



HUNTING

KENDRA

BRAVO TEAM SERIES

ELIZABELLA BAKER

Hunting Kendra

ELIZABELLA BAKER

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To anyone struggling because of the sins your parent's committed. Stay strong and know there are people out there who see you for how great you really are!

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Also By Elizabella Baker

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Chapter 1

Four Years Ago

Kendra tossed back another shot of Jameson, reveling in the feel of the whiskey as it burned down her throat and warmed her belly. Sliding the glass up the bar, she met the eyes of the bartender. That was her third shot in less than an hour, and she strongly felt he would be cutting her off sooner rather than later. She was a lightweight. She already knew this about herself and made the stupid decision to mention it after she knocked back the first shot. That was certainly a nugget of information the bartender stored away for later and would most likely be his reasoning for politely cutting her off.

If she were smart, she would stop on her own. If there was one lesson she learned over the past few months, it was that no amount of drinking kept the dreams at bay. Shots or beer, nothing did the trick. Every time she closed her eyes, those horrific days flooded back. Captured. Beaten. But it was the guilt of surviving when others didn't that really messed with her.

She'd fucked up. No, her therapist would kick her ass for that thought. For two months, she had been seeing the woman once a week. That was nine sessions too many, in her opinion. Things should've been better by now. She shouldn't still be having the same dreams over and over again. Fuck, she was sick of feeling weak. She joined the Army so she would never again be that weak little girl. Yet, there she was, crying into her beer. Okay, she wasn't actually crying and her bottle of

beer was empty, but the analogy worked and her head was too fucking fuzzy to come up with something better.

She tried again to get the bartender's attention. Sure enough, she didn't miss the sigh or the way he shook his head before heading in her direction. She didn't need him to open his mouth to know what he was about to say.

"Sorry, darlin', but I think you've had enough for one night. I'll be happy to get you some water while you chill and watch the game."

She nodded her head in agreement because what else could she do? He was right, and damn, he sounded so sincere while doing it. No one ever cared what she did, not as a kid and not as much in the Army. Kendra always felt like an outsider.

An hour ago, she got the bright idea to stop for one drink. It didn't take a rocket scientist to know that one drink turned into several in under an hour. It was like she couldn't stop herself from throwing them back. Not when there was the slightest chance that with each toss of a shot, the odds she would have a nightmare would lessen. *That's just your drunk mind trying to convince you to keep going.* Kendra could practically hear her therapist scolding her.

"Sucks when they cut you off."

It took her a few seconds to muster up the courage to slide her gaze over and find the face that went with the deep, sultry voice. Her first thought was there was no way the person could have both a sexy voice and a sexy face. It turned out she was wrong. Dead wrong.

Jet-black hair styled in what she liked to think was shaggy sexy. Not too long, but certainly long enough that she could tug on it when he was going down on her. Yup, she was definitely a little more than tipsy if her first thought when meeting a stranger was she would like him to lay her out on the bar and feast on her.

But it was his eyes that really captured her attention. There were dark eyes and then there were this guy's eyes. She was in the process of trying to figure out if they were really black in color or if the lighting in the bar was giving them that look when he spoke up again.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to listen in on your conversation.” He didn't look all that sorry. In fact, he looked pretty damn smug, and it was that sense of confidence that had her responding rather than blowing him off.

“Well, since you seem so inclined, you might as well join me,” she slurred. “Although, fair warning—I think those shots are going to my head, so I can't be responsible for what comes out of my mouth.” She was far more proud that she managed to get the whole sentence out than she should be.

A single roll of laughter and she was hooked. She should've known as soon as she heard his voice that his laugh would be just as addicting. “I'll consider myself properly warned.”

He slid onto the stool next to her and she took the few seconds it took him to get situated to shamelessly eye him up. She had to admit, the man was the whole package. Good looks, a great body, and a voice she could swoon to. Not that

she did that often, but if she did, it would be to this man. All that was left to figure out was, did he have a great personality and was he great in bed. He had to be, right? There's no way those good looks would be wasted on a man who sucked in bed.

“Is there something wrong with the way I look, or are you checking me out?”

“Checking you out,” she blurted before she could get a rein on her tongue. “More accurately, trying to decipher if you would be good in the sack or if your great body was being wasted.”

Smooth. Real smooth. This was probably when a normal woman would flush from embarrassment. Unfortunately, she wasn't normal. Or maybe she was. She could never tell which would be better.

“There's only one way to find out.” He leaned over and bumped her shoulder. Her entire body broke out in goose bumps when his breath fanned her cheek.

“Is that so? You planning on taking advantage of a drunk gal?”

Who was this woman she was turning into? She didn't flirt shamelessly, and she sure as fuck didn't proposition a guy at a bar. No, she worked side by side with them and demanded to be treated as one of their equals. Maybe that's why it had been years since she last got laid, and drunk Kendra meant horny Kendra.

“Never,” he replied seriously. “But I sure as hell wouldn’t turn down the offer in a couple of hours once you’ve sobered up.” Mr. Mysterious winked. It was now her nickname for him, as a plan formed in her head.

She thought long and hard about what he said. Well, not that long. More like a couple of seconds; that’s all it took for her to make up her mind. Drinking wasn’t working, so why the hell not try something new?

“You’re on.” She returned his smile with one of her own. “But no names. I’m not looking for more than one night.” That and she was seriously thinking she would reconsider her boldness when she was sober.

Kendra could’ve sworn disappointment flashed in his dark eyes before he shut down and blanked his expression. It wasn’t even a second later when that carefree “devil don’t care” smile was back.

“I’ll agree to your terms ...”

Her own disappointment surged, but she quickly pushed it down. She wanted this. No, she *needed* this.

“Blue eyes.” He cut into her line of thinking. The nickname sent another shiver through her. Her electric-blue eyes were the first thing people commented on, and Kendra almost hated it because it reminded her of her mother. People used to say that’s how her mother got to where she was.

No longer wanting to think about that time in her life, Kendra whispered instead, “Mr. Mysterious,” letting him in on

the secret nickname. This time, she was the one to bump his shoulder. It was a stupid nickname, but it was exactly what he reminded her of, dark and mysterious. And she was a little tipsy, so she was going to blame her lack of a filter on that.

The next hour was spent talking and laughing. Nothing personal. At least, not in the traditional sense. By the time they left together, she didn't know his name, where he lived, or anything about his life growing up. She didn't need or want any of that. What she did know was that he couldn't care less about the baseball game on the TV, but had been happy to laugh at her while she yelled at it. He liked nachos, and she only knew that because, in her effort to sober up, they had shared a large platter of them, him favoring the salsa and her the jalapenos.

As promised, she stuck to water, so by the time they left together, Mr. Mysterious felt confident she was making a sound decision and no longer under the influence. His words, not hers. She would have gladly gone back to his room at the hotel next door hours ago.

“You sure about this?”

Kendra rolled up on her toes and placed a kiss along his chiseled jaw. “Absolutely,” she whispered.

She didn't get a chance to put her heels back on the ground. Mr. Mysterious had his hands planted firmly on her ass and was lifting her up. It was pure instinct that her legs wrapped around his waist like they were made to be there. She quickly pushed those thoughts away. Now wasn't the time, and that

wasn't what this was about. Pure carnal desire. That was all she could offer, and damn if her dark and mysterious man didn't understand that when his mouth crushed down on hers. One sweep of his tongue against her bottom lip and she was more than happy to open her own for him.

She heard more than felt the door of the hotel room unlock. One minute they were out in the brightly lit hallway, and the next, darkness surrounded them. And all without breaking the kiss. There was nothing gentle about the way her dark and mysterious stranger slammed her back against the door. Or the way his calloused hands slid under her shirt, pushing her bra farther up until he was cupping her breasts. Shamelessly, she arched her back, begging for more. Turns out, she didn't need to beg. He was more than willing to give her what she wanted.

Her sexy stranger broke the kiss long enough to tear the shirt over her head and fling it across the room. She took the moment to catch her breath. Her chest was rising and falling, causing her barely bra-covered boobs to push out. Since she was still clinging to him like a damn spider monkey, they were just below his eye level.

“Sexy as fuck with your flushed skin.” His gravel voice washed over her.

Like they knew they were being talked about, her nipples peaked even more. Holy hell, she didn't even think that was possible. She assumed it was because the next second when his tongue flicked out and traced the dark bud, they grew heavier. Throwing her head back against the wall, she mewed.

