He really was always so fucking dramatic.

“Where is he?”

“I- I don’t know.”

I give Collins a quick nod and he immediately flicks his wrist, adding another cut to Ben’s body.

“Fuck!”

“Now, why do I feel like you can give me a better answer than that?”

“He tracked me down. I never went to him.” I’m sure he’ll be easy to find but I really just want an excuse to keep torturing this fucker.

“Alright, well how about an easy one, then. Why’d you take the job?”

I watch as he uses the small bit of energy he has and sneers at Jax before turning back to me. “Why wouldn’t I? He showed me the proof of who my father is and his golden boy child. He stole the life I should have had.”

Jax lets out a loud bark of laughter and shakes his head. “Wow, he really fucked with your head, huh?”

“He didn’t have to.” I can see that Jax wants to argue with him, tell him the truth about his life growing up and how fucked up it was, but instead he just shakes his head and lets it go.

“He said that you took away the love of his life, so he wanted you to feel the same pain he did.” He lets out a hoarse, sarcastic laugh and shakes his head weakly. “All this shit for a piece of ass.” Jax’s body stiffens because it’s a comment like that that undermines what we truly share.

“That may be true,” Jax says, kneeling down in front of the man who shares his blood. “But it’s a damn good piece of ass.” Ben visibly flinches at Jax’s words and a feeling of satisfaction falls over me.

“Did Conaway say anything else?” Curt Conaway isn’t exactly what you would consider a mastermind. But he’s rich, and knows how to use his money to get what he wants in life.

Before we go after him -*and I will go after him*- I need to know if he has anything else up his sleeves.

“He never said. He- he just said he wants you dead.” The look of pure hatred he aims at Jax has anger rising even more inside of me and my fingers begin to itch with the need to end him once and for all.

“And you couldn’t even get that right.” Ben pulls at his restraints again, rage radiating from his body, but he’s become so weak from the pain and blood loss that it does nothing.

“Are you the only one he hired?” At this point, he’s barely conscious, let alone coherent. He just shakes his head slightly, telling me that he has no clue. He’s not the mastermind in all of this, he’s just the one that was paid to do the dirty work. Of course Curt wouldn’t do the job himself.

Deciding that we won’t be getting anything else from him, I give Hunter the signal to get ready. Jax and Collins both back away, allowing me to get up close to Ben who eyes me warily, even in his weakened state.

“There’s one thing Conaway conveniently left out when he hired you.” I speak low, getting close to Ben so he has no doubt who’s talking to him right now. “When you hurt the people I love, I stop at nothing for revenge. The moment you agreed to attack *my* man, is the moment you signed *your* death warrant.”

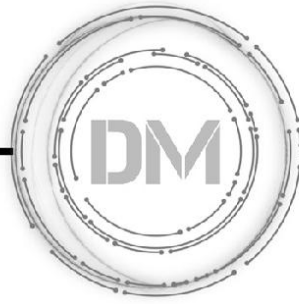
Without letting him get another word in, I stand and flick my chin to Hunter and Collins. I stop at the door, turn and watch just in time to see Hunter and Collins begin covering Ben in the acid. The moment his pained screams hit my ears, satisfaction falls over me. I need to know that the man who physically hurt the love of my life is gone for good. Now it’s time to take care of the person who started it all.

Jax and I walk out of the room together, Ben’s cries following us out to the hallway where Tanner is waiting on us. His computer is open with the camera views on screen, which means he’s already caught up with everything that just went down.

“Who was he talking about?” He keeps his voice quiet and level, but Tanner isn’t one to like being left out.

“Curt Conaway.” Jax answers, but both men’s gazes stay on me while I let out an irritated sigh. I thought that part of my life was over, but apparently I was wrong.

“My ex-boyfriend.”



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jax

Six Years Ago...

THE DRY HEAT HITS HARD AGAINST MY SKIN WHEN GUNNAR and I step out of the airport in California. I've been here plenty of times, but it's always been for a job. This is the furthest thing from a job we can get right now.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Gunnar asks, yet again. I've lost count of how many times he's asked, and if I was less confident in our relationship, I might be worried.

"Are *you* ready for this?" He stops walking toward the line of taxicabs and turns to look at me.

"I just don't want to scare you off." My lips twitch up at his uncertainty and shake my head gently.

"Gun, we live together and I don't know if you forgot or not, but we're in love." That causes a small chuckle to escape past his lips. "Meeting your family isn't going to make me rethink everything we have." He lets out a breath as if he really was nervous that I would call it quits if things don't go well. Knowing Gunnar has been so nervous has actually helped me to get over my own nerves. I'm meeting my boyfriend's family for the first time and I have no idea how they're going to feel about me. I know none of them really cared for his ex, with valid reason, but what if they don't like me either? It's not terribly uncommon for families to not like

any of the significant others their kids bring home. And unfortunately it happens quite often to same-sex couples. So it's a possibility that it wouldn't matter who it is, they'd hate anyone Gunnar brought home. Of course I'm not going to share my fears and concerns with my boyfriend, who's so nervous he's practically crawling out of his own skin.

We grab a taxi and head to Gunnar's family home. My hand stays firmly on his thigh the entire ride there, for both comfort and to stop his leg from bouncing up and down. I lean over, putting my mouth right against his ear. "Relax, baby." I squeeze his thigh with a little more force and almost as if that's exactly what he needed from me, he lets out a long exhale and relaxes into the seat. Just as the cab pulls up in front of the comfortable looking suburban home, the door swings open and a middle-aged woman steps out onto the wide porch in a rush.

Before the car even has a chance to be put into park, she comes running toward it and for a moment I'm afraid she won't stop in time. But she skids to a stop a few feet away from where the driver parks the taxi. Gunnar hurries to climb out and is immediately engulfed in a motherly hug. I quickly pay the driver just as he pops the trunk and I get out to grab our bags from it. By the time I set our bags on the ground and close the trunk, Gunnar's barely pulling out of his mother's embrace. The taxi pulls out of the driveway, and Gunnar wraps his arm around my waist.

"Mom, this is Jax." He doesn't give me any more of an introduction, but his mom's eyes become misty as she looks from her son to me. Before I can process what's happening, I'm being pulled into her arms and she's hugging me very similarly to how she was hugging Gunnar just moments ago.

"I'm so glad you're here," she says softly in my ear. When she pulls away, I turn my head for a moment and clear my throat from the emotion threatening to clog it. I can say easily how many times my own mother hugged me growing up. *Never*. Getting a hug from my boyfriend's mom shouldn't hit me as hard as it does since Gunnar warned me that his family is affectionate and loving. But fuck, it does. I've never been

hugged by anyone's mother before. Being embraced so easily by the love of my life's just does something to me.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Beckett." She waves her hand in the air, as if fanning my words away.

"Please, call me Camille. Or mom, if you'd prefer." I don't miss the careful way Gunnar is watching me, trying to gauge my reaction to those words. My heart warms even more with something unfamiliar, and a wide smile spreads easily over my face.

"Thank you, Mom." That simple word on my tongue feels so foreign. But I don't hate it. Camille turns to lead us into the house and Gun and I pick up our bags and follow. His arm wraps around my waist again and he pulls me into his side.

"See," he says softly against my temple. "You had nothing to worry about." I let out a loud bark of laughter as his words.

"Smartass." Gunnar laughs and I can't help the way my chest puffs out from the sound. I'll never get tired of being the reason my man is happy. We had an interesting start to our relationship, but it's been full steam ahead from the moment we confessed our love for each other. We're still living at HQ, but we share a room and we chose a plot of land down the street where we want to build our house. We just haven't gotten started on it yet.

I can't say that this is where I saw my life, but I wouldn't change it for the world. My shitty upbringing may have been complete hell, but I'd endure it all over again if it means I'd still end up with Gunnar. We're more than just boyfriends. Hell, I don't even know if partners are a strong enough definition of what we are to each other. We may have only been together a year so far, but Gunnar and I are each other's worlds. We've built a bond stronger than most and I know without a doubt that whatever life throws at us, we'll go through it together.

The moment we step inside the house, it's a flurry of more hugs and greetings as Gunnar's sister, Candice, who acts like she didn't think I was real, even though Gun's sent her

multiple pictures of the two of us together, and his dad, Byron, descend on us.

It only takes seconds for me to feel comfortable and at ease here. It's obvious that his family loves him, and by extension, me. I'm not positive of everything he's told them about me, besides the fact that we met at work and have been together for a year. All of which is true. But that's all surface level stuff. I doubt Gunnar told them about my abusive family or my horrific upbringing. But I don't even know if he's told them where I'm from. So when his dad asks if I golf, I refrain from telling him that I practically grew up on the links. I just nod my head and tell him I've been a few times.

Byron loves golf, this is something I already knew. After Gunnar's first six months with Dark Matter, he took a chunk of what he made in that time and not only paid off his parent's house for them, but he bought them a membership to one of the fancy-schmancy country clubs in the area so that his dad can golf any time he wants and his mom can be pampered at the spa when she feels like it.

From everything Gunnar has told me, he didn't grow up struggling. But his parents have worked hard for everything they have. His mom is a music teacher at some high-end prep school and his dad is a manager for a large construction company. All Gun ever wanted to do was make sure his parents didn't have to work harder than necessarily to provide for themselves. So when he has the means to lessen the burden for them, it was the first thing he did and I fully supported it.

"Well then, you two can join me tomorrow morning for my eight-thirty tee time!" The excitement in his voice is almost contagious to the point that I find myself nodding enthusiastically.

"Can't wait."

It may have been a while since I've stepped onto an actual golf course, but the knowledge of how to play is burned into my

brain. Even if I tried to throw the game, I don't think my instincts would actually allow me to. Luckily, Gunnar's dad spends most of his free time out here, so he holds his own and I don't feel like a total asshole for playing better than my boyfriend's father. My boyfriend on the other hand...

"When did you say the time you went golfing was?" My question comes out between gasping laughs and the angry scowl on Gunnar's face only makes me laugh even harder.

"Oh," Bryon says with just as much laughter in his voice, "I would maybe be able to drag him out once or twice a month when he was younger, but I'm sure it's been years since he's picked up some clubs."

My mind involuntarily flashes to a couple weeks ago when we had to make a hit look like a home invasion gone sideways, so Gunnar grabbed the guys nine iron and used it to take out our target. I shake those thoughts from my head because the last thing I need to do is give away anything about what we actually do for a living. So I just chuckle a little more with his dad and give Gun a kiss on the cheek. We walk to the next hole and this time my boyfriend doesn't completely bomb it, though he's still far behind our scores.

"Why does it always have to be golf?" His muttered words come as we approach another hole. "Why can't we have a nice time over a couple of beers and some skee ball?"

"Would you like to go to an Arcade tonight, babe?"

I might be teasing him, but I'm not at all surprised when he replies. "Yes, I would. Thank you."

Just as I'm leaning in to give him a kiss, a voice calling out Gunnar's name has my love stiffening next to me.

"Fuck." The word is a quiet mutter, but it immediately has me on high alert. The three of us turn to see a slim, overly fancy-looking guy approaching us.

"Damn it," Byron hisses before he walks away, going to take his turn. My brows fall in even more confusion, but just as I turn to ask Gun what's going on, he steps up to us and greets Gunnar as if he was expected.

“Hi sweetheart! I didn’t believe it when I heard you were coming home since you never called me.” The way he says that, like Gunnar reaching out to him would have been a given, has something inside of me boiling.

“Why would I call you, Curt?” The name Curt has my hands balling into tight fists, and I have to force myself not to just outright attack this fucker. Gunnar told me about his ex-boyfriend and the shit he put him through in high school. The fact that Gunnar felt like the only way he could escape him was to join the Marines pisses me off even more. I’m not going to start a scene at Byron’s favorite golf course, though. So instead of saying anything, I just slide my hand around Gunnar’s waist and pull him close to me. Curt’s eyes narrow on where my hand rests on my man’s hip, and in order to really drive home that he doesn’t belong here right now, I place a simple kiss on Gun’s temple.

“Who is this?” Curt spits out, but I take my time turning to look at the man -if you can even call him that- directly.

“I’m his partner.” A thunderous look crosses the jackasses face, and I can’t help the smug grin that lifts my lips. Something passes over Curt’s face and it has me gripping Gunnar’s hip tighter because this isn’t sitting right with me. I glance over to where Byron just finished hitting his ball. He looks over at us from the far left of where Curt is standing. His eyebrows dip in question and starts to walk closer to us but I give him a quick shake of my head. Thankfully, he stops in his tracks and I let out a small breath of relief. I don’t know what’s going on with this guy, but I don’t trust that he won’t lash out. The last thing I want is for Byron to take any brunt of this shit just for being a protective father.

“Are you fucking serious right now?” Curt looks at Gunnar and I fight my instinct to shield my man from his ex’s gaze. As protective as I may be of Gunnar, he can take care of himself. He may possibly be one of the most terrifying men I’ve met, and my fucked up head finds it so damn sexy. I realize a normal person may not get turned on when they watch their boyfriend so casually smile before pulling the trigger on a pedophile or some other piece of shit. I shake those thoughts

out of my mind and tune back in to Curt, who's throwing a hissy fit in the center of the golf course.

"I've been waiting for you to come back to me while you've been out here fucking this guy?"

I open my mouth to tell this guy off, but Gunnar speaks up first. "I was never coming back to you, Curt. I made that damn clear before I left, and I haven't spoken to you since. You need to move on."

Curt shakes his head vigorously. "That's not true. You just needed some time away."

"No, Curt." I have to hand it to my boyfriend, he's doing his very best to stay calm and talk to Curt rationally. "I was never-"

"We're meant to be, Gunnar!" He's practically screaming now, and we're clearly beginning to draw an audience. It's not large, but the few people passing by to the next hole pause their steps and eye Curt with both confusion and fascination. I'm sure a place as fucking fancy as this isn't used to anything scandalous like this happening. According to Byron, this is a place for fancy business men and their housewives. So I'm sure shit goes down, but it goes down privately, not as a public outrage like this.

"No we're not-"

"Yes! I always knew you would come back to me, you're just, just confused!" I look over at Byron who looks much more concerned for his son than anything else. I have no doubt he sees exactly what I do, which is a completely unhinged, entitled man screaming at his son. I know he wants to step forward and say something, but he must see the truth in this interaction: it needs to happen.

Curt has clearly been holding onto his relationship with Gunnar for years now. He needs to hear the truth, that it's over and he needs to move on. If he wasn't such a fucking asshole, I might actually feel sorry for the pathetic moron for waiting around for so long. But hearing the way he's screaming at Gun right now, has any fleck of sympathy disappearing.

“I’m not confused, Curt. I’m with Jax now and I’ll always be with Jax.”

Curt’s face grows redder and redder and pure anger and rage takes over his features. I look down at his hands that are balled into tight, white fists and his entire body is stiff. This guy really needs to learn how to not show his hand so easily. I can tell Gunnar is as irritated and frustrated as I am right now, but he looks just as relaxed as ever.

“You’ll always be with me! You’re just confused. He has you confused!”

“I’m not confused, Curt.”

“Yes you are! You’re just confused by good dick!” The moment those words leave his mouth, everything around me blurs and my mind hones in on this stupid fucker and what he just said. I can handle a lot of shit, but the last thing I’m going to stand here and listen to is someone trying to undermine what Gun and I share. I don’t give a shit how angry or heartbroken he is. Gunnar and I aren’t some fleeting fling that’s going to end at any moment. We’re not just boyfriends, either. We’re fucking partners. We’re life partners, and I’ll be fucking damned if I let anyone try to lessen what that means. Without thinking about it, forgetting about everyone around us and even Byron who’s starting to look just as pissed off as I am, I step forward, ending this shit once and for all.

“That’s enough,” I practically growl, but Curt has no self preservation and keeps talking.

“You’re just dick drunk!” Without any thought whatsoever, my arm winds back and my fist catapults right into Curt’s jaw. I hear the loud crack even outside and above all of the murmurs and gasps of everyone around us.

“That’s the last fucking time you will ever see or speak to Gunnar again!” I snarl right in Curt’s face as he holds it and cries out in pain. I grab my boyfriend’s hand and lead him over to his dad. I expect to see at least a hint of anger from Byron, but all that’s present is amusement.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble quietly, but he just shakes his head.

“I’m not, he deserved that.” I have no idea if he’ll face any consequences from the country club for that, but if he does, Gun and I will take care of it. We’ll buy him his own fucking golf course if we have to. Without looking back at the piece of shit screaming at us from behind, we walk away, our golf game officially over as we head back to the clubhouse.

I look at Gunnar, his face stoic and unreadable as we walk. “Gun?”

He shakes his head and looks at me, anger in his eyes and for a minute I think he’s pissed at me. Until he opens his mouth and speaks.

“I wanted to kill him. Just now, I wanted to kill him.” I shake my head softly and pull him to a stop right outside the doors of the clubhouse. Byron doesn’t stop with us, probably because it’s obvious we need this moment.

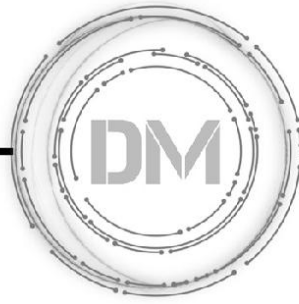
“No, baby.” I pull him closer to me, out of the way of foot traffic and curious ears. “He’s not worth it. I gave that asshole what he deserved back there, and now we can move on with our lives.”

He nods a couple of times, but I can see the uncertainty in his oceanic eyes.

“Gun,” I whisper, before pressing my lips softly against his for only a second. “It’s over now. He got the hint and he can move on with his life now.”

“Yeah,” he exhales a long breath. “You’re right. It’s over.”

“And we’ll never have to see Curt Conaway ever again.”



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jax

I SHOULD HAVE FUCKING KNOWN. NO, CURT CONAWAY ISN'T in our world exactly. But he hates me and wants to hurt Gunnar for leaving him, and he has money to spare. I'm not even a little bit surprised that he was able to figure out that Ben exists, then manipulate him to do his dirty work. I'm fucking pissed right now, but more than anything, I'm worried about Gunnar. Alec wanted to focus on clean up today, but he already called a meeting first thing in the morning.

Gunnar is completely quiet as we walk back to the house. I know my boyfriend enough to know that he's beating himself up so hard right now. To be fair, I don't think anyone would have come to the conclusion of it being Conaway behind all of this. It's been years since Gunnar left him for good and we haven't heard a single thing from him since. We just assumed he moved on with his life, which would have been the normal thing to do after a break-up. Of course, Curt Conaway never really was normal.

I'm thankful when we walk into the house and find nothing but silence. Cole is back at HQ, and I can only assume that Lillie is with the other women right now. Whenever we have situations back at the house like the one we just had with Ben, Alec tries to keep the women preoccupied if he's confident they don't need to be involved at all. Most likely, they're just at Wyatt's house so they can still keep an eye on them.

Gunnar immediately walks upstairs, heading straight to our room but I make a quick stop in the kitchen. I grab a couple of bottles of water, a box of the ranch flavored crackers Gunnar likes, and a container of store bought cookies. It may not be the most nutritious meal, but I need to make sure my man at least eats something.

When I get to the room, I already hear the telltale sound of the shower running in the en suite bathroom and I know Gunnar didn't waste any time. I set the bottles of water on one of the nightstands and the crackers and cookies next to them before I strip out of my own clothes and make my way to the bathroom. The mirror is already fogging and the small space is filled with steam. Through the obscured glass, I can see Gunnar standing under the heavy spray barely moving. He doesn't even flinch when I open the door and step in behind him.

"Babe." I whisper the single word just before I place my hands on his strong, tense shoulders. He doesn't give me any response other than slightly leaning back, putting more of his weight against my hands. I gently knead against the knots around his shoulder blades, making his head fall forward and a soft moan escape his lips. The water continues pounding down on us, but I pay it no mind because at this moment this is what my man needs and I'll give him anything.

"We'll get him, baby." I kiss just below his ear and Gunnar lets out a soft sigh.

"I know we will."

"Then you wanna tell me what has you so upset right now?"

He turns around, his face full of despair and pain. His blue eyes are dark and heavy and I just want to make this all go away.

"This is my fault, Jax. All of it." I'm shaking my head before he even finishes talking.

"No it's not, Gun."

"He went after you because of me. Because I left him for-"

“You left him because he’s an arrogant jackass who didn’t give a shit about anyone but himself and his money.” I grip his chin, forcing him to look into my eyes. “It’s not your fault that he couldn’t just let it go and move on.”

“And you almost died because of it.” It’s obvious that he’s not going to stop arguing with me or blaming himself, so I spin him back around and try a different approach.

I fill my hand with his favorite shampoo, the smell of coconut and citrus immediately filling the shower. I gently begin to scrub it into his hair, massaging his scalp with the rough tips of my fingers.

“Fuck, Jax.” His breathy words have my cock swelling, but I try to ignore it in order to keep pampering him the way he needs right now. Once I have his hair completely rinsed out, I move on to his body. Rubbing him gently with his body wash, massaging across his shoulders and down his back before sliding my hands around to the front. I feel the hard ridges of his muscles beneath my palm and fingertips as I lather up his front with his delicious smelling body wash.

“You’re so fucking tense, baby.” He leans his head back on my shoulder and lets out a low hum of frustration. “I guess I’ll just have to use another method to calm you down.”

Before I give him a chance to respond, my hand wraps around his only half hard cock, but once it’s in my grasp it grows rapidly and Gunnar moans out my name.

“Jax.” I stroke him slowly, letting him feel every single one of my movements. I press my front against his back, my hand as hard as steel carding right between his cheeks.

“That’s it, baby. Let me take all the stress away.” I begin sliding my hand up and down his shaft in quicker strokes before Gunnar suddenly pulls away and turns to face me.

“Together.” He’s breathless and the need is shining in his eyes. He steps closer, notching our erections together and grabs my hand to wrap them around both. “I want to do this together. Show me why we belong together.”

There's so much pain and need in his voice that there's no way I won't do as he wishes. I jerk us both off, relishing the low, needy moans falling from his lips.

"There are so many reasons we belong together, Gunner. This? Sex? This is just a drop in the bucket of why we work so well." He leans his forehead against my shoulder, his hands wrapping around to my ass, and I fucking love how much he needs me, needs this right now. "We're soulmates, Gun. I knew it from the second I met you, and I'll never let anything tear us apart."

I increase the speed of my hand, and Gunnar's cries and moans become louder and more frequent until his nails dig into my ass so hard, they're probably going to leave marks. That thought alone has tingles beginning to climb up my spine and my balls draw up. At the same moment, both Gunnar and I call out each other's name as we come hard all over my hand.

"Fuck." Gunnar's breathing is heavy and rapid as he tries to gain control of his body again. I take advantage of his inability to stand on his own by quickly finishing washing him up and getting us out of the shower.

Gunnar's still quiet as I dry us off and get him into bed. He leans back against the headboard and doesn't fight me when I open one of the bottles of water and hand it to him. He swallows down half of the bottle before closing it and putting it on the nightstand on his side of the bed. I settle in next to him, snatching up the bag of crackers that he loves, grabbing out a few and holding them up to him. I see the hesitance on his face for a moment before he finally gives in and takes them from my hand. He slowly nibbles on one before seemingly realizing just how hungry he is and quickly shoves the rest in his mouth. I sit quietly as he ends up eating a few more handfuls before putting the bag next to his bottle and curling further into my side.

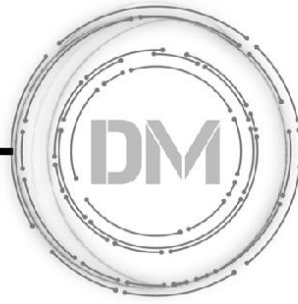
"This is all my fault." It kills me to hear how broken and helpless he sounds right now. I want so bad to argue with him, but I know it's not going to get me anywhere. Not right now.

“We’ll take care of it.” I wrap my arms around him, bringing him tight into me. I close my eyes, enjoying the silence.

I know I should be feeling something right now. I basically just killed my own brother. Someone who shared my blood. And I found out who hired him, who started all of this bullshit. But I just can’t get myself to care right now. The only thing I’m even slightly concerned about is Gunnar and how he’s going to handle all of this. It may have been a long time ago, but there was a time in his life when he loved Curt. At one time he even thought they would end up getting married and building a life together. None of this is going to be easy on him. There’s no doubt that he knows what Conaway’s fate is going to be when we find him, and I wish I knew for sure how he felt about that. Will he be able to end him as easily as I was able to end Ben? Or will he have second thoughts. Will his love for me come out on top, or will his past make me break a promise? Will it tear us apart?

I shake those thoughts from my mind because they aren’t going to do me any good right now. We’ll deal with all of that tomorrow when Tanner and Wyatt can gather more information.

I listen intently as Gunnar’s breathing begins to even out and his body relaxes even more in my arms. It isn’t until I’m sure he’s fully asleep that I allow myself to finally give in to the exhaustion of the day.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Gunnar

“CURT CONAWAY. WALL STREET INVESTMENT BANKER. JUST went through his third divorce last week. Third husband got two million and a beach house in Palm Beach. He currently has a penthouse in New York, a mansion in Bel Air, and another beach house in Malibu. His main office is in New York, but travels to the west coast pretty often.”

It’s weird as fuck listening to Tanner drone on about the life of my ex-boyfriend. I heard from my sister that Curt got married and divorced, but I had no idea that it’s been three times now. I guess I shouldn’t be all that surprised. Curt has always been an asshole, and even though I don’t know the reasoning behind his divorces, I’m sure he’s to blame for a lot of it.

“He’s on his way back to New York from California now.”

“So what’s the plan?” Cole’s been pretty quiet about all of this, but besides Jax, he’s the only person here who knew who Curt was before today.

“Three men.” Alec speaks up. “I assume Jax and Gunnar both want in.” He looks to us, raising a single brow in question and neither of us hesitates to nod in response.

“So Jax, Gunner and-”

“I’ll go.” I’m not surprised that Cole’s the first to speak up. We’ve always had each other’s backs, and I knew there was no

way he was going to abandon me during this bullshit. Alec eyes him for a moment before giving my best friend a sharp nod.

“Leave first thing in the morning. You have free reign on this one, but I want it done fast.” We all agree to what he says, then he moves on to other topics. My mind stays firmly on Curt and all of the shit he’s put me through.

We met when we were only fifteen years old. Two of the only gay kids in our school, of course we ended up gravitating toward each other. We started dating and at first everything seemed perfect. We got along well, we easily spoke of our futures and the life we would have together. We both had plans and aspirations and we were easily able to fit each other into those plans. Until the day I started to realize that the life we were planning wasn’t the life I wanted. I began throwing other ideas into the mix and that’s when he started to change. He became verbally abusive and condescending in everything we did. I was a seventeen year old kid and just didn’t see what was happening and what he was doing. My family didn’t like him and my sister Candice was especially vocal about it. It wasn’t until the end of our senior year of high school when I realized exactly how bad things had gotten. I realized that the only colleges I had applied to were the ones he also applied to. No matter where I chose to go, he would follow. And for the first time in almost three years, I hated that idea. I hated the thought of going away to college with him, of officially solidifying our relationship from high school sweethearts to live-in life partners. That thought alone is what had me driving to the Marine recruitment office the morning of graduation. I drove straight to graduation, having already signed everything needed to leave the following week. It was my out, and I was thrilled. Of course, Curt was pissed. In his mind, I was just lost and confused. Maybe I was. But I knew without a doubt that I wanted out. I wanted a fresh start and a new life plan. One separate from him.

Curt had insisted that he would wait for me, and that distance would only make me realize how perfect we were for each other. I knew that wasn’t true, and I told him that. I told him not to wait for me, and I didn’t wait for him.

When I left the Marines, he expected me to come back to him. He expected that I would have *come to my senses* and been ready to settle down with him once and for all. That's not what happened. Straight out of the Military, I joined Dark Matter Security and met Jax. The next time I saw Curt, Jax and I were together and more than committed to each other. He was pissed, as I expected, and he was convinced that I was just confused. *Dick drunk*, as he called it. Jax wasn't happy about him demeaning our relationship like that, and he showed him with a punch to his face. That was the last time I saw or spoke to Curt.

Alec finishes up with our briefing dismissing everyone. Cole, Jax and I stay behind, leaving us alone with Alec, Wyatt, and Tanner.

"How do you guys plan to go about this?" Alec asks, and Tanner already has his laptop open in front of him, probably prepping to get us whatever we need for the job.

"Well he lives in New York, we could just make it look like a mugging." Cole's suggestion is a good one, but if I know Jax *-and I damn well do-* then a simple mugging gone wrong isn't going to be enough for him.

"No." Alec opens his mouth to say something, but Jax cuts him off. "He deserves more than a couple of punches and a gunshot to the head."

The table is silent as everyone absorbs his words. He's not wrong, but we do need to be careful about how we go about all of this.

"We can't draw too much attention to it." Alec's tone is both firm and understanding. "Whatever you do, be careful and call Dent to clean it up." He doesn't say anything else before he stands from the table and leaves the room.

"I'll be on standby," Tanner says. "Keep us posted on what you decide to do, give me enough warning so I can ensure the coast is clear."

Once Tanner and Wyatt leave the room, Cole leans back in his chair and lets out a long breath. He pulls the pony tail from

his long blonde hair and combs his fingers through it before retying it into a bun at the back of his head. Cole's a gorgeous guy, in a rugged kind of way. When we first met in the Marines, we immediately clicked. We went through basic training together and somehow managed to end up together over the next four years I was in. During any leave and holiday breaks, I went home with him to Vermont. His family became like a second family to me and the day Cole was presumed dead, was one of the hardest days of my life. I'm just thankful as hell that I figured out the truth and Tanner and Wyatt are damn good at their jobs. We were able to figure out where Cole was being kept and were able to rescue him. Unfortunately, in order to get the vengeance he so desperately needed, he had to stay dead. I hate this life for my best friend. Especially now that he's found an amazing woman to spend his life with that I know his family would love.