Whoever this man was, he sure knew how to play her body like a fine-tuned instrument, to make every part of her sing.

With each suck of her nipple, her pussy clenched in her now-soaked panties. Kendra hadn't known something as simple as nipple play could be so arousing. One small tug between his teeth and she was about to fly off the cliff. Needing more friction, she ground her clit, trying desperately to hit the right spot despite the layers of clothes between them.

"I need these off," Kendra hissed.

She clawed at the shirt covering his back. Her short arms barely reached the waist of his pants she so desperately wanted to magically fly off him.

There was no hesitation. One second she was begging, and the next, her body was flying in the air. Her body bounced once on the bed, then like the skilled man he was, Mr. Mysterious was yanking her jeans down her legs, her damp panties twisted within. Pushing up onto her elbows, she used her one hand to unclasp her bra, sending it sailing across the room. She turned onto her side to enjoy the show she hoped was coming. She couldn't pull her eyes away from the man quickly divesting himself of clothes right in front of her.

Soon he was moving, and she lost sight of the magnificent view. A resounding crack echoed in the room and her ass stung from where his palm connected, but all thoughts of the pain disappeared when he growled.

"Be a good girl and come sit on my fucking face. I've had hours to work up an appetite."

Kendra scrambled her naked body up the bed, but instead of doing as he demanded, she flung her leg over his head. With her hands on his thick thighs, she tossed a saucy wink over her shoulder. She had to do her best not to face-plant when his hands gripped her waist and pulled her ass back until her center was just inches from where he wanted.

“You going to suck my cock, blue eyes?” She felt the hum against her clit.

She wiggled her ass and dipped her head forward, taking his pulsing length into her mouth, not bothering to answer him.

The sexy man underneath her wasted no time spearing her swollen lips with his tongue. She groaned around his cock. She tried to focus as she rotated between licking and swirling her tongue around his engorged head, using her hand to pump the length her mouth couldn't reach. She gave up on that concentration when he slipped not one but two fingers inside her, causing her to lose her rhythm. No longer bothering to set the pace, she let him fuck her face from underneath, his hips pistoning up in tune with his fingers pumping inside her.

Sensation after sensation was building inside her. She was so damn close; she didn't care that she was grinding her pussy against his face.

With a pop, she was plucked from his dick and, once again, was tossed through the air. Only this time, Mr. Mysterious was scissoring himself until she was beneath him. A frustrated cry slipped from her mouth. Before she could complain about the loss of his fingers in her and his mouth on her, he thrust inside

her. Her back arched at the sudden pain of being stretched, but just as quickly as the pain came, it soon turned into pleasure. The buildup she was feeling before was back. Only this time more, so much more.

“So fucking tight, blue eyes. I’m going to fuck you all night so that you won’t want to leave.”

She didn’t respond, just merely groaned. She didn’t want to ruin the mood by correcting him. It’s just one night. She couldn’t let it be any more than that.

“Don’t stop,” she begged instead.

She was so damn close, but she needed more, so that’s exactly what she told him. And just like the magician she knew him to be, he slipped his hand between their sweaty bodies and pinched her nub, crashing her orgasm to the surface. Kendra screamed, definitely waking the occupants on either side of the room, as his body jerked above hers. The punishing rhythm he’d had just a second earlier faltered as she felt his release crash against her walls.

A sweaty mess of tangled limbs, the two of them lay exhausted on the bed. Heavy breathing was the only sound in the room.

She had no idea how much time passed, but as her sexy stranger promised, he continued to fuck her throughout the night. Three orgasms later, the two of them passed out. But he wasn’t the only one to make a promise. Hers just wasn’t said out loud.

When she was sure he was fast asleep, Kendra slipped from the bed. She quietly found each article of clothing, dressed, and snuck over to the door. With one last look back, she whispered, "I'll never forget you, Mr. Mysterious. You gave me my first normal night in a long time."

And with that confession, she snuck out of the room and hailed a cab. Kendra desperately wanted to start her life over, and maybe this was the perfect transition she needed.

Chapter 2

Kendra “Blue” Beck walked through the barn on her way to Wes’s office. The text message he had sent had been cryptic, at best.

Meet me in my office in 20 minutes

Having her boss call her in wasn’t the cryptic part. The fact that he wanted her in his office was. Wes hated his office. He thought it was stupid and represented the very thing he despised. Authority. Was he a great boss? Absolutely. Was he the definition of a grumpy asshole boss? Hell yes. If that phrase needed a description, Wes’s picture was sure to turn up. But did the man actually *like* being the boss? The one who made the ultimate decisions and had to be the face of the company? That would be a hell to the no. He was just another one of the guys. That’s what he always said. So being called to her boss’s office meant something big was up.

She barely finished knocking when Wes’s booming voice demanded that she enter. She wasn’t sure what she expected when she walked in, but a pissed-off Daniel wasn’t it.

She hadn't seen him since the last time they were in Mexico, bringing Ember back for the second time. Daniel hadn't even been present for King's takedown, which was surprising considering how much he hated the man.

"You wanted to see me?" She looked back and forth between both men, trying to decipher their stony stares. The problem with working with a bunch of alpha men, as they were often called by the wives, was that they all were good at hiding their facial expressions. Something she was also very good at. But she now understood why those same wives hated it so much. Being on the receiving end sucked.

"Take a seat," Wes barked.

"Considering the two of you are standing, I think I prefer to as well."

She didn't drop her gaze. She was just as much a team member as the rest of Bravo Team. Wes wouldn't be shy about telling them something, so she wasn't about to let him treat her any differently. And she told him as much.

"Listen, just spit it out. No need for dramatics. I can handle it. You wouldn't be pulling the same bullshit with any of the other guys, so knock the shit off."

That seemed to do the trick. Both men eased up a little. Not enough to say they were relaxed, but certainly not as tense as they were when she first walked in.

"Matthew Jenson and Carl Packton were both found murdered within the last few weeks. I sent Daniel to check

things out when Matthew turned up dead right after Trista fled to Seattle. I was notified of Carl's death last evening. Daniel just got back from seeing the body. It appears both men were killed by a sniper."

Kendra almost stopped listening after Wes said the first name, but a small part of her knew she needed to listen to the rest. Hearing both of those names after all this time sent chills down her body. Her mind was trying to force her back to that hellish time in her life, but she used every technique the Army therapist taught her to keep the memories at bay. She would have time to let the nightmares take over later. Right now, she needed to focus.

"Do we know anything other than how they were killed?" Her question was directed to Daniel. He was the one to go investigate, so he should have the answers.

"Not yet. But from what I can gather, the two deaths are related," Daniel answered honestly. His tone was low and hard.

The *deaths are related* was all she heard. It kept repeating over and over in her head, which could only mean one thing.

"I'm next."

Fuck, that was sobering. For four long years, she had gone without having to hear those names mentioned by anyone but the demons in her head, and here she was. Just when she finally thought she was getting over the guilt.

“I’m not going to bother to blow smoke up your ass.” Wes was his usual direct self. He didn’t bother to pull punches as he continued to explain. “I think there’s a very good chance that’s the case. I don’t believe in coincidences.”

While she appreciated her boss’s candidness because, really, that’s what she had come to expect from the man, a very tiny part of her wished he had cushioned that a bit. Not because she couldn’t handle the news, but because the reason behind their deaths still rocked her.

“Wes already called in your team,” Daniel explained. “But we thought it best to tell you first and give you a few minutes to get your shit together.”

She wanted to laugh. Over four years of trying to get her shit together and only once, in all that time, had she ever felt remotely normal. She quickly squashed that memory as well. There was no time for her to be thinking about Mr. Mysterious right now. She had her one night to forget everything that had happened.

Over the years, she’d tried to replicate that night, but she could never find another guy who made her forget the way he had. There had been times she had kicked her own ass for not asking his name. Times she wished she was stronger and didn’t need the distraction. There was a time in her life when she prided herself on that strength. Not so much anymore. It wasn’t the first time she wondered why Wes had hired her.

Plastering on her usual mask, she answered, “I don’t need time. Let’s get this started.”

Kendra didn't wait for Wes or Daniel to respond. She also didn't bother to make sure they were following her. If she had, she likely would've noticed their concerned expressions. But alas, she did not, making her unprepared for the shitstorm that was about to take place.