"We need to be smart about this." Cole's words interrupt my thoughts. "I know you're pissed, and want to make him pay, but we can't be stupid, not now."

"I know." Jax combs his fingers through his dark hair, and I can hear the frustration in his tone. He hates having to be careful about this, but Curt is different than Ben, people will notice he's missing.

"Why don't we sleep on it? We can figure it out tomorrow on our way to New York." I slide my hand across Jax's back, hoping to calm him down some.

"Yeah. Yeah, let's sleep on it. We'll figure something out."

I'm restless as fuck. I know I should be sleeping right now since we're supposed to be leaving for New York in less than four hours, but I can't seem to calm my mind. Which is why I'm sitting in the sand, barely a foot away from the tideline and looking through my phone at pictures of Jax and I over the years.

With every photo I see of his smiling face -*a smile that always seems to be saved for me*- my anger towards Curt seems to rise more and more. Things didn't need to be like this, didn't need to end like this. But at the same time, I'm not that surprised that he wouldn't just let shit go. Considering he had convinced himself for over four years that I would be coming back to him, despite me not responding to a single one of his letters or care-packages. Hell, after the first year, I had them sent back every time. But he couldn't understand why someone would leave him when he's rich and comes from a good family.

I shake my head in irritation and swipe my finger to the left, revealing another picture of Jax laying on the beach in nothing but swim shorts. Even through the screen, I can't help but admire his perfectly sculpted body and sharp jawline. There's no doubt that my man is fucking gorgeous, but there's so much more to him than that. He's so fucking amazing.

"Gun?" I turn to find Jax walking toward me, confusion clear on his face. "What are you doing out here, baby?"

I shrug my shoulder, trying not to show him how much my mind is working right now. "I couldn't sleep."

He sits down next to me, quiet for a moment as he looks out at the dark water. The sun is about to rise, so the sky is slowly turning from blackened to a slightly lighter blue.

"Are you having second thoughts?" His question sends a jolt of surprise through me and my gaze snaps to him.

"Why would you think that?"

He doesn't look away from the expansive ocean in front of us, but I watch carefully as his mind works. He lifts a single shoulder in a seemingly casual shrug. "You've known Curt for a long time. There was a time that you planned to spend your life with him."

I shake my head furiously at his words. He may not be completely wrong, but he's leaving something very important out of his observation.

“I was young, Jax. A kid. By the time I turned eighteen, I knew he wasn’t what I wanted anymore.”

“He still meant something to you at one point.”

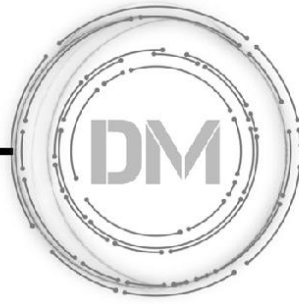
“Yeah, something. But you mean everything to me, and he tried to take you away from me. I’m not letting him get away with that.”

“You’re sure?” The insecurity in his voice throws me because Jax is very rarely insecure, especially about our relationship.

“Jax.” I turn, grasping onto his chin with my fingers, forcing him to look at me. “I will *always* choose you. I don’t care who it is. If someone tries to come after you, I will always find them, and I. Will. End. Them.”

“I love you.” His words come out whispered, and slightly broken, but the conviction behind them cracks my heart open. I lean forward, placing my lips gently against his.

“I love you, too. Always.”



DARK MATTER SECURITY

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jax

I'M WELL AWARE THAT THERE MIGHT BE SOMETHING MESSED UP in my head. It's the only explanation for the calming feeling that settles over me when I know I'm about to commit the ultimate crime. Maybe it's due to a lifetime of abuse, and then joining the military as a way to escape the abuse. Maybe my time would have been better spent in therapy. But being a part of Dark Matter Security is therapeutic in its own way. Enacting justice on those who deserve it most, those that the law ignores for one reason or another. People like Curt Conaway, who uses his money to do his dirty work and gets away with it. I could have died in Paris, and he never would have been caught if it hadn't been for my men being unwilling to let it go.

I close my eyes as I lay on one of the small queen-sized beds in our shared hotel room. Since Cole is the only one that Conaway doesn't know and we can't risk him seeing us before we come up with an official plan, he went to get us some take-out while Gunnar's taking a shower.

I let out a long sigh, feeling strangely content right now. Though I know that my boyfriend is most likely feeling the exact opposite. During normal assignments, he has the same attitude toward all of this as I do. But this isn't a normal job, not for him. This isn't going to be some random crook or child molestor that Gunnar's going to smile at when he pulls the

trigger. Even though there's no doubt he wants him dead, this isn't going to be quite so simple.

"You look like you're thinking really hard over there." I lift myself up on my elbows, my eyes immediately trailing down his body that's still slightly dripping from the shower. His towel is slung low on his hips and my fingers are itching to yank it away and lick the stray droplets of water from his perfect abs.

"Jax?" When my gaze snaps to his, there's a smirk playing on his lips but his blue eyes are blazing with desire.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts of the job and focus solely on my naked boyfriend in front of me.

"I was just thinking." I sit up completely, scooting to the edge of the bed and Gunnar steps closer, standing between my legs.

"About anything in particular?" The moment his fingers slide through my hair, all thoughts of anything but him flee my mind. I shake my head gently and rest my cheek against his hard stomach.

"It doesn't matter." He steps back, only enough to make me lift my head from him and cups my cheeks looking into my eyes. His thumb slides along my bottom lip, his eyes focused on my mouth.

"I've always loved your mouth."

"My mouth or what I can do with my mouth?" I attempt it as a joke, but the way his eyes darken and his breathing picks up, I know he likes that thought.

"I may have forgotten. I think you should show me." Without another thought, I lift my hand to his waist and with a simple flick of my wrist, his towel drops to the floor. I'm greeted by his already throbbing erection. I may be biased, but Gunnar has the most perfect dick I've ever seen in my life. It's long and thick, with a prominent vein traveling from the base to the head. I poke my tongue out, licking away the bead of pre-cum dripping from the tip. I twirl my tongue over his slit, making Gunnar groan as his fingers tangle in my hair.

“Fuck, Jax. You’re so fucking good at that.” His praise only spurs me on and I wrap my mouth around his dick before swallowing down his whole shaft. I reach one hand around to his ass, squeezing roughly before my finger begins playing with his tight hole. My other hand toys with his heavy balls while my mouth slurps and my tongue swirls over his head. Gunnar groans and moans, crying out my name over and over again. Every sexy sound that falls from his lips only pushes me to make this blowjob better and better for him.

His fingers tighten in my hair and I relish the sting from his grip. I push my finger harder against his asshole, pushing him closer to his orgasm.

“Fuck, Jax! Yessss!” Within seconds, his body begins to spasm and his cock throbs in my mouth. I use my hand and mouth to milk him, swallowing down every last drop he releases as he says my name in a broken cry.

“Jax!” Once his body calms down, I feel Gunnar comb his fingers through my hair and let out a contented sigh.

“I love you so much, baby.” His words are spoken softly and they’re so damn genuine. I had no idea that this was exactly what I needed. I needed the reminder that no matter what happens, *I’m* the one Gunnar loves. *I’m* the one he’s sharing his life with.

“I love you too.” The moment the words leave my mouth, the door to our hotel room opens, causing Gunnar to jump back from me.

“Fucking hell.” Cole shuts the door behind him and shakes his head. “You guys seriously couldn’t go one fucking day?”

“Nope. And thanks for ruining my post orgasmic bliss, asshole.” Gunnar isn’t even a little bit embarrassed about his best friend walking in on us. Of course, it’s not the first time it’s happened and since we all live in the same house, I highly doubt it will be the last.

I let out a light chuckle and fall back against the bed while Gunnar walks over to his suitcase and pulls out a pair of

sweats and Cole starts pulling take-out from the two to-go bags.

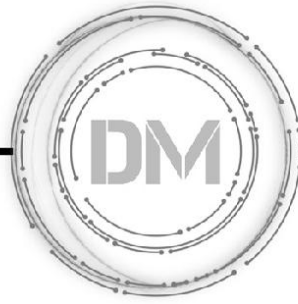
“Well now that you got your rocks off-”

“I didn’t.” I mumble, but Cole just ignores me.

“Let’s eat. I’m fucking starving.”

I sit up, my eyes immediately tracking my boyfriend wearing a pair of dark gray sweats and no shirt. His hair is still mussed from the shower and his body still slightly flush from the blowjob. He always looks so fucking good.

“So am I.” I reply to Cole, my gaze solely focused on Gunnar. “Fucking starving.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Gunnar

“HE’S FAR FROM SQUEAKY CLEAN. AS FAR AS WE COULD FIND, there’s insider trading, skimming off the top, bribery.” Nothing Tanner is telling us comes as a surprise to me. Curt has always been the kind of person to stop at nothing to get what he wants, especially when that involves money and power. It’s how his father was, a real estate mogul in Los Angeles, and Curt learned everything he knew from him.

“How many accounts does he have?” Cole has never been one to worry too much about the details of a job. Even when he was first assigned the job to protect Lillie, he just took his orders and did what he was told. It wasn’t until he became more invested in *her* that he started to worry about the smaller, intricate issues of the situation. I guess it would make sense that he’d be invested in this situation as well, considering at the center of this whole thing is me and Jax.

“A lot.” We watch on the screen as Tanner types a few things on his screen, then his face suddenly only takes up half of ours and the other half is a document with almost a dozen different account numbers.

“The top three are his legitimate accounts, the next one is his business expense account, and the rest are offshore and overseas accounts.” Next to each account number is the current balance, and shame rolls through my gut when I see that his offshore accounts have much larger balances than the

rest. When I left Curt, I figured he would move on, find another man, get married, and have a nice life. It honestly did not cross my mind that this is what his life would come to. Marriage after marriage, embezzlement, and probably a lot more that Tanner hasn't even covered yet.

For a small second, my heart cracks open for the boy I once loved. The boy who I so willingly gave my first kiss to. The boy who my teenage self loved so deeply. But then I tilt my head, looking at the man I currently love. The man that I may not have given my first kiss to, but will most definitely have my last. The man that I *am* going to be with forever. The large scar running down Jax's stomach and the smaller scar across his eyebrow is a strong reminder that the boy I once loved no longer exists. Replaced with a man who tried to rip my world apart. Any sympathy I may have had disappears in an instant and the only thing left on my mind is vindication. For myself and for Jax.

"Can you drain them?" An idea officially comes to me, and I know exactly how we're going to go about getting rid of Curt for good.

"Easily. What's your idea?"

"Make it look exactly like what it is. He was stealing from his clients and his company. He felt as if people were becoming suspicious, so he ended it."

"Once they see the accounts drained and his financial records, the police won't look or question it any further." Jax finishing my thoughts for me is a reminder of how well we've always worked together. From the moment I joined Dark Matter Security, we've flowed as perfectly as a downhill stream on the mountain side.

"I'll have to do it slowly, one account at a time. We don't want him to notice."

"How long?"

"Tomorrow morning." We've already been here one night, and as much as I don't particularly want to stay cooped up in a

hotel room in New York, our plan is good and we're not going to do anything that could possibly fuck it up.

We work out a couple more details with Tanner before ending our video call and Cole leaves to go grab us some breakfast. I can tell Jax is getting restless as he more or less paces the room and repeatedly runs his fingers through his hair.

"It's almost over, baby." He turns to look at me head-on, his scarred body on full display. My eyes track the long, red knife cut that starts just at his peck and travels diagonally down his torso. There's no doubt that Ben did it after Jax was already unconscious. I know my man enough to know that he wouldn't have let him get a jump on him in the front that easily. I let out a heavy sigh, feeling relief that Ben is already out of the picture and it won't be long until we can put this whole thing behind us.

"I know, it's just-"

I walk over to him, tracing my finger down the long angry scar. "It's almost over." I speak softly as I press my forehead against his while still absently tracing my finger over his scars. "Soon, these will be the only reminder left and we'll move on with our lives. For good."

The low whistle that comes from Cole has me chuckling as we step inside the large, immaculate building that houses Curt's offices, along with a bunch of other high end financial businesses.

"Rethinking your career path?" I give him a teasing smirk, making him laugh as he shakes his head.

"Definitely not. We make more money per job than most of these pricks make in a month." He's right about that one. Every job we do, we usually bring in around twenty to twenty-five thousand per job. And that's just our individual payments, not the money that goes to Dark Matter as a business. The one thing Alec and Wyatt always make sure to do is take care of

their men. None of us struggle, and none of us do this job in vain. We all have extremely healthy bank accounts, even if a lot of us barely even spend it.

“You sure you don’t wanna wake up and dress in a suit everyday?” Jax’s eyes twinkle with mischief as he leans slightly around me to get a better look at Cole. His eyes roam over my best friend from head to toe, taking in his perfectly fitted suit, shining shoes and slicked back hair. It’s not always easy for Cole to tame his mane, but when he does it only helps to accent his high cheekbones and chiseled jaw. The slight scruff covering his chin only adds to how gorgeous my best friend really is.

“Fuck that. I swear if owning a suit wasn’t required for our job, I’d be burning this thing the second we leave here today.” Jax and I both let out low laughs at his words because we both know it’s true. Cole is possibly the furthest thing from a “suit guy” as you can get. Jeans and t-shirts are the staple of his wardrobe. However, Alec requires us to have access to an array of clothes in order to be prepared for any and all types of jobs that may come in. And it just so happens that our plan for this job required suits in order for us to not stick out. Though the tattoos on Cole’s hands and neck are still peeking out, he’s not standing out like a sore thumb. Tanner flew in this morning, bringing our suits along and is now holed up in our hotel room.

Jax’s phone beeps and he only takes a quick second to read it and slide it back into his pocket.

“Tanner said to go up to the nineteenth floor.” We follow his lead over to the bank of elevators, taking on a persona of casual boredom. We don’t speak, or really even look at anyone around us. Though we see every single person that comes into our view. We step off the crowded elevator, Jax leads us down the hall to where Tanner directed in his message. When we get to a large, sleek black door, Jax opens it without hesitation.

“DMS?” The man waiting for us in the small meeting room can’t be much older than any of us. At most, maybe as old as Wyatt and Alec, which would put him around forty-three.

Jax confirms who we are and walks closer to the guy, who starts giving him details about how things need to happen. I know Cole and Jax are both more than capable to get and retain the information we need. So I take a moment to calm myself and mentally prepare for what's about to happen. I let out a long breath, and I don't miss the way Jax eyes me from the corner of his eye, concern clear in his facial expression. Before he can bring it up, or start to have second thoughts over what we're about to do, I clear my expression and focus on what Tanner's contact is telling us.

When he finishes giving us instructions and our timeline, he leaves the room, leaving Jax, Cole, and myself waiting for the hands on the clock plastered above the door to tick by.

Not a word is spoken while we wait. All of us needing this time to mentally prepare for what we're about to do. Sure, we're trained to act fast and react when there's a threat or danger. But when we plan out jobs like this, knowing we're going into a situation that's going to leave someone dead, whether they suspect it coming or not, we need to take a few moments to remind ourselves why we do this. When the minute hand lands on the four, all three of us let out heavy sighs before pulling in deep breaths and making our way to the door.

We follow the directions and instructions given to us, and within a few minutes we're standing in a small lobby outside of an office with Curt's name on the door. The receptionist desk is empty, just like we were told it would be and we know the camera's, at least in this area, are off.

"Ready for this?" Jax's question is so quiet, it's almost silent. I give him a sharp nod before motioning for Cole to open the door.

Cole walks in first, not wanting Curt to spot me or Jax right away. The moment I step through the threshold of the overly immaculate office and spot Curt behind his desk, it feels as if I'm transported right back in time to when I was nothing more than a young and eager fifteen year old kid. Curt doesn't look much different than he did back then. His Zach Morris blonde hair is still perfectly styled, and though he's

slightly broader than he was six years ago, he's still trim and lean. He's wearing a perfectly tailored suit that probably cost more than a normal person's car.

"Can I help you?" It's obvious that he only spots Cole at first and most likely the sight of his tattoo's and natural gruffness has Curt on edge. Rightfully so, of course.

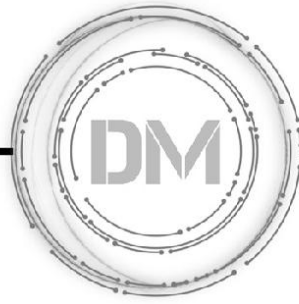
"I was hoping we could chat." I almost laugh out loud at Cole's response, but hold it in with a shake of my head.

"A- about what?"

Without another word, I step out from behind Cole, giving Curt a clear view of me. I know immediately the moment he registers that it's me that just stepped into the room. His face lights up and a smile spreads over his face. A smile that I once found charming and attractive. Now I see the evil and narcissism hiding behind it.

"Gunnar?" The excitement in his voice only has my anger rising to unmaintainable levels. Instead of lunging forward and attacking him, I pull in a deep breath and force myself to stick to the plan.

"Hello Curt."



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jax

THE MOMENT GUNNAR'S GREETING LEAVES HIS MOUTH, I STEP around him, putting myself further into the room. Curt's eyes are solely focused on my boyfriend, and every protective instinct inside of me threatens to take over. I want to jump in front of him, keeping him from the bastard's view. But I refrain. I wait as Curt finally pulls his gaze from Gunnar and puts it on me, his eyes going wide with shock the moment he realizes exactly who he's looking at.

"J- Jax? I- uh, I thought-"

"You thought I was dead?" If possible, his eyes grow even wider and pure shock and surprise cover every inch of his face. He goes ghostly white and almost immediately, sweat begins pouring down his face.

"I- I-" I let out a low chuckle at his obvious fear and confusion. I step closer to him, but still keep my distance.

"You- you- What? You thought that hiring an amateur who hates me was good enough to get the job done?"

I glance over at Gunnar, who hasn't even made a sound since I made my presence known to Curt. I look for any possible sign of him being uncomfortable with this, but nothing is there. He looks completely at ease right now. As if this is just any other job. Which only prompts me to keep pushing.

“Let me give you a word of advice, Curt.” I take two steps forward, causing him to roll his chair further back, plastering himself against the wall. “Next time you want someone dead, spring for a professional.”

He opens his mouth, ready to speak, but Cole cuts him off. “Of course, there isn’t going to be a next time.” His casual shrug has my lips trying to twitch with a smile. Curt begins to stutter, his voice full of indignance.

“You- you can’t hurt me!”

“But you can hurt me?” I can’t help the chuckle that escapes as I shake my head in mock disbelief. In reality, I’m not surprised one bit that this is the mindset he has.

“You deserved it!”

“How do you figure?” This is the first time Gunnar has spoken since I entered the room, and his voice is as smooth as honey, like it often is. There’s not even a hint of hesitation or anything that might indicate he’s unsure about the situation.

“He- he stole you from me!” Gunnar’s face stays like stone, still not giving anything away. “If you hadn’t met him-”

“If I hadn’t met him, then I would be single right now.” The indignation written on Curt’s face would almost be comical if it wasn’t for the fact that he’s a fucking psycho who tried to have me killed.

“No you wouldn’t! You’d be with me!” Silence falls over the room as Gunnar does and says nothing. He’s just standing next to me, looking at Curt with what seems to be a new perspective. Gun has always known that there was something off with Curt. It’s something we discussed shortly after the country club incident years ago. But I don’t think he ever realized just how completely unhinged his ex really is. It’s been over six years. The guy has gone through multiple husbands in that short time, but has obviously never actually let Gunnar go.

He doesn’t know what we do for a living. He doesn’t know the kind of lives we live. But he clearly didn’t hesitate to do whatever necessary to throw Gunnar’s life into complete and

total chaos and despair. Contrary to what Curt might think, that's not true love.

“Let me let you in on a little secret, Curt.” Gunnar steps closer to the desk, but Curt's already pinned against the wall in his chair. The way we're all standing makes it impossible for him to be able to try and run, not that he'd even get far if he did. “I don't love you. I'm not even sure I ever did.” Curt opens his mouth to say something, but Gunnar cuts him off before he has the chance. “I was manipulated into thinking what we had was real. When what we had was you trying to control me and my life. I left you because I couldn't stand the sight of you anymore. From the moment I left for the Marines, I never looked back. I found Jax, and for the first time ever, I knew what love was. With him. Never you, only him.” It's not the first time he's said something like that to me, but for some reason it feels even bigger now that he's stating it so blatantly to Curt.

“Jax is the only man I have, and ever will love. I may not have left you for him, but I absolutely *will* be killing you for him.”

The second those powerful words leave Gunnar's mouth, all of the anger on Curt's face disappears and is replaced with real fear. His face pales and I wouldn't be surprised if he just wet himself too.

“N- no, you- you wouldn't.”

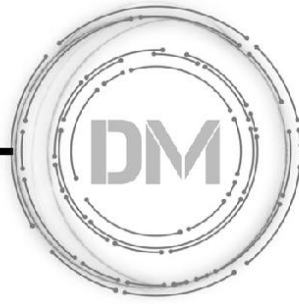
Gunnar walks around the desk, putting him right in front of the squirming man. “Yes, Curt, I would.” He leans against the desk, looking as casual as ever and for the first time since we walked into this office, he looks like his normal self. This is the Gunnar I usually see when we're on a job. “You tried to take Jax away from me. You didn't think about how it would hurt me, and if you did think about it, you didn't care. You didn't care that I would have not only lost the love of my life, but myself in the process. You didn't give a shit that you were turning my entire world, and life upside down. You didn't give a *fuck* that I would have missed him with every fiber of my being.” Curt's chest begins rising and falling heavily with every word Gunnar speaks. He wants to say something, I

know he does. A man like Curt Conaway is programmed to want to argue and try to get their way. The only thing that would stop him is the fact that he officially knows without a doubt what his fate is. We're not letting him out of this office alive.

"Gun." Cole's voice is quiet, but we both know what it means. We're running out of time. I glance at the clock and see that we only have five minutes before his receptionist will come back. Gunnar doesn't look at either of us, but as if Cole's warning snapped something inside of him, he stands up straight. He gets so close to Curt, and even though I know what's about to happen, my instinct is to want to pull him away from the bastard. Curt doesn't even deserve to breathe the same air as my man. But I stay in my spot and let Gunnar do what he does best. He jerks Curt's chair away from the wall enough so he can stand behind him. He leans down with his hands on Curt's shoulders, his eyes finding mine as he begins to speak to him again.

"You see that man right there?" Gunnar asks, putting his face almost too fucking close to Curt's. "He's the only thing that matters to me. After this is over, I'm leaving here and I'm spending the rest of my life with him. You'll officially be forgotten about. For good." Curt's eyes widen, but before he can say anything, Gunnar pulls out the gun that we brought just for this and puts it to his temple. It's registered to Curt, so no one is going to question what went down in here.

"Goodbye Curt." Gunnar says only seconds before he pulls the trigger and Curt goes lifeless.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Gunnar

THE DRIVE BACK TO NORTH CAROLINA IS QUIET. ALEC CALLED and assigned Cole and Tanner to another job in New York, so they'll be coming back separately tomorrow. It's just Jax and I in the car for ten hours as he drives us home. It's not tense, it's just... quiet. Neither of us has a lot to say right now and I'm okay with that.

I can't get the image of the way Curt kept looking at Jax out of my head. Pure hatred and disdain. Even though he was way off base as to the reason why I left him, I haven't been able to get the whole thing out of my head. *How did I miss it?* How did I not see what a complete and total nutjob Curt was from the beginning. Maybe it was acceptable when I was fifteen, but while I was in the military and especially after Jax and I went back home to visit, I should have seen it. I should have done something to prevent all of this. Not only did I fail Jax and even myself, I failed my team.

I failed Dark Matter Security.

"Anywhere specific you want to stop for dinner?" I look at the clock, only now realizing that it's after nine at night and I haven't eaten a single thing all day. Neither has Jax, which of course is just another thing I'm failing him on.

"Wherever you want to stop, I'm not very hungry." I keep my gaze focused out the window because I know that's going to make Jax assess me, and I'm not sure I can handle it right

now. I can feel his gaze burning into the side of my skull, but I do my best to ignore it. Of course I should know better than to think that Jax would just let it go.

“You wanna tell me what you’re thinking about?” I shrug my shoulders, not trusting my voice right now because I really just don’t know what to say.

I hear Jax let out a long sigh before the car suddenly jerks and he’s pulling off the highway and into a small, abandoned rest stop.

“Okay, Gun. Cut the shit.” I turn to face him, feeling uneasy about his anger. “Do you regret what just happened?” My eyes snap to him and I’m shocked that he would even think that.

“Of course not! He deserved to die!” Before Jax can respond, I fling my door open and climb out of the car, suddenly feeling too damn claustrophobic. I hear him open his own door and follow suit, but I ignore him as I pull in a large lungful of oxygen and let it out slowly.

“If he deserved it, then why are you acting like this?” I’m not surprised he’s questioning me. Jax knows me better than anyone. “If you don’t regret it then-”

“Because I should have done it sooner!” I finally snap, letting all my frustration and anger with myself bubble up to the surface. “I should have killed him six fucking years ago like I wanted to! Then none of this shit would have happened!”

“Gun-”

“I failed you!” I practically scream the words, and it’s almost as if just the force of my voice makes Jax jolt back. “I fucking failed you, Jax! I failed us. If I had just taken action six years ago when I saw the way he freaked out on the fucking golf course, then none of this would have happened and I wouldn’t have almost lost you the way I did.”

Jax shakes his head and I hate the damn pitying look on his face. “It’s not that simple, baby. We didn’t have a real reason to do it then.”

“We did. If I didn’t let my history with him blind me so fucking much, then I would have seen how damn crazy he was.”

Jax steps forward, putting us almost toe-to-toe, and drops his voice. “I knew how crazy he was, baby. I knew it. But I had no idea he’d go to this extreme. There was no way to know. It’s been six years, Gun. There’s no way we could have known he was still holding onto that grudge.”

“I shoul-” Before I can finish my sentence, Jax’s hand grips my chin roughly, and he forces me to look him in the eyes.

“This was not your fault and you will not blame yourself anymore.”

“I can’t help it, Jax.”

“Yes, you can.” He leans in so our noses are practically touching and I can feel his breath fanning over my face. “You are not to blame here, and I won’t let you think otherwise.”

He closes his lips over mine and takes me in an aggressive kiss. His hand grips the back of my neck and his fingers fist in my short hair. His tongue demands entry into my mouth and I willingly give it to him while sliding mine against it roughly. A growl climbs out of his throat and the sound immediately goes to my dick.

“Turn around.” It doesn’t even cross my mind to disobey him. I place my hands on the side of the car and Jax presses his front against my back, letting me feel his hard cock against my ass. He presses a kiss to the back of my neck before going to my collar bone and biting down softly. His lips leave wet, open-mouthed kisses up my neck and over my jaw.

“Look at us, baby.” I train my eyes on our reflection in the car window and the air is practically knocked from my lungs when I see what’s looking back at me. I’ve always known that Jax and I look good together, but right now, we don’t just look good together. We look right. So fucking right, and so fucking perfect.

“This is us. Forever.” I turn my head, just enough for him to take my mouth again as his hands begin to wander down my body and anticipation begins to thrum through me.

When Jax pulls away from the kiss, I don't have even a second to think about it before he reaches around and undoes my pants. He gets them around my ankles in practically no time at all.

“Everything we do, Gun,” Jax says softly against my neck, “we do for each other.” I open my mouth to reply, but before I can he's down on his knees and kneading my cheeks with his hands. He peppers a trail of soft, wet kisses along my lower back before moving to my ass and kissing my cheeks. His tongue begins to make trails of designs leading to my desperate hole. He licks from the top of my crack, all the way down and around my hole and to my taint.

“Fuck.” He continues licking and sucking on my ass while I cry out with needy moans. Jax doesn't pause for a second, not even when he reaches around and takes my leaky cock in his fist and begins to pump in rhythm with his tongue strokes. He's rough and gentle, giving and taking at the same time. I let my forehead fall to the edge of the top of the car, trying desperately to stay up right as the pleasure takes over my body.

“Jax, baby, fuck! So good!” My entire body begins to tremble and the moans leaving my mouth are uncontrollable as Jax picks up his pace and pushes me closer and closer to the edge.

Everything begins to tingle as my orgasm slams into me and I silently pray that no one drives by with their windows down because there's no way I could be quiet right now.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

Jax lets go of me the moment I'm done coming, and I practically fall against the car, completely boneless. He stands up behind me and I hear the telltale sign of his belt clanging and his pants being unbuttoned. His fingers grip my hair roughly and he pulls my head back, stretching my neck. “Get on your knees, baby.”

I scramble to obey him, loving the fact that our dynamic has finally started to go back to normal, even with everything we've been going through. The moment I'm on my knees in front of Jax, I open my mouth and he unceremoniously slams into me, all the way to the back of my throat. I recover quickly and begin bobbing up and down on his dick, tasting the pre-cum dripping from his tip. I swirl my tongue around the crown, showing him in this simple act just how much I love him. Jax doesn't loosen his grip on my hair and with every thrust he makes into my mouth, my dick begins to come back to life.

"That's it, baby. Fuck, you take my cock so good." He hits the back of my throat so hard I wouldn't be surprised if he left a bruise. I grip his thighs, using the stability to hold myself up as Jax's hips rock so hard my body moves back and forth with force.