The first thing she noticed the moment she entered the situation room was the camaraderie. For the past four years, these five men have had her back; seven, if she included Daniel and Ray, which she did. Daniel might consider himself a lone ranger, but he was just as much a part of the team as the rest of them. And she could never forget Ray. He didn't go out on their assignments with them, at least not usually, but he was with them every step of the way, feeding them intel and saving their asses.

Falcon and Apollo looked to be in a very heated discussion. If she had to guess, it had more to do with their fiancées than what was going on. Falcon's girl was Trista. She was high strung and likely causing trouble. And it was even more likely she was doing it with Jewels, Apollo's woman.

Now that was an interesting story. It all started when Bentley, who was on their other team, met his now wife, Ash, after rescuing her from a kidnapping. With Ash came Trista, former model and now a savvy businesswoman. Those two were trouble in themselves but add in Jewels, Bentley's little sister, and suddenly the three men found themselves constantly blaming the other for the trouble they were routinely bailing the women out of. Kendra was slightly surprised Giggles wasn't in on that, considering his lady, Ember, worked for

Trista and often got roped into what adventure the other three created.

Hollywood was busy talking to Ray, and Panther was deep in conversation with Giggles. None of them paid any mind to the fact that she entered. Not because they were rude, but likely because they had no idea that their next assignment would involve her. None of her teammates knew about her past. Like the rest of them, they knew she served, but they didn't know specifics. Kendra never spoke about it. It wasn't that she didn't trust them, there was just never a good time. Plus, admitting it meant she was weak, something the therapist she no longer saw would've had a field day with. *Putting yourself first doesn't make you weak.* Her therapist must've repeated that same mantra a million times.

“Look who’s back in town.” Hollywood’s gaze peered over her shoulder. It was the only indication she had that both Wes and Daniel had indeed followed her in. “Did you miss seeing our smiling faces?”

“Something like that,” was Daniel’s only response. She didn’t miss the grumpiness. Or maybe it was hostility. In a matter of minutes, the room was going to be filled with testosterone and alpha tendencies. She wasn’t in the mood to deal with it. It didn’t matter that she was one of them, she could already sense what was coming.

“So, you going to tell us why we’re here, or did we forget the boss’s birthday and now we need to pay for our mistake?” Giggles did his best to break the tension in the room.

“Although, just for the record, I know damn well Nancy wouldn’t let any of us forget anything important. Especially something she knows will annoy you.”

The room was filled with resounding yeses and plenty of laughter. Nancy used to be the receptionist, but now she was the business manager. Only that title sounded lame considering how much the woman really did. If anyone were to ask, it was Nancy who ran W.J. Protective Services. Wes might own the place and be the billionaire who pays for everything, but it was Nancy who knew what the fuck was going on from day to day. Without her, Wes would have run the business part of the company into the ground for sure.

“No one missed my damn birthday, jackass. And just so we’re clear, I don’t like celebrating it with you fuckers,” Wes grumbled. “We aren’t here because of missed celebrations. You have a new assignment. This one hits a little closer to home.”

The room went silent. Kendra was almost positive that, if a pin dropped, it would’ve sounded like a bomb going off. To say that was a shocker was more than just a mild understatement, considering her teammates made an art form out of being rowdy. She almost missed the usual loudness and craziness right now.

Kendra figured it was her turn to speak when Wes gave her a chin lift, so she took a moment to compose herself. She never talked about her time in the Army, at least not the months leading up to her discharge. When her teammates

brought it up, she let them think she didn't re-enlist, the same as everyone else.

Here goes nothing.

“Six months before my enlistment was up, my Ranger unit was captured. Three of the men in my unit were KIA. It took seven days for the remaining three of us to be rescued. After that, I left the Army. Took the recommended medical discharge when the therapist felt I shouldn't return to active duty. I purposely chose not to stay in touch with the other two individuals who were rescued along with me. Survivor's guilt is what they called it. I preferred to move on and I came to work for Wes. Daniel just informed me that those same two men were murdered by a sniper recently.”

Detached.

Unemotional.

That's the only way she could give those minimum details without allowing her past to suck her back in. She wasn't fooled. At some point, she would need to tell them what she could of the mission, but not right now. She needed time to fortify her defenses, to build back up those walls that cracked when she heard those two names.

“So, the assumption is you're next,” Falcon surmised. Her team leader wasn't stupid. He might barely talk, but that was only because when he did, it was something meaningful. He didn't waste time with useless chatter.

“Correct.”

No need to sugarcoat the situation. Her team would see right through it. Four years was a long time to work together. Especially when a majority of that time was spent in the dredges of Mexico taking down the scum of the earth who bought and sold women. They formed a connection built in the present.

Just as she expected, the room turned into mass chaos. Testosterone seeped from every man as they argued and started talking over one another. Ideas were tossed around about her going back to the safe house.

Kendra let them toss the ideas around. She didn't bother to turn any of them down. She would wait until they burned themselves out before giving her opinion.

She nearly snorted out a laugh when Panther suggested she go on the run. How could he seriously believe she would run when she knew damn well none of the other men on the team would? She blamed it on the soft spot he had for women. He would never openly admit it, but she knew he thought of himself as her self-appointed big brother. At first, it drove her insane, but she soon realized it never affected the way they operated out on the field, so she let it slide. Except for today, but he would learn that soon enough.

It took a solid fifteen minutes, but the room finally settled down. Daniel was the first to look at her.

“Are we ready for my opinion now?” She didn't ask with malice, but she also didn't hide her sarcasm. And she waited until they all agreed before she started speaking. “First of

all”—she pointed to Hollywood—“fuck no.” He was the one to suggest she move back into a safe house. Hell would freeze over before she agreed to that.

Then she turned to both Falcon and Apollo. “Love both of your women, but absolutely not. There isn’t enough ear bleach in the world to convince me to stay with either of you for any length of time. I already hear enough about your sex lives to last me a lifetime.” It was gross and there were days she couldn’t look at the guys without wanting to hide. Both men had the decency to look properly put out by her explanation.

“The same goes for you, Giggles. While Ember might not express as loudly about your sex life, the answer is still hell no.”

Finally, she turned to Panther. “While I appreciate the sentiment and the fact that I know your suggestion is born out of your love to keep me safe, the answer is absolutely not. Actually, absolutely fucking not, in case you thought I might change my mind.”

She took a deep breath and turned to both her boss and Daniel, the only two in the room who hadn’t said anything throughout the exchange, along with Ray. He had made a suggestion, but it was actually a sound one, so she didn’t feel the need to call him out on it.

“I’m not going into hiding or on the run, and I refuse to live with any of these idiots. I have no objection to Ray’s suggestion that a few more cameras be installed and a few other security protocols be added, but that’s all. I will continue

to live my life as I see fit. If anyone has a problem with that, they can kiss my ass.”

Kendra ignored the grumbles and turned to leave. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have thinking to do and four years’ worth of burying shit to uncover.”

She didn’t wait for questions before walking out. She wouldn’t have answered them anyway. She needed time alone to plan her next move.

Chapter 3

Jaxson Hayes packed up his sniper rifle and moved through the empty apartment. The place was a shit hole, with even shittier neighbors. It was why he picked the place when he was told his target liked to pick up hookers a few buildings down. Like clockwork, every Friday evening, the guy was on the same corner, picking up the same woman, and taking her to the same shitty flop where she either sucked him off or he fucked her like a badly made porno. Three weeks of watching the same shit and he had enough. Porn did nothing for him. Neither did hookers. So to say he was glad this job was over was an understatement.

Walking through the dark alleys, no one paid him any attention. Four blocks over and he slipped into his truck. With his rifle case hidden under the seat, he pulled away from the crappy part of town. Another thirty minutes and he was back at his hotel. It didn't take him long to shower off all the grime. After fifteen years of doing the same thing, Jaxson had a routine. One that no longer bothered him. Emotional

detachment. It was why he was recruited to begin with. He had more hash marks on his soul than the average sniper. Hell, more than the above-average sniper. He knew how to compartmentalize. He knew how to turn off his emotions. That's what made him so good at his job. Dropping down into the desk chair, he powered on his burner phone and sent out the same text he had a hundred times before.

Jaxson: Job complete.