"Fuck yes, Gun. You love it in your mouth as much as you love it in your ass, don't you?" All I can do in response is a little hum, but with as hard as he's thrusting into me, it turns into a choked sob, but I recover quickly. "You're such a slut for my cock, baby." *Fuck.*

His words always do something to me, and the dirtier and more degrading they get, the more turned on I become.

I reach one hand around to his backside and the moment my fingers begin to press against his tight hole, his thrusts become frantic and uneven and I prepare myself to swallow him down just as he calls out my name and drains himself into my mouth.

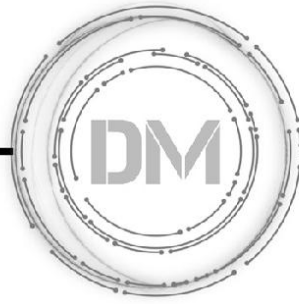
"Fuck, baby," He pants heavily. "You're so fucking good at that."

I barely have a second to recover before Jax pulls away and redoes his pants up. He helps me to stand, and right my clothes as well. Once we're both redressed, he pulls me to him and grips my chin, much more gentle this time. His lips close over mine and he kisses me, long and languid. Our relationship may seem strange to an outside perspective, but to us, it's perfect. We both know when the other needs a firm

hand, or when we need the soft intimacy like right now. There's not another man in this world that can love me and take care of me the way Jax does.

“It's over now, baby.” His forehead rests against mine and they rub together as I nod a couple of times. He's right. It's all over now.

Curt's dead.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jax

I SHOULDN'T BE FEELING LIKE THIS. I'VE NEVER CARRIED A JOB with me longer than it took to finish it. But from the moment we left New York a week ago, I haven't been able to let it go. Of course, I'd never tell that to Gunnar. I was very clear that night that it was over and we're moving on now. But I can't get the images out of my head. The flashes of Curt looking at Gunnar like he's some sort of fucking property to be owned. His pure disdain toward me and my relationship. He didn't show even a hint of remorse for what he tried to have done to me. If he had any regret for it, it was that he didn't spring for a professional and ensure it was done properly.

He was so damn delusional. He truly did believe that my death would have sent Gunnar running back to him. The situation was so fucking messed up, and personal.

That's part of the reason why I can't seem to let this all go. I've executed hundreds of jobs over the course of my career with DMS, and not once has it been like this. Sure, when we rescued Cole from the terrorist cell, that was personal. When we saved Lillie from her ex-husband, and took out Wilson and then Banner, that was personal for the team as a whole. But this, this wasn't about the team. This entire thing was truly personal for only two people. Me and Gunnar. The hatred and vendetta that Curt held, wasn't connected to Dark Matter in any way at all. It was purely because we love each other. Because we've spent the past seven years building a life

together, and he didn't like it. That knowledge is what has been eating at me for the past eight days. It's unnerving. All my life, I've grown up knowing that there are shitty people in the world. I was raised by two of the worst if you ask me. But fuck, this situation was so much. All I keep thinking is, *what if he went after Gunnar instead of me?* He sent someone after me because he thought that meant he'd get Gunnar back. But if he had known ahead of time that Gunnar would have never come back to him, then he could have easily changed his target. The thought of anyone trying to remove Gun from my life has everything inside of me spiking to dangerously angry levels.

"Hey you!" The sweet voice to my left has an involuntary smile lifting my lips. I turn to find Nicole walking toward me with two to-go cups of coffee in her hand.

"Hey," I greet her with a smile and she holds the cup out for me. I lean back in the chair facing the water, and gesture for her to take a seat next to me. I take a sip of the black coffee and relish the bitterness on my tongue. There's not exactly a coffee shop close by, so I have no doubt that Nicole made this herself. She's a thoughtful person like that. She reminds me a lot of Gunnar, which may be the reason why we hit it off so quickly when we met.

"I saw you sitting out here, and thought maybe you'd like some company." She sounds slightly shy and unsure about that, so I do my best to reassure her.

"I'll never say no to your company." The blindingly beautiful smile she gives tells me that I said the right thing. We both settle in further on the folding beach chairs I placed close to the edge of the water and relax. I originally brought these chairs out here for Gunnar and I, but Alec sent him on a quick errand with Hunter and Cole, so I've just been out here by myself for the past twenty minutes. Not that I've minded having the time to myself to think. But I also won't say no to Nicole and the brightness that seems to follow her.

Nicole and I have grown close over the past few months. Ever since Wyatt first brought her here, we hit it off. After everything happened with the attack from Banner, and she

came down to the infirmary to visit me practically everyday, we became good friends. I'd probably even say at this point that she's become my best friend.

"So Wyatt said Doc cleared you to go back to work fulltime now."

I nod my head. "Yep. He came by a couple days ago and said that everything looks like it's back to normal."

"That's so exciting! I bet you're thrilled to not be stuck here anymore." I let out a soft chuckle, but I don't actually respond. I've been waiting impatiently for Doc to clear me completely, but the moment he did, something just felt *off*. I wanted to be happy about it, I wanted to be thrilled. But for some reason, all I could manage was a simple nod and thank you.

Ever since New York, I feel like my mind is a jumbled mess of uncertainty. That's never been who I am and that might be bothering me just as much as the uncertainty itself.

"Jax?" I peek over at Nicole, who's watching me with both concern and confusion written in her gaze. "What's going on?"

I let out a long breath and lean back in the chair dejectedly. "I really wish I knew."

She doesn't say anything, only sits in comfortable silence, waiting for me to figure out what I want to say.

"I love my job, I always have. I really do feel like it's my calling in life." Her head bobs twice, but she doesn't say anything. "But something feels off now."

"Off how?"

I shake my head in frustration with myself. "I killed my own brother, Nicole. Sure, I had never met him before that moment, but I killed him and I didn't even think twice about it."

"I know." Her words are a soft whisper but I hear them clearly, even over the waves crashing only feet away from us.

"Then I watched my boyfriend take out someone from his past, Someone he once loved." I card my fingers through my

hair roughly and expel a loud breath. “It’s just all so fucking much.”

“So,” she says cautiously. “What are you going to do about it?”

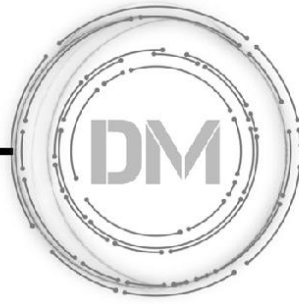
“I wish I knew.”

“Jax?” I turn and look at her, finding a knowing expression on her face. “I think you do know.”

I swallow heavily, and close my eyes as my head bobs up and down twice. “Yeah, I do know.”

I open my eyes again, Nicole waiting with all the patience of the saint she is, and for the first time ever, I say the words that have been silently playing in the back of my head for days now. The words I never thought would even cross my mind for as long as I lived.

“I think I need to leave Dark Matter Security.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Gunnar

Four Years Ago...

“FUUUUCK.” JAX PROLONGS THE WORD AS HE STRETCHES OUT on the bed, his perfectly muscled body on full display. The sheet that was only barely covering his bottom half slides off and his already regrowing dick comes into full view.

We just got done fucking, and yet I’m already desperate for him again. My ass is sore from the pounding he just gave me, and my voice is hoarse from the blowjob I gave him right before he buried himself inside of me. And yet, I could very easily go for another round.

“Sorry baby, but I’m going to need a little more time to regain my strength.” Jax lets out a soft laugh at my indignant huff while I throw my head back against the pillow.

He pushes himself up on his elbow and hovers over me with a teasing smile on his lips.

“Don’t worry baby, I promise I won’t make you go too long without my dick in your ass.”

I place my hand on the back of his head and bring his lips down to mine. “You better not.”

Our kiss quickly becomes more frantic and needy, putting us on the track to go for round three. The sound of the front

door opening and closing has Jax and I pulling apart and I groan in frustration.

“Don’t get me wrong,” I say as we both begin climbing out of bed. “I’m glad we found him and he’s okay, but I swear Cole takes joy in cockblocking me.” Jax lets out a loud bark of laughter as he pulls on a pair of sweats.

“I didn’t realize our sex life was suffering so bad?” He raises a single brow in a teasing challenge and I let out a puff of air. Even though he’s saying it in a light-hearted manner, Jax would never be okay with our sex life suffering, so I won’t even pretend that it is.

I step up to him, wrapping my arms around his neck, and give him a soft kiss. “It’s not. But you know how greedy I am for you.” My statement brings a smile to his face and just like it always does, I melt.

“Are you two done fucking yet?” Cole’s yell comes from downstairs. “I brought dinner.” Jax and I both laugh and shake our heads. I love my best friend, and I’m thankful as fuck that he and Jax get along just as well. When we saved Cole last year, the fear that I’d lose him was really hard to deal with. Even working for Dark Matter Security for two years before we had to save Cole, I’d never had to actually deal with losing someone I care about. I lost men while I was in the Marines, but it just wasn’t the same as almost losing my best friend. Jax was my rock through the whole thing. And when we did find Cole and bring him back here, it took over a month to get him back to full health and not once did the fear of him dying leave me. Not until Doc cleared him to be one-hundred percent back to perfect health. He became an official member of DMS and moved in with Jax and I. It’s been pretty damn great, except moments like these when I just want my boyfriend’s dick in my ass all night.

Relenting, we finally make our way downstairs to find Cole emptying a bunch of food containers onto the table. He doesn’t say anything as he grabs down two plates, utensils, and a couple of beers.

“Only two?” Jax asks, his brows dipped in confusion.

“Yep.” He says easily. “Look, I love you guys, and I’m glad we’re close. But I’m gonna draw the line at crashing your anniversary. I grabbed you some dinner, I’m gonna take mine over to HQ and stay in my room for the night.”

“Cole,” I say, guilt beginning to wash over me. “You don’t have-”

“I know I don’t. But you two deserve this time.” He picks up two of the containers and starts walking back toward the door. “Have fun!”

Without another word, he walks out, leaving Jax and I alone to eat and celebrate our anniversary together. *Damn, I love my best friend.*

Jax and I have been together for three years now, and I still have moments where I can’t believe this is my life. Despite how fucked up it might be, I have an amazing job. I love my job, I love my boyfriend, and even with the danger that lurks around our life, our future looks bright. Of course, every moment with Jax is a good one.

“I really like that guy.” Jax’s arms slide around my waist from behind me and I let my head fall back against his shoulder.

“He’s not bad, is he?” My boyfriend laughs softly as he pulls away and begins piling our plates with the delicious smelling Chinese food Cole left. I grab the two beers he got out for us and carry them over to the coffee table as Jax follows me with the food. We settle in comfortably with a movie and our food and eat in easy silence. Time flies with me cuddled against Jax and his arm wrapped around me with a strong but gentle grip. It doesn’t take long for my eyes to begin to close on their own accord.

The soft press of Jax’s lips to my forehead has a contented sigh falling from me. Moments like these are the reminder I sometimes forget I need. Jax and I may not have the perfect relationship, and to someone watching from the outside, we may seem like an odd couple. Two men who basically kill people for a living, meeting and falling in love. It’s not exactly normal. But Jax is the hard to my soft, the darkness to my

light. He's my calm when life feels like a storm of chaos. The love we share is what keeps me going day after day, and it's the one thing I know I'll never be able to give up.

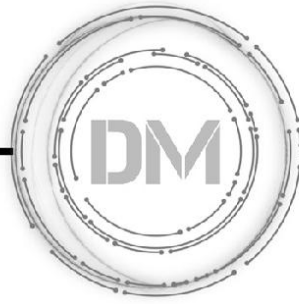
"I love you." I mumble into his chest as I adjust my body to a more comfortable position and Jax rewraps his arms to help.

"I love you too, baby. Always."

"Mmm."

Another kiss to my forehead is the final straw that officially starts lulling me to sleep, but before I'm taken completely I hear Jax's soft voice say one more thing.

"Happy Anniversary, Gunnar. You're my world." *And he's mine.*



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Gunnar

SOMETHING IS OFF WITH JAX. I CAN'T QUITE PUT MY FINGER on it, but he seems *distracted* somehow. He's still getting up, working, and comes home and fucks me like he always does. But I can tell he has something else on his mind. I can't help but think it has to do with me, though I know Jax better than that. If he was done with me or was struggling with something that had to do with us, he'd say something. I don't think whatever is bothering him actually has to do with our relationship. But he's definitely thinking about something heavy. It's been a little over three weeks since everything went down with Curt, and over two weeks since Jax was cleared to go back to work. DMS has been keeping busy, but most of the jobs that have been coming in have been pretty quick and straightforward. Only a few of them have required any real traveling, but they've only been a day or two long. So besides a couple of nights, Jax and I have been able to come home to each other at the end of the day and make love before bed like we usually do. But the moment he pulls out of me and falls asleep, the uncertain feeling begins to seep back in and my unwelcome fear starts to take over.

I shake my head, clearing those thoughts from my mind and do my best to focus on what Alec is telling us. It's nothing new or different. He explains the details of a couple jobs and the traveling they'll require. But again, none of it is long term. It's not often that we take on jobs that will leave any of us out

of range for a long time. The job with Lillie was the last time that had to happen. At the time I didn't fully understand it, but when everything came to light with Wyatt and Banner, it all made sense.

Alec finishes giving us our current assignments before dismissing the entire team. Everyone begins filing out of the room, going to either their own houses or their bedrooms.

"Take a walk with me?" Jax asks, gesturing his head toward the back porch and the beach. I nod my head and follow him out of the house. Once we're a little closer to the water, Jax takes my hand and we begin walking down the beach toward the abandoned rock cliff a mile or so down.

"You wanna tell me what's been on your mind?" I can feel Jax's steps falter slightly, but he doesn't stop walking. "You may hide it well, babe, but I know something's on your mind."

I glance over at him just in time to watch his chest expand while he pulls in a large breath and lets it out on a long exhale.

"I honestly don't know, baby. My mind has been a mess." There's a tremble in his voice that immediately has me on high alert. I stop walking and tug on his hand when he tries to keep going. He stops a few feet away from me and pulls his hand out of my grasp to run it through his thick hair.

"Jax?" My insecurity and uncertainty comes roaring back to life and I have to force myself to keep my breathing calm and steady, even though I feel as if I'm on the verge of a full-on meltdown right now.

"Are you happy, Gun?" His voice is full of despair and that simple question has the world turning on its axes. I begin panting and my vision starts to become blurry and obscured. My body becomes too heavy for my legs and before I can do anything about it, my knees collapse and I fall to the sand.

"Gun? Gunnar? Baby?" His voice sounds like it's coming from above water and as hard as I try, I can't seem to shake the excess noise away. Jax grabs my hand, and as if his simple touch is pure magic, it starts to calm my racing heart and

everything begins to settle around me. The fog clears and Jax's face becomes focused and at the forefront of my vision

“What just happened there?”

“Are- Are you ending things?” His eyes widen and realization seems to suddenly dawn on him.

“What? No! Of course not, baby.”

Even though he sounds vehement about what he's saying, his words bring little comfort.