It took less than a minute for him to get a response back, and his eyebrow rose in a silent question. Normally, it would take a few hours, if not a day, to get a response. It wasn't like his boss had the pleasure of sitting around waiting for covert messages. Maybe that should've been his first red flag.

Boss: Good. Another file will be delivered to you within the hour.

So much for a break. He didn't hate his job. He didn't love it either, but it was a way for him to control the darkness he was sure lived inside him. It was likely the reason his boss sought him out. Jaxson wasn't delusional about where he came from, but doubted his boss knew the full story. His history was never discussed. He and his boss had a mutual agreement, one he followed to the letter. Nothing more. He completed the missions sanctioned but never anything beyond. He didn't form attachments. He didn't get involved in others' business. Solitary. That was exactly how he liked his life.

Jaxson ordered room service and was just finishing his rare steak when a large manila envelope slid under his door.

Wiping his mouth with a napkin, he pushed aside his late-night meal and, without a single emotion, picked up the envelope. No matter what the contents, it was just another job to him. That's how he approached every new file.

Heartless.

Detached.

Unemotional.

That was until he slipped out the dossier on his new target. One look at those electric-blue eyes and he was tossed back to a single night four years ago. Thrown back to the one woman who changed everything for him. A woman who made him feel for the first time. He hadn't wanted to feel anything, and yet, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't regret that night with her.

Jaxson had effectively shoved that night in a box and didn't allow himself to think of her. Until now. Letting the memories flow, he remembered the way her sad eyes captivated him, the way her body looked beneath his and then, moments later, the way it moved when she rode him.

He could tell the instant he sat down at the bar that there was something different about her. She wasn't fake. She didn't throw herself at him. Hell, she likely wouldn't have given him a second glance if he didn't strike up a conversation first. It was exactly the reason he had. As soon as he heard the bartender cut her off, he just had to know how she would react. What he hadn't expected was for her to challenge him. Or accept his invitation back to his room.

He had been finishing a job, just like tonight. Except that night, he broke his sacred tradition and found a bar instead of eating in his room. He was glad he did. One night was all he allowed himself to have, but as he promised, he never learned her name. Now he did.

Kendra Beck. The name rolled around in his head. It suited her. Just like her eyes, the right mixture of hardness with a hint of softness. An Army Ranger. It explained the hardness but surprised him that she still managed to keep a bit of the softness. Most Rangers he knew had long lost that part of themselves.

Blue eyes. That was the only thing she allowed him to call her. He hadn't known what she did for a living, didn't have a clue where she was from. She kept everything superficial, then snuck out like a thief in the night. When he woke up that morning, he wondered briefly what would've happened if he had changed the rules the night before; if he'd asked her to stay or at least tell him her name. Would she have walked out of his life the same way, in the wee hours of the morning, while he slept soundly for the first time in his life? Those thoughts only lasted long enough for him to get confirmation from his boss. Then, just like with every other mission he was sent on, he went back to his life. Never allowing himself to think about that night again.

Anger coursed through him the longer he held her picture in his hand. Tossing the file on the bed, he picked up his cell phone and placed a call.

“You know better ...”

He cut his boss off, completely ignoring the cold tone. “Absolutely not. You know my rules. They haven’t changed.”

He might be nothing more than a highly paid assassin, but he had a moral compass. No women or children. His boss understood that. At least, he thought he did.

“You will. You have successfully taken care of the other two from that unit. This is the last and will wrap everything up.”

His boss didn’t give him a chance to continue arguing. Silence was the only answer. One glance at his phone and he had his confirmation. His boss had hung up on him.

He sat back on the hotel bed and picked up the file again. For the first time in four years, he had both a name and address for his blue eyes. He took the time to look over the file and his decision was made. *I’m coming for you, Kendra Beck.*

Chapter 4

Well, it was official. Her life was no longer her own. She watched with semi-controlled rage as Ray installed yet another camera around her small cottage. She fell in love with the place the moment the realtor sent her the listing, something that was completely new for her.

Kendra went from living in a shitty house with her parents to the Army where home was just someplace to sleep, and then to living wherever work took Bravo Team. This was her first real home, and it took her all of three minutes after viewing it to decide she was more than ready to be a homeowner. The property sat on two acres, which was much more than she needed, but maybe one day when she got a dog, it would enjoy the extra space. In the meantime, she would welcome the solitude of waking up and being able to look out over her land in peace. At least, that was the plan until Ray and her team got their greedy claws into things.

“Okay, almost done.” Ray pulled her from her mini internal rant.

“Pretty sure this is a little excessive, don’t you think? I agreed to a few cameras. This is way more than a few.”

She didn’t hide her disdain for the situation. She agreed, but only because out of the options given, this was the only one that gave her the freedom she craved. That didn’t mean she had to actually like that it was happening.

“No, I don’t.” The tone of his voice left no room for argument, and she was taken aback. Ray wasn’t like the other guys she worked with, and this was the first time she was seeing the alpha personality she normally associated with the rest of the men on her team. She didn’t much care for this new side of him.

“I can take care of myself,” she defended.

“No one is saying you can’t. You aren’t the first person on the team to have cameras around your house. In fact, you’re the only one who doesn’t,” he pushed. “The safe house that Hollywood and Panther use has them and every other team member of both Charlie and Bravo Team has them, so really, your arguments are moot.”

Why did he have to go and be the rational one right now? All it was doing was making her feel like a damn drama queen, and that wasn’t her personality. Fuck. It really sucked when she was forced to reflect on how she was acting. *Damn Ray.*

“You’re right,” she agreed with a grumble.

“That was tough for you to admit, wasn’t it?” Ray poked her in the side with a giggle. His goofy side was back, and she had to admit she liked that part of him much better.

“Just a smidge.” She held up her fingers in the tiniest space available, but she did it with a chuckle. Ray had the tendency to do that, and not just with her. He seemed to be able to make just about anyone smile. Kinda like Giggles. The two of them could easily have any of them busting a stitch.

A beeping sound interrupted the silliness.

“What’s that?” she ground out. She had a feeling she already knew the answer, but was really hoping she was wrong. Of course, she wasn’t.

“You know what it is,” Ray teased.

Gah! She wanted to scream. Maybe punching Ray would make her feel better. She would likely feel bad later, but right this moment, she was absolutely positive she wouldn’t have a single regret considering how much her privacy was now being invaded. Cameras were one thing. Motion sensors that alerted her to every movement on her secluded and long driveway were a hard pass. Animals would set them off and she already knew how pissy that was going to make her.

“Trista sighting in five ... four ... three ...”

She ignored the rest of his childish countdown and turned in the direction of her front yard. She didn’t get more than five steps in before Trista was barreling her way around the side of the house.

“You didn’t think to give a girl a heads-up?” Trista wasted no time expressing her displeasure to anyone within earshot. “A simple phone call that said ‘hey, by the way, some psycho is after me’ would have sufficed, but no! Not a text message or even a fucking carrier pigeon! I thought we were friends. Guess not. I had to learn that some *hit man* is after my so-called friend from Falcon. Mister ‘I don’t say shit about anything half the time’ gave me the information first. Not cool, Kendra. Not cool at all.”

She let her friend burn herself out. Or she thought she did, but before she could even open her mouth to respond, Trista was back at it again. Only this time, it was Ray getting her ire.

“And don’t you smirk over there, Mister Hotshot Superspy. I didn’t see you calling to let me know you were going to make Kendra’s house light up like the damn Fourth of July. Don’t think I don’t know why you’re here and that my so-called friend *who didn’t tell me she was in danger* is happy about all the privacy you’re taking away from her. Rude, Ray. So damn rude.”

Kendra wasn’t sure which tangent was better. The fact that Trista was yelling at her about something she herself hadn’t known about very long, or the fact that her friend was defending her against the injustice of being spied on. It was both, she finally admitted to herself. Both tangents were the reason she loved Trista so damn much that she forgot that she hated women.

Since it was a good solid minute since Trista's last word, she felt it was safe to ask, "Feel better now?"

"Yes!"

One word, but damn if it wasn't full of so much attitude. Her teammates wondered why she got along so well with Trista when any other female annoyed the shit out of her. Okay, not all but most, and especially the dramatic ones, but no matter how hard she tried, she could never hate on Trista and this was why. The woman was loyal to a fault. Nothing, absolutely nothing, would stop Trista from defending those she cared about. Plus, she was one of the few who called her by her given name and secretly Kendra loved that. While Blue was an awesome nickname, it was given to her because of her blue eyes and they were the one quality about herself that she didn't like.

"You sure? Am I okay to speak now?"

She nearly busted a gut when Trista had the audacity to roll her eyes, like the attitude she was giving was any less dramatic than the one Trista just gave.

"Yes, bitch," Trista snapped, but there was a smirk beneath it. "On with your lies already." With attitude and the "come-on" motion, her friend really was in full-blown diva mode today.

"First off, I didn't call, text, or send a carrier pigeon"—she did her own eye roll at the ridiculousness of the conversation—"because I only just found out a few hours ago, and if you haven't noticed, I've been a bit busy also giving Ray shit

about my newfound lack of freedom. However, I would have told you when we met tomorrow for breakfast, so it wasn't like I planned on hiding it from you. Falcon just couldn't keep his trap shut long enough. Which, by the way, surprises me, since he had to know how you would react."

"Oh, he didn't want to tell me anything," Trista shot back. "I overheard him talking to Wes and told him I refused to give him a world-class blow job again until he spilled."

So matter of fact and not an ounce of remorse. That was exactly Trista's way. Kendra shouldn't be surprised by the blunt retort from her friend, but somehow that statement still shocked her. It shocked Ray as well, if the choking noise coming from behind her was any indication. And that was the reason there was no way in hell she would ever stay with Trista and Falcon.

"I didn't need that tidbit of information." Clearly, Ray was no longer choking.

"Oh, please." Trista let out a dramatic *pfft*. "We all know you aren't shy about your sex life. I've seen the sheer number of women doing the Uber of shame from your house. It's astonishing. Who knew you moving in across the street would provide so much entertainment?"

The slightest blush tinged Ray's cheeks and damn if that didn't make her want to hip-bump Trista for making it happen. Served him right.

"Burn," she giggled.

“I don’t know why I put up with either of you.” Ray threw his hands in the air and walked back to what he was doing before Trista rolled up.

“Because you love us,” Trista hollered after him. Then turned back and merely shrugged. “Well, he does, and you know it.”

She did know it, but that didn’t stop Kendra from laughing or shaking her head at her crazy friend. Trista had one of those over-the-top personalities that people either loved or hated. Fortunately for Trista, everyone seemed to love her, especially her teammates.

“That love might be running a little thin after that comment,” Kendra explained.

“Doubt it. Besides, if he didn’t want anyone to know about his little sexcapades, then his ass shouldn’t have moved across the street from me. I mean hello? Everyone knows I have zero boundaries. What did he expect to happen? For me to keep his secret? Yeah, right.”

Again zero remorse.

“Changing the subject now,” Kendra huffed out.

“Yes, let’s do that. Let’s talk about this hit man you supposedly have after you. Any leads? Is he hot? It is a ‘he,’ right?” Trista’s perplexed look did her in.

She bent over at the waist and just let it all out, all the stress and anger, and just laughed. So hard that she needed to take several deep breaths before she could finally speak again.

“Only you would wonder if the hit man who’s after me is hot.” She wiped away a tear that escaped. “I think it’s safe to say you’re reading too many of Leslie’s books.”

Leslie was Zack’s wife, one of the guys on Charlie Team. She was an author of some steamy romance and more recently of what Leslie liked to call the “morally gray” heroes. Romanticizing a hit man was right up Leslie’s alley.

“Hell yeah, I am. And believe me when I tell you it certainly spices up the sex life. Not that Falcon needs any spicing, but damn if he doesn’t enjoy the perks every time I read one of those smutty scenes.”

The conversation went downhill so fast. She didn’t need the visual her mind was conjuring up of what Falcon and Trista did when they were alone. There were certain parts of girl talk that she couldn’t participate in, and even more so when that talk involved her team leader. Kendra wanted to stick her fingers in her ears and yell *lalalala*, but thought that was a bit too childish, so instead, she cut Trista off from any further explanations.

“Moving on!” She didn’t miss the whispered *prude* coming from her friend’s mouth, but she chose to ignore it. “No, we don’t have any leads. I’m sure once Ray is done wiring up my house with the same security it takes to get into the barn, he will be heading back and digging up information. Not to mention, Daniel is back in town and he’s already looking into it, so between them and my team, there’s a good chance I will

know the person's identity sooner rather than later. Then maybe I can go back to my normal life.”

She hoped anyway. Being the center of attention never sat well with her. She hated it when she was in the Army. The men looked at her differently because she was a female, despite not allowing them to lower the standards for her. It was worse when she went to Ranger school. There were several who thought a female didn't deserve the same chances as the men. There was nothing she could do about it at the time except prove she was good enough. Not the best. That was a fool's errand. No matter what she did, as a woman, she could never compare to a man but that didn't mean she allowed herself to be the worst either. She was forced to prove over and over again that she was good enough to be a Ranger. She didn't care. It gave her a single-minded focus until she was captured and tortured. Then it was like something inside her snapped, and suddenly that drive was no longer the same.

“Well, for your sake, I hope so as well. Overprotective alphas are no fun. Especially when you can't let the frustration out in a healthy manner.” Trista winked. “If you know what I mean.”

Unfortunately, she did, and she nearly gagged. She saw none of her teammates in that light. Sure, most women would consider them sexy, especially Hollywood, who was every woman's wet dream, but all she saw were five brothers. None of them would ever be anything more, so yes, there was no way she would be taking out her frustration in what Trista considered a healthy manner. Although that wasn't anything

new. She couldn't remember the last time she had a man. Oh, wait, yes she could. It was four years ago when she was trying to drink away some memories. Too bad she never got his name. Mr. Mysterious would likely have played the perfect role as one of Leslie's morally gray heroes.

Chapter 5

Terry's Diner was exactly what he expected it to be; an old-fashioned diner smack-dab in the middle of a small town. When he received the dossier on Kendra, he looked up the town of Divot. Hell, nearly everyone Kendra worked with owned a good chunk of the town. He knew it wouldn't take long for rumors to start about the new guy walking around. Fortunately for him, he had no intention of actually staying in town. If anyone asked, he was just passing through with his dog.

Jaxson looked down at Duke, his seven-year-old American foxhound. No one in the diner had blinked an eye when they walked in. It was a good thing too. He hated going anywhere without his best friend. The days he was on an assignment and unable to take Duke with him were brutal. His dog had been by his side throughout his latest journey and there were some days he felt he wouldn't have been able to continue if it weren't for the comfort Duke offered. He hated to admit it, but there were times he wondered if what he did was starting to

eat at his soul, and if maybe that box he shoved every kill into was just a bit too full. Either that, or he was becoming melancholy in his old age. If one could call thirty-eight “old.”

He discarded the thought immediately and picked up the plastic menu. Jaxson had barely made it through the first two breakfast choices when a man, who had to be pushing seventy but still looked pretty fit, approached the table. If he were a betting man, he would say the man served at one point. Or maybe he just knew his way around manual labor, because there was no way a man pushing seventy should still have the body of a man much younger.

“New to town or just passin’ through?” he asked while filling up Jaxson’s overturned coffee mug, the universal diner sign that the customer did indeed want the cup of joe. He’d been to enough small-town diners to know how to act like a traveler.

And the question didn’t surprise him. It was exactly what he expected the second he sat down. People were so predictable and the reason he was able to be so effective at his job. Watch someone long enough and it was easy to pick up their routines.

“Passing through.” The lie slipped through naturally.

“Well, glad to have ya at my humble abode. Name’s Terry. What can I getcha?”

He wondered if this was the owner. If so, he gave the man credit for still working the tables. It was the kind of man he could respect. No wonder the guy didn’t look lazy and old.

Unfortunately, Jaxson wasn't the sort to chat. He was sure this man would be a wealth of knowledge about his target.

"Breakfast special. Italian toast. Over easy eggs and bacon." He wasted no time rattling off his order in a short and concise manner. Small talk, as a rule, wasn't his thing, and he found that people in small towns could get chatty quickly. It was better to just cut them off before they could even begin.

"Comin' right up. Holler if ya need anythin'."