“Then why'd you ask-”

“Oh baby, no. I didn't mean with me. I'm pretty sure I know the answer to that.” He gives me a sweet smile, but my heart is still racing and my mind is whirling with confusion. “I mean, are you happy with where we are? Our jobs and everything else?” I'll admit, I wasn't expecting that. My forehead scrunches and I look at my boyfriend with the question clear on my face.

“We've been through so much, Gun. Do we really want to keep living like this?”

“But-”

“I know it's a big decision, and I would never force you to do something you didn't want to do or aren't ready for.”

“But you're ready?” He opens his mouth to say something, but all he does is shake his head a couple of times.

“I really don't know. But I've been thinking about it.”

“For how long?”

“Since New York.” *Since I killed Curt.*

“You've been thinking about this for three weeks?” I can't help the slight hint of defensiveness in my tone. He's been keeping this from me for three weeks. He's been planning this major life change without even telling me.

“Not exactly, the thought didn't actually come to me until a week later.”

“That’s still two weeks, Jax. You’ve been thinking about this for two weeks and didn’t bother saying anything.”

“Gun-” I cut him off with a sharp shake of my head, and luckily he gets the hint and his mouth closes.

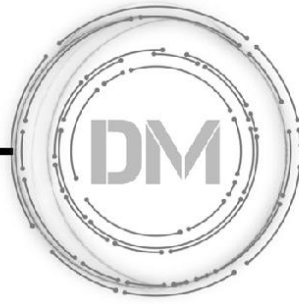
I know technically I don’t have to quit DMS just because Jax does. But if the whole reason he’s quitting is because of the lifestyle and danger that comes with it, me staying won’t fix that issue. I love Jax. I love him more than anything in this entire world. But I love my job. We make a real difference in the world, even if people don’t know it. We keep people safe. I don’t know if I want to give that up. But if I don’t, then the alternative will be giving up the love of my life.

I slowly climb to my feet, the world still feeling as if it’s off-kilter. My mind is a fuzzy and jumbled mess, and every move my body makes feels forced and heavy. I can’t meet Jax’s gaze as I try to figure out what the fuck just happened. “I- I need time to think about this.”

Jax doesn’t say anything, but the silence is louder than any scream. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him try to reach out for me, but I ignore it.

“I- I need to be alone right now.” Without giving him the opportunity to try and argue, I walk away. I hold my breath for a few minutes until I’m sure that Jax isn’t going to try and follow me. My mind spins with confusion and irritation. Jax knows how much I love him. He knows how much I need him. He also knows how much I love our job, and DMS.

And he wants me to choose.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Jax

GUNNAR IS PISSED. IT'S BEEN THREE DAYS SINCE I TALKED TO him about leaving DMS, and he hasn't said a single word to me since. He was sent on a job the next morning and wouldn't return any of my texts. Technically, I wasn't supposed to be texting him, but I'm not going to just let this go. I won't give up our relationship without a fight. He didn't even give me a chance to explain my thoughts. It's not that I blame him exactly. It was kind of a big bomb to drop on him, but we didn't even get to talk about it. He walked away and I knew better than to follow. And over the past few days, the only time we were together was that night, and he wouldn't even let me get a word in before he demanded that I just go to sleep. We didn't fuck that night, let alone even cuddle or talk. My hands haven't been on him for days, and I'm going absolutely fucking nuts from it.

We all file into the meeting room and I'm quick to take the seat next to Gunnar. He doesn't look at me, but that's not exactly unusual here. But for some reason, it feels heavier this time.

Since I know Gun won't react, I place my hand on his upper thigh. Besides his body stiffening slightly, he doesn't say or do anything about it. We're all here, waiting on Alec, Wyatt, and Tanner. We all received the same text in our big group chat, telling us to get to HQ and into the meeting room ASAP. It's not exactly out of the ordinary, but usually when

Alec calls a meeting, we get a time, not an immediate order. Knowing that whatever is about to happen is a big deal, I'm already on edge. I can't handle having Gun mad at me, too. I'm touching him for multiple reasons. One of them being that I need the comfort he provides. And two being that I just really fucking need to feel his warmth under my hand.

The moment Alec, Wyatt, and Tanner storm into the room, it's as if all of the air is sucked out of it. Everyone sits up straighter and the tension coming off of the three men is palpable in the small space. Tanner goes right over to the large bank of monitors against the side wall, instead of sitting at the table. Wyatt takes his usual seat to the left of the head of table, but Alec remains standing.

"I received a call this morning from one of my old military contacts." Alec says, not even waiting to make sure everyone is listening and paying attention. "He works with the FBI now." My mind immediately goes to the thought of an investigation being done on us. We've been really smart, and have been able to fly under the radar for the past ten years. But that doesn't mean that someone hasn't started to suspect something at some point. "His niece was kidnapped, and in the investigation, they discovered a child trafficking ring." The breath leaves my lungs, and I'm pretty sure his words have the same effect on everyone else in the room. "He knows who's behind it, but because all of the evidence they've gathered is circumstantial or was obtained illegally, they won't act on it. He's been conducting his own investigation and has been able to pin-point all the top players and what exactly they contribute to the operation. All he needs now is someone to complete the job and take them all out."

"Why would the FBI care if the evidence was only circumstantial for a child trafficking ring?" Collins asks, and it's a damn good question. It wouldn't be the first time the feds have taken down an operation like this with little to go on.

"Because at the center of the operation is Richard Johns."

"Fuck." I mutter to myself. I met Senator Johns more than once growing up. He's a close ally of my fathers and if I'm

being realistic, I wouldn't be surprised if my father knows exactly what his friend does in his free time.

"Who else is involved?" The way Alec turns to look directly at me, I know he knows what it is I'm really asking. There are only a few people in my life who know where I actually come from and who my family is. Gunnar, of course, and Alec, Wyatt, and Tanner. No one else on our team knows that I'm related to *the* Carters. My father is a well known attorney who works for the rich and famous. Senator Johns being one of his best clients.

"Mostly lower level players. People he's able to easily manipulate and control. Some of his more powerful friends are his clients, in a sense. But the ones that have a hand in the operation, are very much beneath him." I nod my head at him, knowing exactly what he's saying. My father may not be involved in the day-to-day operation, but he sure as hell has partaken in the benefits of it. *Sick fucking bastard.*

"So does he just want us to take them all out?" Hunter's deep voice asks from his spot standing against the door and Alec immediately shakes his head.

"From the intel he's managed to gather, they have over two-dozen kids. At least. He was able to locate three of their four storage facilities. He's trying to find the last one, but he's hit a dead end. We need to take up post at the three to ensure no more come in or out while he searches. The moment we get word from him, we'll move in. We'll take out everyone working at the locations, get the kids out, then take down the Senator.

"How long?" Cole asks.

"He says he needs at least twenty-four hours," Wyatt says. "Possibly forty-eight." The thought of having to wait even another hour makes me sick to my stomach, but I understand the reasoning. If we move too quickly, we may not ever find out where the last location is. And it could give Johns time to escape. We have to be smart.

"Carter and Beckett, I want you on location one." Alec says, and Tanner pulls up a photo of a giant-ass mansion, one

too damn similar to the one I grew up in. Judging by the address that pops up on the screen, it's not that far from the one I grew up in either. "Hunter and Collins, you're going to take watch here." Tanner pulls up a second photo, this time of a smaller, still large house. It looks like it's an average suburban street. Which just drives home the fact that you can never truly know your neighbors. "Grant and Cole, you'll be here." A third photo pops up, this one looking closer to the one Gun and I were assigned to. "Wyatt and I will stay on top of the Senator, not letting him out of our sight until we receive word. Tanner will be in constant communication with all of us, including Dent who's going to be on stand-by with his men to clean up after us. I don't care what kind of mess you need to make once we get the go ahead. Your main focus is to take out every piece of shit in that place. Whether they're working there or partaking, they don't get to live. Then you get the kids out of there as safely as possible."

Tanner stands from his chair, walking over to the table with purpose. "We'll have a rendezvous point for you to transport all the kids once we're ready to complete the job. Dent will have four of his men equipped with transport vans to get the kids from point A to point B. There will be a lot of tears and confusion, but you don't say a damn word to them."

Everything he's saying may sound heartless and fucked up, but I get it. The last thing we want is to say or do something that could incriminate any of us.

"Do we blindfold them?" Collins asks and Alec shakes his head.

"You won't need to. We're going in dark. We're all going to be covered from head to toe. Nothing showing, and once the raids start, no names are spoken. Once you get the children into the transport van, you're to leave immediately. You'll go back to your hotel rooms and wait for the all-clear to come back."

It's not often that we have to be this careful and detailed about a job. Generally it's a get in and get out type of situation. But I know that every single step that's being put on this job is to protect all of us and the team as a whole.

“What about the women?” Cole’s voice is full of concern, and I don’t blame him. When we were taking on a dangerous job, like when we confronted Wilson and Banner, we left some men here to protect them. Not that it worked out so well last time, I still got Nicole kidnapped. But leaving them completely unguarded isn’t something any of us are comfortable with.

“Tanner will be here, and Dent has Hastings and Danes coming to help. They’ll keep them safe, and if it seems like any of this is going to fall on us, they’ll get them out of here.”

That seems to help appease Cole some. Lillie is his entire world, something I can relate to. So the only way he’d be okay with leaving her like this is if he knows she’ll be safe and protected. Of all of the men that work for Dent, Hastings and Danes seem like pretty good guys. They didn’t hesitate to take a bullet in order to protect Anya and Willow when Banner attacked the house last time. That’s probably why Cole’s okay with them being left here with his wife.

“When do we leave?” I ask, suddenly itching to get this shit started.

“I want everyone at their hotels by nineteen-hundred tomorrow. Then to their posts by oh-five-hundred. With any luck, we’ll be executing our plans by zero hour.”

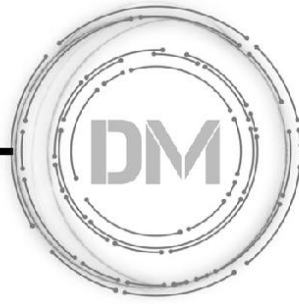
“And waiting until then gives us more of an opportunity to take out a larger amount of their clientele.” Tanner adds.

A sick, and angry part of me almost hopes that my father ends up in one of the locations. The bastard deserves to die, but it’s never actually been something on my radar that I cared too much about executing. But if he’s there, then I wouldn’t hesitate about pulling the trigger on him. I shake my thoughts away before I end up getting too lost in my own vendetta. That’s not what this is about.

“Each team is taking an unmarked car from the garage. If anything goes down, you ditch it. Let Tanner know where you leave it and he’ll give you a rendezvous point to be picked up at.”

The garage is just an old warehouse about three miles down the road. According to what I've been told, it's the only structure that was here when Alec bought the land years ago. He originally planned to tear it down, but ultimately decided to keep it. Now it's used to store about ten unmarked cars that DMS has purchased over the years under fake names. We rotate through them every couple of years. Either scrapping them or just simply abandoning them when shit goes south. None of our names are even close to being connected to them, so they're safer than using our own vehicles for jobs like this.

"Any questions?" Alec finally asks, and besides a few murmured *no's* and head shakes, no one says anything. "Okay then," he says, standing from the table. "You all know what to do."



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Gunnar

IT'S JOBS LIKE THESE THAT REMIND ME WHY I TOOK THE JOB with DMS in the first place. Why I love what I do, and rarely shy away from what's asked of me. My body is thrumming with anticipation as Jax and I make our way into our room at the mid-grade hotel. Contrary to what most people think, staying in seedy motels isn't actually the best way to fly under the radar. Places like that are generally where cops tend to look first when shit goes down. Staying in a place like this, where you often see families, or traveling business men and women, you tend to blend it a lot easier. The doors to the room are outside, so you still have privacy without having to traipse through a lobby full of guests and employees.

Jax drops the small bag, the one holding our gear for tomorrow, on the queen-sized bed. He doesn't say anything to me as he walks to the bathroom and within a minute I hear the shower turn on. We haven't actually spoken since everything that went down a few days ago on the beach. I know we need to talk, but I just haven't been sure about what to say.

I have to give credit to Jax, he hasn't given up. Sending me texts even when I was gone on a job. Not letting a day pass without reminding me that he loves me, even when I didn't respond. He kisses my forehead every night, whispering that he loves me, even when he thinks I'm asleep. It's those little actions that keep making my decision more and more difficult.

I don't want to let Jax go. But I don't want to let DMS go, either.

I make sure the room is secure before stripping out of my clothes and following Jax into the bathroom. The shower is running, but my boyfriend isn't in it. He's standing in front of the mirror, his clothes a haphazard pile on the floor as he stares at his reflection. I step behind him, placing my hands on either side of the bathroom counter, caging him in. I skim my lips over his shoulder and relish it when he tilts his head, allowing me easier access to his neck.

"I love you." His words are breathy and I didn't even realize that it's exactly what I needed right now. I don't do anything more than plaster our bodies closer together and kiss trails up and down his neck a couple of times. After a couple of moments, his body finally relaxes into mine, and eventually he allows me to lead him to the shower.

We work in silence as we wash our own bodies and hair, nothing turning sexual, but the need between us feels like currents of electricity zapping through our bodies. I always want him, always desire the feel of his touch and the warmth of his body against mine. But right now, with everything so jumbled and confusing, our future possibly in question, I don't just want him. I need him. I need us.

Once we've turned off the shower and dried off, we climb into bed with only our boxers on. We don't make love, but for the first time in days, Jax wraps his arms around me and instead of turning my back to him and pulling away, I wrap mine around him too. I'm not angry with him, I'm hurt and confused. The two most important things in my life, and I'm being forced to choose between them. I don't know if I can. Both Jax and Dark Matter Security give me the stability I crave in life. I've never even considered a life with one, but without the other.

I close my eyes, knowing that this moment isn't when I should be thinking about all of it. I need to focus on the job at hand, and worry about the future later. I skim my lips over Jax's chest, and his soft and satisfied exhale fans over me in a comforting manner.

“I love you,” I whisper into the darkness of the room and when Jax’s lips press against my forehead, I allow the comfort of this entire moment to wash over me and let sleep take me.

I’ve always known there were terrible people in the world. People that lack even the most basic of human decency. Rapists, pedophiles, wife and children beaters. They’re all pieces of shit. But the people who kidnap and sell children? Fuck, they don’t deserve any mercy whatsoever. Those are the people who even when they were little, people probably excused their shitty behavior for one reason or another, so they think how they act is perfectly fine because they’re untouchable. *That’s where we come in.*

“This is fucking disgusting.” Jax murmurs, but I only nod my head in response. We’ve been here since five this morning, just like Alec instructed. The place has basically been a ghost town all day, but as soon as night fell, it’s like a damn switch was flipped. Car after car has been driving through the shittily constructed gates and it’s absolutely disgusting how many well-known people have been arriving. High-powered political figures, Hollywood big rollers, CEO’s.