He gave a curt nod, and Terry moved away as quickly as he approached. Coming to Divot wasn't the smartest decision. There was always the off chance that Kendra would see him. It was why he opted for a baseball cap and kept it low, hopefully covering his eyes. Not his best disguise, but it would do. He wanted to get a feel for the area and driving around aimlessly didn't seem to be the best use of his time.

He thought back over what he had learned about his blue eyes, the woman who captivated him all those years ago. Just a day before, he had been wondering if he'd made a mistake not demanding she tell him who she was before she left. And now here he sat, in the same town she lived in.

Kendra had taken the job with W.J. Protective Services a week after their night together. She'd spent most of her time in Mexico, chasing down human traffickers, and it wasn't until recently that she finally settled into a little cottage on the outskirts of town, one he fully planned to visit again later that day. He had driven by yesterday, just in time to watch as one of her teammates installed new equipment. It hadn't been the

right time for him to scope out the area. That was why he was back today. He needed to see how hard it would be to get close to her, to do what he came to Texas to do.

He looked down when Duke let out a whimper. While his dog loved to travel, sitting in a diner wasn't something he liked. No, Duke preferred when he could run free through open fields. That and socializing. His buddy was a friend magnet for both kids and adults. There was never a time that someone didn't love Duke. Why the dog had chosen him as a friend was a mystery. And it was Duke who chose him. Jaxson had found the little guy while on an assignment, huddled behind a bunch of boxes. One look and Duke was pinned to his side, no matter how hard he tried to shake him, and truth be told he hadn't tried all that hard, but it didn't matter. What Duke wanted, Duke got. It was still true to this day.

He was still thinking about Duke when Terry dropped off his breakfast. He couldn't help but notice the little extras added just for his dog. Duke strikes again. Even the diner owner was taken in by Duke's sad eyes. Not that his dog was actually sad, but that Duke knew how to lay it on thick.

“You're spoiled, you know that?”

People around him likely thought he was a bit crazy to be speaking to the animal, but screw them. At the end of the day, Duke was his only friend and really the only thing he needed. With Duke in his life, he could actually convince himself that he wasn't the loner his boss criticized him for being.

The food was good. He could see why the place boasted that they had been in business for over fifty years. Terry refilled his cup twice, never allowing the coffee to get cold. It was no wonder the place was packed. Every time a table left, another customer was quickly filling the spot. Luckily, the one woman he was here for wasn't one of them.

By the time he was done eating, the diner was no less packed than it had been when he entered. He was reaching for his wallet when Terry appeared again. This time, it would seem the man didn't plan on leaving without asking a few things.

“Where ya headed to? Divot ain't usually a stop on anyone's list.”

He bit back the urge to snap that it was none of the man's business. He reminded himself for the tenth time that this was a small town. He doubted the population was larger than two thousand people, so yes, someone passing through was unlikely. That didn't mean he enjoyed being questioned. In fact, he hated it. Didn't tolerate it well. Except he had no choice. He couldn't afford to draw attention to himself, or why he was there.

“Nowhere special. Decided I wanted to travel across the country with my boy here.” Jaxson patted Duke, who was lying on the bench next to him, his head on Jaxson's leg.

He should have insisted Duke lie on the floor, but it had taken only a second when he walked in to say fuck that. Duke was better than that, and his dog was well-trained. Begging for

food wasn't something he did. Not when he knew Jaxson always bought him a meal.

“Good friend ya got there,” Terry told him while slipping the check onto the table.

“The best kind,” Jaxson answered honestly.

“Well, if yer ever in the area again, don't be a stranger around these parts.”

He didn't miss the indecision marring Terry's face. It looked like he wanted to say more but, in the end, decided against it. That was probably for the best. Too many questions and he would need to deal with the old man.

There was no way he would be visiting again. He was only in the area for one thing. Tossing some money down on the table, he climbed out of the booth to leave with Duke right on his heels as he stepped back out into the Texas sun. Slipping on his sunglasses, Jaxson looked up and down the one main road in the town. He didn't see Kendra yet, but he would have her in his sights soon enough.

Chapter 6

Being the center of attention was never Kendra's thing. Being the center of her team's attention was even worse. She wanted to hunt down and kill the assassin on her own just for putting her through this shit. Talk about overprotective. It had her wanting to roll her eyes every three seconds, but she figured her boss and team leader would likely have something to say about it.

"I reached out to a buddy of mine last night that I served with," Wes started.

They were meeting in the situation room, and Kendra wanted to be anywhere but here. Even hunting down human traffickers in the drudges of Mexico would've been favorable over being the center of attention.

"Daniel was able to get access to the autopsies and, based on the ballistics reports, we were able to narrow down the list of potential snipers, but there are a few problems. Three of them are former or active military. My buddy believes all three are part of a specialized unit that performs ... let's say ... not

so sanctioned assignments. We were able to get their records. Ninety-nine percent of it is bullshit, but at least we know what they look like and can keep an eye out for them. Then we have one more who we have nothing on other than what profilers like to call a ‘signature.’ This individual is a ghost, but it’s clear based on the MO that the assassinations were done by the same person.”

“Are we thinking this ghost is possibly the same as one of those three serving?” Falcon asked. “Or someone completely different?”

As much as she hated that they were meeting because of her, she couldn’t hide her interest in the question. If the assignments were off the books, and whoever was ordering them didn’t want the military involved, they very well could have been the same individual. She had heard grumblings of such specialized units when she was in the Army, but never anything concrete. The who and why were kept under wraps.

“Yes, one and the same is exactly what we’re thinking,” Daniel confirmed. Strong. Resolute. There was no room for argument. Something told her Daniel knew more than he was sharing. She found that curious. As far as she knew, Daniel never served, so operational security wouldn’t be an issue. Something else was keeping him quiet.

“So, what’s this signature that ties them together?”

She glanced over at Panther. Other than the slight outburst the day before, her teammate talked very little, preferring to speak only when necessary. Even less than Falcon, and that

was saying something. When she first met Panther, she thought for sure he was stuck up. Turned out he preferred to observe what was going on around him before giving any input. It was his questions and insight she valued the most because she knew they were carefully planned and thought out.

“The weapon used,” Wes answered. “Although the sniper is careful to police his brass. I’m assuming it’s a he. And also the way he kills his marks.”

Kendra finally did roll her eyes. The man wasn’t sexist, and for the most part, he stopped excusing his behavior in front of her long ago, but occasionally it snuck out. Like now. She didn’t give the first fuck if he classified the assassin as a male while they looked. In the end, that shit didn’t matter. An assassin was an assassin. Period.

“Define the way he kills?” Giggles prompted.

“He kills them while in compromising situations. In the middle of a drug deal, while with a prostitute, while watching kiddie porn. The list goes on. All the kills done by this supposed *Reaper*, yes that’s what he’s nicknamed, have something similar. Skeletons in the closet, so to speak.”

Kendra had to suppress a laugh. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to find the person and kill them, or give them a high five for ousting people for the dirty shit they did. Giggles was apparently of the same mind.

“I know this supposed ‘Reaper’ might be the person after Blue, but would it be wrong to give the fucker a job well done

for taking those scumbags out? Sorry, Blue, I know that's insensitive. I mean, I'll still kill the fucker for you, but a simple thanks for ridding the world of assholes should be in order. Maybe as you put a bullet in his brain you could mumble it? You know, a little 'sorry for this' but also a 'hey, thanks, fucker' kinda thing."

Now she did laugh. Not a full-blown one, because that would be inappropriate considering the reason they were gathered, but a small chuckle snuck out. She really liked that he said she would be the one pulling the trigger. It reminded her that her team still considered her an equal despite their overprotectiveness.

"Not insensitive." She waved the laughter away with her hand. "I was thinking the same thing, but what about the two I served with? How do they fit in?"

Wes and Daniel exchanged a look she could only describe as some sort of silent communication. She knew she wouldn't like what they had to say when it required her boss to let out a very loud exhale of air. Wes didn't get frazzled, so whatever he had to tell her couldn't be good. However, she respected the fact that he didn't pull any punches and just told her the facts as they were.

"Jenson was found while looking at child porn, and Packton had bank deposits that showed he had several offshore accounts with millions of dollars tucked away."

She let the news wash over her. She had served with these men, had been tortured right along with them when their unit

was ambushed. She wouldn't have said they were friends, mostly because both men felt a woman shouldn't be allowed to be a Ranger, but that didn't mean she wanted them murdered. At least, not before she learned what they did. Now she was glad the world was rid of their blackened souls. She wasn't entirely sure what that said about her character.

“So, they were killed by the Reaper.” It wasn't a question, and she didn't need the confirmation Daniel was about to give her.

“That's the assumption, and why I was sent to look into them more.”

She digested everything she was told so far. It was a lot. Twenty-four hours was all it took to turn her life upside down, and she didn't know how she felt about that. Pissed didn't seem to do the feeling enough justice. Things she thought she knew were no longer the case. Four years of harboring guilt that she lived, along with two other good men, was all a lie. They weren't the men she thought them to be.

“So maybe this has nothing to do with Blue.” Hollywood's response kept her from going further down that rabbit hole. “It's not like she has any hidden secrets we don't know about. I mean, after living with her for four years, I feel pretty confident that I know all I need to know.”

Hollywood wasn't wrong. In fact, he was a nosy son of a bitch, and a messy one to boot. Even if she wanted to keep a secret from her teammate, she doubted she could. She'd lived in the present and she hadn't hidden that from her team. Her

past was just that; in the past. But nothing in it would be reason enough for someone to send a hit man after her.

“Hollywood’s right. There’s no way in hell this Reaper could be after Blue.”

Apollo’s words made her feel good. She hated to think that, deep down, she still harbored some of her insecurities from her time in the Rangers. She was left with more than just the nightmares that plagued her sleep. For months after she was rescued, she couldn’t shake the feeling that everyone was right, that she really wasn’t good enough. It was why the decision to leave the Army came so easily to her. Kendra wasn’t the same Ranger she had been before her capture, and while she gained a lot of her confidence back over the last four years, that niggling feeling made itself known occasionally. Unfortunately, now was one of those times.

“We don’t know anything for sure, but I think it’s safe to assume she could be a target even without any dirty secrets and we’ll treat it as such,” Daniel answered.

There went any hope that maybe everything was a misunderstanding and she could go back to her life. She really needed to stop expecting that to happen. It was only disappointing every time she found out otherwise.

She listened as the conversation continued around her, listened as her team continued to defend her honor. She was humbled that they had such faith in her. Not that they shouldn’t. She had nothing to hide. No dirty secrets that would be exploited when someone attempted to kill her. Other than

the fact that two of the Reaper's victims were the same men she served with, there was no reason she should even be worried. Yet, she was because her boss was. Wes didn't worry needlessly.

“Here are the three snipers whose names we were given,” Ray explained. “As Wes stated, there's a good chance that the majority of the information on them is either false or redacted. But we have their service record and identities, so that's something.”

Kendra continued to listen as their images popped up on the screen. Her whole world shifted beneath her when she recognized the third image on the screen. Mr. Dark and Mysterious was suddenly staring right back at her. She never would have pegged he was in the Army. Maybe that was judgmental of her, but with the dangerous vibe he gave off, she had leaned more toward the mafia or motorcycle gang.

When she thought back on it, that probably wasn't the smartest decision she'd made—to leave the bar with a man whom she knew nothing about and who, on any other day, would have given her reason to pause. She didn't pause, though. Four years ago her life had been in turmoil and that one night had been a tipping point for her. A week later, Wes offered her a job. She vowed to do better, and she had. She turned her life around and never thought back on that night. Until now.

Four years was a long time to plan a murder. Was that night a coincidence? She hoped like hell that was the case. Those

memories got her through many lonely nights. It was pathetic to admit, but she needed them to remain untainted.

Kendra didn't hear the rest of what was said during the meeting. By the time she walked out, her head was in such a fog that she couldn't even remember how she managed to make it home. It was a damn good thing she didn't live far, and the town was so small. Luckily, it was later in the day, so there weren't many people out driving because it was clear she drove on automatic, her subconscious doing all the work.

The walk into her house wasn't any better, and that's where she went wrong. She didn't look around her yard. If she had, she would have noticed the lack of lights that should have automatically come on, or maybe the dog that wasn't hers roaming about her backyard. Maybe she would've noticed that her alarm wasn't set. Even though it was new, she had remembered to set it that morning before meeting Trista. And lastly, she would've heard the faint footsteps move across her kitchen just moments before she was grabbed from behind.

Chapter 7

Instinct kicked in. Kendra jabbed her elbow back and felt the rush of satisfaction when it elicited a grunt from her intruder. Another well-placed stomp of her foot and the hand holding her mouth loosened. She didn't waste any time taking advantage of the reprieve. Kendra might not be the best on her team at hand-to-hand combat, which was reserved for Apollo, but he was the one to train her. She could hold her own more often than not, even when the person likely had nearly a hundred pounds on her.

Spinning on her heel, she was throwing out a right hook before she finished stepping out of the embrace, holding her. She managed to clip the person's jaw and the thrill of the fight surged through her veins. She was just getting into her groove. Kendra took advantage of the momentary stumble of the intruder to get in a roundhouse kick to the gut.

She expected the person to go down, but a slight adjustment on their part at the last minute prevented the full force of her kick from landing. A fierce growl filled her otherwise quiet

living room just a second before a rock-hard body slammed into her. She had only a second to consider that it felt familiar before she shook off the feeling. There was no way this could be anyone she knew.

They were both knocked off their feet from the momentum of the hit and crashed through her coffee table, the cheap wood splintering into a million pieces from their combined weight. Kendra was sure she would have gotten the upper hand if she had just another second. Planting her feet firmly on the floor, she bucked her hips and attempted to toss the person off her, but they were just too heavy.

“I’m not here to hurt you, blue eyes.” A whispered growl stole her breath away.

Only one person had ever called her that, and just an hour ago his face was on the screen of potential men sent to kill her. Not believing a word he said, she slammed her head back and clipped his chin.

A hissed “motherfucker” met her ears.

Satisfied that she managed to loosen his grip enough to scramble out from under him, she quickly moved across the room to where her phone had skidded out of her hand. She was mere inches from it when she was being lifted off her feet and tossed onto the couch, sending pillows scattering. She tried to move, but he was quicker. Pinning her to the couch, she had only a second to recognize those dark eyes before they were gone from her vision.

The man she now knew as Jaxson Hayes slammed his lips on hers. Kendra immediately sank her teeth into his lips, reveling in the fact that she drew blood, but it didn't deter him. In fact, it seemed to spur him on. In one swift move, he had both of her wrists locked in his one hand and her legs trapped beneath his rock-hard body. A husky growl feathered across her face. She tried to buck her hips again, but the hand that wasn't securing her wrists held her in place. Doing her best not to react to his body, she opened her mouth to tell him exactly how she felt, but quickly realized her mistake when all it did was leave her mouth open for him to plunder.

His tongue swept in with brutal force. Reminding her of that night so long ago. Kendra tried desperately not to be swept away by the sensations he was evoking, but soon she was struggling less and wriggling more. Desperate for the friction she knew damn well he could create. It had been a long four-year dry spell, and this man knew how to play her body. In one night, he had learned so much about what pleased her.

Jaxson didn't let up his assault on her mouth until she was a whimpering mess beneath him. He sensed the moment the fight left her because his hands released her wrists, but instead of pushing him away, she pulled him closer. Her body took over while her rational mind was pushed aside.

Clawing at his shirt, she yanked it higher until her palms finally met his hot skin. A little mewl escaped her throat from the contact. She wanted more, needed more, and she wanted it now. Jaxson didn't seem to have any issue reading the sounds she was making. Without any prompting, he was up on his

haunches and dragging her pants down her legs. Unlike the last time, he didn't take her panties with them. Instead, his arms bulged from the force he used to tear them off her. And holy fuck, was that hot. He tossed the shredded pieces to the ground like the garbage they now were.

Not bothering to give her a chance to comment on his barbaric ways, Jaxson was tossing her right leg over his shoulder and spreading her wide on the couch. With one hand under her ass and the other pressed against her stomach, he held her firmly in place as his tongue speared her welcoming pussy. She screamed out at the sudden intrusion and the overwhelming pleasure that suddenly flowed through her body. She tried to pump her hips when his teeth grazed her clit but he held her body still, torturing her with his mouth, bringing her to the edge over and over again but backing off each time until she became a whimpering mess beneath him, begging him for a release.

“Soon, blue eyes.”