People are so fucking sick.

“Have you seen him?” I ask Jax, but he just shakes his head.

“No.” I can’t tell if he wants his father to show up here or not. This would be the closest location for him to go to, being only a forty-five minute drive from the mansion Jax grew up in. This isn’t the first time we’ve had to come to Connecticut for a job, but every time we do, it makes Jax restless and uncomfortable.

Jax’s parents are the prime example of people who should have never reproduced. They’re shitty spouses, shitty parents, and just all around shitty human beings. I know when it comes down to it, Jax won’t have a problem taking his father out if he shows up here tonight. But just because he won’t have an issue

with executing it, that doesn't mean there won't be a part of him that struggles when it's all said and done. Even though he never met him beforehand, I know that killing Ben wasn't as easy as he's tried to lead everyone to believe. He still shared blood with the guy, even if he was a bastard who tried to kill my boyfriend.

“Security here is a fucking joke.” I mumble and Jax scoffs out a laugh. We've been here for over seventeen hours, and not once have guards come outside to make rounds. They're solely relying on their security system, a driveway gate and four cameras. There are so many blindspots, that it won't even be close to a challenge to get in there and take them out.

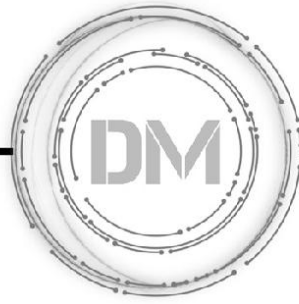
“I'm going to make another quick round.” Jax nods his head, but his eyes stay trained on the driveway where cars are sporadically approaching the property.

This place is a joke. It's in a neighborhood with other mansions that are just as large. They're separated enough that the constant coming and going of vehicles won't draw attention, and the tall hedges surrounding the buildings keep watchful eyes from noticing anything unusual. I'm sure the inside of the mansion is soundproofed enough that any loud sounds won't filter outside enough to gain notice. I stay on the outer side of the hedges, using the breaks between them to peer through and see if anyone is out here. Still no one.

I make quick work of rounding the property and hurry back to Jax. He's staring at the driveway with an unreadable look on his face.

“Jax?” His head slowly turns to look directly at me, his dark eyes are stormy and angry and his jaw is locked tight.

“He's here.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Jax

I SHOULDN'T BE SURPRISED. A PART OF ME EXPECTED HIM TO be here. But the more and more people that showed up, and him not being one of them, I allowed myself to believe that maybe Alec was wrong. Maybe my father stopped being such a shitty human being and turned himself around or whatever bullshit I wanted to believe for half of a second. But when I saw him pull through the gate, every memory from my youth came flooding back to me. Every time he tried to tell me that I was an abomination and that *real men don't fuck other men*. My wrists started to fucking itch with the memory of the ropes he used to tie me to my fucking bed. I'd think that seeing his face would have had me feeling all kinds of emotions, all kinds of confusion. But it didn't. I felt one thing, and one thing only.

I was pissed.

Pissed that even all these years later, he's still a piece of shit.

My eyes stay trained on the house, mentally calculating the square footage and the layout. I have no doubt that the set-up is probably damn close to where I was raised. Too many fucking bedrooms for a single family and so much open space, you fill it with overpriced art and other pointless items. If it is like my childhood mansion, then the bedrooms are upstairs, and most likely that's where we're going to find the children. I

count the upper windows, figuring out how many rooms we'll have to sweep through in a matter of mere minutes once we get the go ahead. I finally pull my eyes away because of the soft pings coming from both mine and Gunnar's phones.

Three minutes

I glance down the street, seeing the dark, lightless van pull up and I know who it is without question. Everything is in position.

Without saying anything, I lean in and place a soft kiss to my boyfriend's lips before we both pull on our full face masks, bathing us in complete darkness. I silently tick off the seconds before Gunnar and I officially get into place. The moment we're ready to go, our phones ping again.

Now

Wordlessly, we pull out our guns and quickly descend on the house. The moment we enter, we begin shooting, taking out anyone and everyone we see. In the main part of the house, there are only adults and within thirty seconds, we have every one of them laying on the floor completely lifeless. We continue through the house, shooting first and thinking second. It isn't until we get to the bedrooms upstairs that we have to start being more careful about our aim.

I ignore the sick twist of my stomach when I see the bedrooms. They're decorated like a fucking luxury hotel. There's large plush beds, nightstands, and even huge ass dressers and flatscreen TV's. It's all set up like the people in them are here for a romantic night together. A getaway. Instead of what this place really is. *Sick fucks.*

Since we know that Dent's men are right outside waiting with the transport van, we also know that the moment we ascended on the house, one of them got into position and will be waiting right by the front door, ready to usher any and all kids that we get out of here.

I hear Gunnar's voice yelling to go downstairs, but I know he's not talking to me. I kick my way into room after room, yelling the same thing at every young person I see. The second

I'm sure they're out of the room, I shoot. The last thing I want is to traumatize them all more than they already are. But I'll do everything I have to in order to ensure that not a single one of these assholes make it out of here alive.

It isn't until I get to the very last bedroom that I find the one person I've been looking for. The one that I've been silently hoping I'll be the one to confront. My mask is still firmly in place, and I doubt that after all these years he'd be able to recognize my voice.

"Get downstairs now!" The young girl looks completely and utterly terrified, but doesn't hesitate to scramble off the bed and to her feet before running out of the room.

The entire house is loud with screams, gunshots, and pounding steps. But I ignore all of it in order to focus on the coward in front of me.

"Who- who are you?" He sounds so fucking indignant that I can't help but chuckle humorlessly. Even when all hope is lost for him, he's still an entitled prick.

I take only a moment to examine him and who he is now. I haven't laid eyes on this man since I left him and my mother, and everything they stood for, almost twenty years ago. He looks the same as he did the last time I saw him, only his dark hair has turned into a full-on salt and pepper look. His stomach has begun to plump out, probably due to years of over-indulging and his body is covered in sweat, most likely out of fear. He's pathetic.

"I'm a little hurt you don't remember me." There's no emotion in my voice, unless you count the hint of venom I'm doing my best to hide. I've never been one to claim that I hate people. But if I did, my *father* would be at the top of my list.

His face screws up in confusion and as much as I enjoy it, I don't have time to fuck around. I lift my mask just enough for him to see my face and it takes almost a full ten seconds before recognition hits him. During the length of those seconds, it only solidifies that I have no hesitation over what's about to happen.

“Ja- Jaxon?”

“Hey there, *Dad*.” I spit his bullshit title out like it tastes nasty on my tongue, which it does.

“What the hell is going on!?” I shake my head at him. *How stupid is he that he still doesn't comprehend what's going on?*

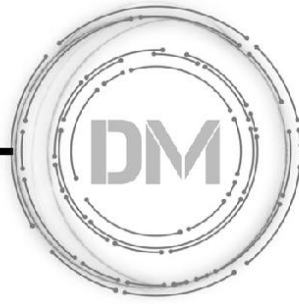
“You're finally getting what you deserve.”

I step closer, and he must have at least a small sense of self-preservation since he sits up straighter. But it's no use. I wish I had longer to really list his many years of mistakes. *The sins of my father*. But I don't. So instead of prolonging it, I aim my gun right at his head and lean down close. I want to make sure there's no question about who's taking his last breath from him. I want my face, the son he never fucking deserved, to be the last thing he sees before he meets his maker.

I lift my lips in a sinister smile and enjoy the fear that finally covers his features. He swallows heavily, and the smell of his perspiration is sickeningly strong to my senses, but I hide my disgust as I say what I know is the last thing he expects to hear from me.

“Say hi to my brother for me.”

His mouth opens, but the only sound that's heard in the small room is the echo of my gunshot before my father's lifeless body falls onto the bed.



DARK MATTER SECURITY

CHAPTER THIRTY

Gunnar

THE RAID ON ALL OF THE PROPERTIES IS DONE AND OVER IN less than half an hour. We get in and out, not a single person still breathing when we step out of the mansion. It's still shocking to me how fucking stupid some people are. They had a total of four people armed, and all of them were inside drinking beer when we began our raid. Two of us were able to take out all of them without blinking a damn eye.

Dents men got the kids to the van and out of there with no issues. We don't know where the rendezvous point was since we had no reason to, but we received word first thing this morning that everything went smoothly and we're free to check out of our hotels and head back to HQ. They wouldn't end the job so quickly if they weren't one-hundred percent certain that we're in the clear.

Jax has been pretty quiet since we left Connecticut, but I wouldn't say it's in a concerning way. He's always been a pensive guy. I'm the one in our relationship who stays pretty wired after we finish a job.

I keep my eye on my phone as Jax drives us back to North Carolina. Even though it seems like we're in the clear, we're always cautious until we're back at HQ. We'll receive word immediately if there's an issue. So even though we're not freaking out, we stay vigilant.

“You hungry?” I ask. I’m still angry at myself for letting everything happen with Curt. I refuse to ignore Jax’s needs again. We ate when we got back to our hotel room, but it’s already been eight hours.

“I could eat.” His easy answer has something loosening inside of me and I’m quick to look around to see what’s close by. We’re coming into the city, so we have a lot of options.

Jax ends up pulling up in front of a small taco stand, and I jump out and order ten tacos and a couple of churros, along with two bottles of water. Street tacos are delicious, but not always filling. Which is why we tend to overindulge when we’re hungry. We walk over to a nearby park bench, taking the opportunity to stretch our legs while we eat. The sun has started to set, so the foot traffic is slow, and the surrounding area only has a quiet murmur of people.

We eat in companionable silence for a few minutes, simply enjoying the fresh air and delicious food in the container between us.

“So, you wanna talk about how you’re feeling right now?” I finally ask after we’ve both downed a couple of tacos. Jax just shrugs his shoulders, looking as impassive as ever.

“Honestly, I don’t feel much. I have no emotional connection to him. Not anymore.”

“But that doesn’t change what you did.” I try to keep my voice level, not wanting to inflect any certain way of thinking on him. This is about him, not me.

“Honestly Gun, I feel relieved. Like I’ve officially erased that part of my past and I can finally let it go once and for all. Move on with my life.” I nod my head, understanding exactly what he means. Strangely, it’s exactly how I felt about Curt. When I pulled that trigger, it was like I could once and for all let him go and move on. Any feelings I used to have for him, even the ones that may have still been lingering around simply because of what he *used* to mean to me, officially died with him.

“So I guess that means you can move on now. From everything.” I try to keep my voice casual, but my words are anything but.

He shakes his head and turns to look at me directly. “You know what else I realized while we were in there?”

“What?” It’s whispered, but I know he can hear me just fine.

“There are too many people in the world just like my father. We can do this job for decades, and unfortunately, there will always be more.” He takes a pull from his water, but I just wait patiently for him to continue when he’s ready. “But at least with us, and our team out here fighting it, we lessen the threat. Even if it’s only a little bit.” I try not to get my hopes up, so I take another bite of a taco to distract myself as he keeps talking. “Maybe in the end it’ll be pointless, but I’d rather make a small difference than no difference at all.”

“What exactly are you saying, Jax?”

He places his hand on my cheek, cupping it gently as he leans in and kisses me soft and slowly before pulling away. “I’m saying that I’m not leaving Dark Matter.”

Instantly, a relieved breath leaves me and I practically slump in relief. “You- you don’t want to leave?”

He shakes his head. “No, baby. I don’t want to leave. I belong with Dark Matter Security just as much as I belong with you.” I grasp his shirt in a tight fist and pull him to me, not giving him any option but to kiss me rough and passionately.

When we finally pull apart, we’re breathing heavily and our foreheads are pressed together. The food sitting between us is forgotten and all I can think about is this man, and how much I need him. I need him in every way possible. But at this moment I’m practically aching to feel him inside of me.

“Let’s go home.”

My plans of dragging Jax straight home and having him fuck me over every surface we can manage is completely shot to shit when Alec calls a last minute meeting. He sent a mass text an hour ago, telling everyone to park the cars back in the garage then go straight to HQ. There was nothing in the message that sent up red flags or made us feel as if we should be worried. Jax tosses our bag onto the couch in the main room of Alec's house, which also works as Dark Matter Security headquarters. We're the last to enter the meeting room, the energy in the room quiet but not exactly somber. Our team isn't the only ones here. Dent is here, along with Danes and Hastings.

Hunter and Collins are standing against the back wall, Tanner and Wyatt are sitting in their usual seats by the bank of computers. Dent is sitting in the spot usually reserved for Wyatt, with Hastings in the one that's generally taken up by Tanner. Danes is standing against the wall next to Collins.

As soon as Jax and I are seated, Alec doesn't waste time before addressing the room. He stands from his seat, motions to Tanner and within seconds a bunch of different photos pop up on all of the monitors.

"Before we tipped off the FBI, Dents men went through and ensured the place was squeaky clean of any of our presence. With our raids taking so many prominent figures, the FBI had no choice but to address the issue. They took down Senator Johns first thing this morning when the evidence became too piled high against him. The transport vans were dropped off at a known FBI safehouse and the children are now in the custody of the feds. We're keeping an eye on it to make sure they either get back to their parents or are safely placed in the foster system. We won't be wiping our hands of them just yet."

Tanner scans through different photos on the screens, showing the FBI going into the different places we hit last night. Body bag after body bag being carried out. The kids being helped out of the vans at the safe house. Senator Johns being escorted out of his home in handcuffs. It's all so much at

once and even though I was there for a lot of it, my mind is spinning.

“Who do the feds think did it?” Collins asks and Alec is quick to shake his head.

“They aren’t asking questions. A major human trafficking and child prostitution ring was taken down. They’re taking the credit and not looking a gift horse in the mouth.”

“We’re keeping an ear out though,” Wyatt speaks up. “Just in case the feds have any cowboys who decide to ignore their subordinates and try to feed their own curiosity.”

“But we’re not too concerned.” This time it’s Dent who adds to the topic. “The feds don’t want this to be in the headlines longer than it has to be. There’s going to be a quick blip on the news and a few headlines, but that’ll be it.”

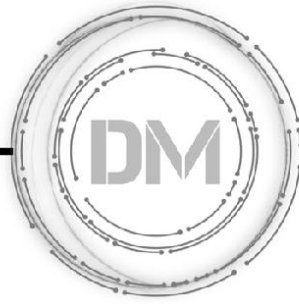
We all nod in agreement. The feds may not have jumped on the opportunity to take down the Senator, but now that the hard part was done for them, they can’t ignore it. But that doesn’t mean they’re going to want to dwell on it. They’re going to close the case as quickly as possible and move on with as little to no fuss as they can.

“With that being said,” Alec says and Tanner shuts off the monitors. “Good job everyone. We know that jobs like these can be high stress and especially risky, but you all handled it great.”

Alec calls the meeting and everyone is quick to get up and leave, most likely to go home and sleep. I have no doubt that just like Jax and I, no one actually slept when they went back to their hotels. Like Alec said, jobs like this one are risky and it’s hard to relax until we know for sure it’s over and done for good and that we’re in the clear.

Jax and I stand from our seats and tuck in our chairs. He leans in just close enough so only I can hear his soft whisper and feel his breath against my neck. “Ready to go home?”

I’m so fucking ready.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Jax

I PRACTICALLY SHOVE GUNNAR THROUGH OUR BEDROOM DOOR, needing desperately to be inside of him. After I got the all-clear from Doc, a day hasn't gone by that I haven't fucked Gun. Until this week. Our relationship being on such rocky ground this past week has been messing with my fucking head. I knew deep down that we would be okay. It will take a lot more than uncertainty about my career to tear us apart. But the stress and confusion it brought the past few days has been pure hell.

“I need to be inside of you,” I grit out through my teeth and start tearing my clothes from my body. Luckily, Gunnar can tell that now isn't the time to tease me. He hurries out of his own clothes before pulling me to him for a desperate kiss.

“Then get inside of me.” He's practically panting when I order him to get on the bed. I want to fuck him. I want to punish him. Turn his ass red with my hand. I want to remind who he belongs to. But more than anything, what I need most right now, as I look at my boyfriend laying on our bed completely naked and desperate for me, I need to make love to him. To show him without any doubt that I'm the only one who can love him like this. That I'm the only one for him.

I force myself to take a long, steadying breath to calm my anticipation. I walk over to the dresser, grabbing out the lube. As much as I'd love to see him stretched around a dildo and

tease him until he can't take it anymore, I need him stretched around me even more.

I toss the small bottle onto the bed next to him and climb over his perfect body. I kiss a line along his chest and collarbone, loving the way his breath hitches with every touch of my lips. Gunnar and I have been together for seven years now, but the effect we have on each other hasn't waned. We're always so fucking needy for each other and he's still willing to beg me for what he wants.

"I will never get enough of you, baby." I pull back just enough to look him in the eyes. His bright blue eyes shine back at me with pure, unfiltered love and just like it always does, my heart practically cracks open into two.

"I never want to live without you." *Fuck.* Gunnar's never been afraid to be honest with me about his feelings. From the first moment we expressed our love for one another, we don't hide things like that from each other. But that doesn't stop me from being taken back every time he's so damn open with me.

"You'll never have to." My lips crash down on his and his hands immediately grip at my back. I pat my hand around, searching the mattress for the bottle of lube. Once I have it in my grip, I pull back and kiss my way down his body. My tongue slides down his perfect abs and I don't even pause before taking his dick in my mouth and all the way down my throat.

"Fuck, Jax!" My fingers slide along his crack and I gently prod at his hole while my tongue swirls around the crown of his cock. His hands fly to my hair and he grips tightly with abandon. I blindly lube up my fingers and begin working them gently in and out of his tight hole. My mouth keeps working him until my fingers are able to stretch him and I can move in and out of him easily.

"Jax, baby, I need you inside of me. Now!"

I slowly pull my mouth from his cock and look up to see the desperate, pleading look in his eyes. "Are you ready for me?"

“So fucking ready!” I don’t have the willpower to question him, so I pull my fingers out of him and hastily climb back up his body. Once I have my cock lined up with his hole, I lean down and kiss him again at the same time I push myself inside.

Our tongues tangle together as I softly pump my hips, making sure I hit the spot inside of him. Moans climb up his throat and I swallow down every single one of them. I bend his knees higher, allowing me even deeper access, the whole time keeping our lips fused together. It isn’t until Gunnar’s blunt finger nails dig into my back and drag down to my ass that I begin to lose control. I rip my mouth away from his and bite down on his shoulder as I pull my dick out so only the crown is in and slam back in with a hard thrust.

I pin my forehead against his as my hips piston in and out. “Yes baby, you feel so fucking good. You squeeze me so fucking tight.”

“Jax! Yes! Baby!” His hand snakes between us to grip his cock, but as if I needed any more proof that he’s the perfect man for me, he doesn’t do anything else.

“Stroke yourself baby. Get yourself off. I’m so fucking close.” Every one of my words come out between gritted teeth because I’m ready to blow any second now.

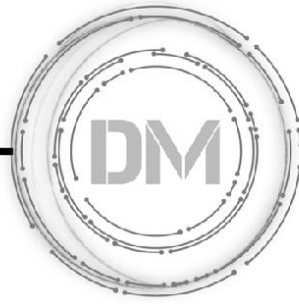
His hand begins to move up and down in sync with my thrusts and it’s so fucking hot watching him lose himself in his pleasure. He throws his head back, the corded muscles of his neck on full display. His lips part slightly, moan after moan spilling out of him.

“Fuck yes! Gun, that’s it! Come baby. Come!” Within seconds, his body begins to tremble beneath mine and that feeling alone has my hips stuttering and my own orgasm washing over me. I empty myself in Gunnar’s ass just as his own cum spurts out of his cock right onto his stomach. We’re both breathing heavily when I lean down and trail my tongue from his stomach to his chest, licking up every last drop of his release before I take him in a slow and languid kiss. I force my mind and body to calm down, not only wanting, but needing to

savor every second of having Gunnar beneath me like this. His tongue slides against mine as his hands grip the back of my neck. Our bodies are covered in sweat and the room is heavy with the smell of sex. My cock begins to grow again with a need for Gunnar that will never really go away, but I ignore it. This moment isn't about that. This moment, just after I made love to him, is about relaying every possible truth that I can. There will never be a day that goes by that my heart doesn't beat for this man. There will never be a moment that I don't need him by my side. There's not a single image of my future that he's not included in.

“I love you, Gunnar. Always.”

“I love you too, Jax. Forever.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Gunnar

THE HOUSE IS QUIET AS JAX AND I WALK TOWARD THE BACK porch and make our way out toward the water. Summer has finally begun to settle in and the air is warm against my skin, even as the sun is barely rising. It's days like this that I truly do love where we live. Growing up in California, warm weather was a staple of my youth. But there's something about the fact that it's not a year round thing here that makes it just a bit more enjoyable.

I'm surprised when I look down the shore closer to Alec's house and see a group gathered in the sand enjoying the sunrise off of the glimmering water.

"Well there goes our idea of a romantic walk." Jax's voice is full of humor, but he's not exactly wrong. We both woke up early, so we decided to make the most of it and take a quiet walk on the beach. I know we still could if we wanted to, and no one would actually care. But we like being able to spend time with our friends. Time that's not revolved around jobs or stress. All of us just relaxing and enjoying the life we work hard for.

It's been a few weeks since everything happened, since Ben and Curt and Jax's father. That entire shitstorm has officially passed and things have begun to finally calm down completely.

Jax has officially been declared back to full health, so I feel like I can truly relax again. I'm not quite as terrified that something could happen to him at any moment and take him away from me.

As soon as we get closer to our group of friends and colleagues, a flurry of blonde hair comes racing toward us and wraps her arms around Jax without warning.

He and Nicole have become so close to the point that if he's not with me or on a job, he's usually with her. If it was anyone else spending so much time with her, I doubt Wyatt would be as cool about it. But he knows damn well he has nothing to be concerned about.

Nicole grabs Jax's hand and leads us the rest of the way to the group. We both take a seat on the blanket laid out while Nicole plops back down into Wyatt's lap. I never realized just how lonely our friend and boss seemed until Nicole came back into his life. Now he radiates a happiness that I didn't know he was even capable of experiencing.

Not everyone is out here right now, only Nicole, Wyatt, Alec, Willow, Anya, Collins, and Tanner. I'm pretty sure Cole and Lillie were still sound asleep when Jax and I left the house, and it's not unusual for Hunter not to join us for group things like this. He's kind of a loner. It's been a little worse the past few months for some reason. Grant has a room at HQ like the rest of us, but he has an apartment closer to town since he joined the police force there after he moved here. He's one person I still can't quite figure out, but if Alec and Wyatt trust him, then so do I.

In usual Alec fashion, Willow is also tucked into his lap and his arms are protectively tight around her. He's another man that I never thought I would see shackled down. But the moment Willow reappeared into his life, it was only a matter of time before he gave in to his feelings for her.

Jax leans his arm against mine as we just sit quietly and listen as everyone around us talks and jokes around. Jax and I have always been conscious about not being too obvious about our relationship in front of our team. It's not that we think any

of them would have an actual problem with it, but it's just something we've been conditioned to keep on the down-low thanks to both of our time in the military. We're pretty sure they all know we're together, but we don't confirm it with any PDA.

But sitting out here, looking around at our friends, a lot of which are coupled off, I can't help but ask myself why. I glance at Alec, who's placing soft kisses down Willow's neck. Then over at Nicole, who leans up for a kiss from her man. My mind whirls, and without thinking too hard about it, I turn to face Jax who must sense my thoughts because he doesn't hesitate to look back at me and lean in to place a soft kiss on my lips. We don't linger, but there's no mistaking what just happened. When I turn back to our friends, everyone's still talking and laughing as if nothing just happened. My chest expands with relief and happiness that I didn't realize I needed.

"God, I love the weather here." Anya's voice comes out wistfully, and I can't help but laugh. I'm over here making life changing decisions, and she's admiring the weather.

"Looks like someone is spending the day at the beach today." I quip and she just shrugs up her shoulder like it's no big deal, which it's really not. Anya is a kick-ass lawyer, but it's not necessary for her to work. Her brother would be more than happy to take care of her, but she's too damn stubborn to let him. Instead, she opened a pro-bono law firm in town and helps people who can't afford to pay for representation but don't qualify for a public defender. Anya Matterson. Heart of fucking gold.

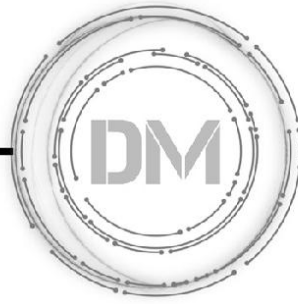
"A day at the beach actually sounds pretty damn good," Jax says easily and that thought has my mind spinning with images of him in nothing but wet swim trunks clinging to his thick thighs.

Oh yeah, a day at the beach sounds pretty damn good right now.

And that's exactly what happens. The sun rises higher in the sky and the rest of our team joins us for a day of sun,

swimming, and burgers on the grill. When the sun sets again, Alec starts a bonfire and we all over-indulge on s'mores and a few too many beers.

I'm not under the illusion that life will always be this easy and perfect. But right now, in this moment while sitting in front of the roaring fire with Jax's arms around me, life is pretty fucking great.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Hunter

I LEAN AGAINST THE RAILING, LOOKING OUT AT THE WATER. I tried joining the group to keep from being completely reclusive, but I couldn't handle it for too long. It hasn't always been this hard to be around my colleagues and friends. Not until her.

I lift my beer to my lips, swallowing down a healthy swallow just as my phone pings in my pocket with a notification. Considering the date of the month, I already know what I'm about to find when I look. I pull it out, only to confirm what I already know.

I read over the notification from the bank before initiating a transfer from my own account to pay the past due of the rent and put the payments ahead by a few months. I'll get another notification once those funds run out, but I don't do more than that. She usually pays a month or two before she ends up needing to use her money on something more important. More important to her, at least. This notification from the bank is my reminder that it's almost time to make a trip out there. It's not something I ever look forward to, but there's a part of me that for some reason refuses to turn my back on her. I should. For my own sanity and self-preservation, I absolutely should. But I just fucking can't.

I pull up the app I have specifically to see how much money is in her bank account. When I see that it's drained to

the point of being in the negative, again I can't resist helping where I can. I deposit enough money to bring the balance above positive and give her some extra cushion. It won't last long, and at this point, I'm just an enabler. But I can't ignore it.

I take another second to shoot off a quick email to her landlord, letting him know that the money is there and to keep me updated if there are any more issues. I should just buy her a place, buy somewhere and pay it off so I don't have to worry about it. But I force myself not to. It's the last bit of self-preservation I do have. The one last wedge I keep in place for my own good. Of course, in the end, it would probably save me a lot more money.

I slide my phone back into my pocket and drain the rest of my beer. I look back out toward the water, the familiar tingles thrumming through my system every time I lay my eyes on her. I shouldn't even be thinking about her. It can't ever happen if I want to keep breathing, let alone keep my job. I do my best to shake those thoughts away as I go back inside for another beer. Things have been pretty quiet the past couple of weeks ever since the raids we did a few weeks back. So the team decided to take today and just relax. They've been down on the beach pretty much all day, while I've mostly stayed up here, watching from a distance.

Like it always does, my gaze finds her. Standing at the edge of the water, toeing at the wet sand. She's pulled on a pair of jean shorts over her black bikini. Her long curly hair is pulled up on top of her head, giving me a perfect view of slender neck. She has a small cluster of freckles on her shoulder blade that I damn well should not notice, but my eyes always seem to draw to it if I'm close enough when she's wearing a tank top or bathing suit. It doesn't happen often since I usually avoid being close to her at all. But sometimes, I just have to give in.

Everything about her is pure perfection and sunshine. Her smile is contagious and I know without a doubt that if I allowed myself, I'd easily become addicted to her presence. And that's exactly why I keep my distance.

I drain another beer before the air starts to become too stifling. If I stay out here too much longer, I won't be able to resist getting closer to her. Instead of allowing myself that indulgence, I turn and go back inside, putting as much distance between us as possible. I do everything I can to shake the image of her from my mind, but just like every other night since I first met her, her face is the last thing that flashes in my head before I fall asleep and her image floods my dreams. The one woman I shouldn't want.

My own personal sunshine.

Anya Matterson.

BONUS

Join Jax and Gunnar in Paris for a sexy, sweet time and a memory they'll never forget!

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/siniif9oyf>

DARK MATTER SECURITY TEAM

Alec Matterson

Wyatt Everett

Caleb Tanner

Cole Monroe

Gunner Beckett

Jaxon Carter

Sebastian Hunter

Owen Collins

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JJ Grice is a lover of sloths! Oh! Yeah, and she has some kids and a husband that she loves too! You won't catch her without a coffee mug in one hand and a good book in the other.

She feels strongly that there's nothing on this planet that can't be solved with a good bottle of wine, and a little bit of chocolate after a good buzz.

JJ is a huge advocate for standing up for your beliefs, and her most controversial fight yet is that Pineapple does belong on pizza, a hill she is willing to die on!

But fighting for pineapple rights and framing sloth pictures isn't her only passion. She dreamed of being an author for as long as she can remember, but she shoved that scary thought to the back burner until her husband and best friend convinced her to go for it.

So, went for it, she did!

After finishing The Maine Stay series, she was stoked to find out that people actually love her words! Fast forward to today, she works as a full-time author and herder of feral children.

If you're looking for your next obsession, you'll find it in any of JJ Grice's books. But, please, only download them if you believe Tacos should be eaten every night, not just Tuesday's because really, Tacos are life!

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

[The Maine Stay Series](#)

[Dark Matter Security Series](#)

[Burn it Down](#)

If you would like to be able to keep up with future books by JJ Grice, feel free to join her Facebook group [here](#).