That damn sultry voice that piqued her interest the first time rumbled along her most delicate lips, his cool breath a shock to her heated core. Finally, no longer able to take the torture, she broke free of his hold, knocking him off-balance just enough that, using her core muscles, she was able to roll them both off the couch. Landing in a mess of blankets and pillows, she finally had the upper hand.

“Not so tough now, are you?”

It was stupid to challenge him. She could tell the moment his dark eyes glistened with mischief that the man she once called Mr. Mysterious looked ready to devour her. And she was ashamed to admit that, after the way he tortured her and ate her, she was going to let him and love every fucking second of it.

“We’ll see if you change your opinion after I fuck you senseless.”

Scissoring his legs, he managed to push her off and flip her onto her knees in one swoop. She would’ve been impressed if her face wasn’t buried into the couch cushion with her ass tipped in the air. The only warning of what was going to happen was the sound of a zipper being pulled down. Her body was hyper-aware of every move Jaxson was making.

The cushions absorbed her scream as he rammed into her with such force the couch slid backward. The first shock of the pain from him ripping into her barely used vagina quickly morphed into pleasure with each brutalizing assault. Her body quivered as he pulled back, almost leaving her, then once again pounded back in, the force of his balls slapping her upturned ass.

The sound of flesh on flesh filled the room, her moans barely contained by the cushions. Jaxson’s grunts were the perfect addition to the trifecta of noises assailing her senses. Kendra was forced to tilt her head slightly to avoid suffocating, but the new angle only spurred him on. Draping his chest over her back, Jaxson nibbled on her neck and ear,

bringing her to the brink. With one bite of the sensitive flesh behind her ear, she screamed in ecstasy as her first orgasm overtook her. The sensation was even more powerful from the repeated denial just moments before.

Her body sagged into the cushions. The only thing keeping her up on her knees were the hands gripping her waist with such brutality that she was sure to sport some bruises.

“Not done fucking you yet.”

She wanted to smirk at the frustrated tone in his voice, but all sounds fled when he flipped her back over onto the floor once again. Landing on the makeshift bed of cushions and pillows, she was nearly bent in half with her legs pressed against her chest the next time Jaxson eased inside her, taunting her. The new angle brought him deeper and tighter until she felt like she was strangling his cock.

The change of pace burned her insides, causing yet another orgasm to build up. With a slow, steady rhythm, Jaxson brought her closer and closer to the edge until the two of them were flying off the cliff together. This second orgasm wasn't nearly as powerful as the first, but it affected her just the same.

Kendra basked in the feel of Jaxson's hard body shaking with just as much power as he spilled inside her. By the time he finally dropped her legs and collapsed on top of her, Kendra was sure her body would just melt through the floor. Not giving a fuck that her shirt was twisted, her bra cockeyed, and the fact that she was naked from the waist down, she took a few moments to savor the feeling of his naked body against

hers. Well, half-naked body. His shirt was gone, tossed somewhere off to the side, but his pants were still halfway down his thighs.

She felt his dick soften and cringed when their combined juices began to slowly leak out of her. With a grumbled “shit” Jaxson slid off her. She was about to move to clean herself up when something soft slid between her legs.

Forcing herself to pick up her head, she watched in amazement as Jaxson used his shirt to clean her up. She wanted to scurry away at the intimacy of the situation but stopped herself. Instead, she whispered, “Thank you.”

Jaxson was clearly as surprised by the gesture as she was. Tossing the shirt away with a scowl, he lay beside her and pulled her to him, forcing her to lie wrapped in his arms. Neither of them spoke for what felt like an eternity. Kendra had no idea what to say or think about what had just happened.

They were still lying in the same position on the makeshift bed of discarded clothes and blankets and pillows, with Jaxson tracing the contours of her stomach and abs, when she finally got up the nerve to ask. “Were you sent here to kill me?”

She should’ve prepared herself better for the answer, but she didn’t have time. Her world, and her heart, stopped as he whispered his one-word answer.

“Yes.”

Chapter 8

Jaxson felt the shift in Kendra's body. One second, she was soft and relaxed in his arms and the next, she was holding a gun and pointing it at his head. *Where the hell did the gun come from?* He shouldn't be so turned on by how quickly her instincts kicked in, or the fact that she looked sexy as hell right now all armed and dangerous, but he would be lying to himself. Not to mention his, once again, hard dick couldn't be missed. The damn thing was lying on his stomach like a beacon, demanding attention despite the two rounds of sex they just had.

Without moving a muscle, he explained, "I said I was sent to kill you, not that I intended to actually do it. Two completely different things, blue eyes."

If this were any other woman, hell any other *person*, he would already have disarmed Kendra and had her back in his arms. However, this was his blue eyes, and after everything he read and experienced firsthand, he wasn't entirely confident he could do so without one of them getting seriously hurt. It was

by the grace of God that she hadn't killed him when he grabbed her. If there was any doubt she had lost her edge after leaving the Army, it was squashed during their tussle. Sex was likely the only thing that saved him.

“Care to explain?” she growled.

Why did she have to look so damn sexy while she was pointing a gun at him? Questioning him? Her dark, normally pin-straight hair had the “just fucked” look from him fisting it while taking her from behind, and her bright blue eyes were even brighter. And he could see the slightest blush above her shirt as it crept up her neck. He knew from four years ago that it would continue down to her perfect breasts. It was a shame he kept the top of her clothes on during their angry fuck, because he would have loved to see that blush again. He missed it after all these years. For too long, he denied himself the memories. It was good to bring them back into focus.

“Care to stop pointing that gun in my face?” he volleyed back. He would much prefer to have this conversation without the threat of her becoming trigger-happy.

“No.”

One word.

Hard.

Resolute.

Damn. “Okay,” he dragged out. “Then is this a conversation that requires me to have some clothes on?”

He didn't mind his nudity, and he could look at her naked all day. Actually, he preferred her naked. There was something seriously fucking hot about knowing their combined juices were dirtying his shirt just inches from where they were locked in their Mexican standoff. But it was becoming increasingly awkward that his cock was still hard and Kendra wasn't even looking in that direction. It sucked, knowing she had more control of her reactions than he did.

“Nope. I think the vulnerability of the moment is good for your ego.”

He tipped his head back and let out a roar of laughter. If she thought for a second that his being naked made him vulnerable, she was about to learn just how wrong she was. Naked or clothed, he would kill someone in a heartbeat. It was who he was, what he was trained to do. He excelled. And that wasn't just his ego talking. His kill count was high because detachment came easily for him. Except now.

“Sorry to disappoint you, blue eyes, but this”—he gestured down to his semi-hard erection—“doesn't make me vulnerable. It wouldn't stop me in the slightest from completing a mission.”

“Good to know you routinely walk around with a hard-on while killing people. For a minute there, I thought it was for my benefit,” she replied sarcastically.

“Never said routinely. This baby is all for you.” He winked. “I said it wouldn't stop me from completing a mission.”

“And right now, that mission is me?” She popped her one eyebrow, and for the briefest second, he thought about rushing her just so he could kiss the scowl off her face. Fortunately, he opted to use his other head, rather than the one down below, and thought better of it.

“Correct.”

“So, tell me why I shouldn’t shoot you right now and dispose of your body. Let the Reaper go down in flaming glory. That is your name, isn’t it? That’s what people call you who don’t realize you’re technically still in the Army? I didn’t need to see the tattoo to figure it out,” she smugly told him.

The air crackled around him. The playful banter he was using to disarm her was long gone. It would appear that she and her team knew more about him than he first realized. That was a mistake he wouldn’t let happen again. It wasn’t just his boss who wouldn’t be happy. Jaxson preferred the anonymity that the Reaper gave him.

“What do you know about the Reaper?” Dead. That was exactly how his voice sounded to his ears.

“Some, but not nearly enough. Obviously, my team didn’t know your identity, but you were on the shortlist. You showing up here after four years when I never told you my name was the first indication. The second was the tattoo on your back. It’s obviously new since I never saw it the last time we had the pleasure of tangling limbs. I would’ve remembered such an important detail. Even if I chose to forget everything else.”

Her cocky smile pissed him off. Hearing her admit that she chose to forget what they shared. Sure, he did the same, but still. Even if she was speaking the truth, it was clear her body remembered, and responded accordingly.

He mentally cursed himself. Two years ago, he had gotten the tattoo on a whim because nothing else was working. When he wasn't on an assignment, he was a mess. Cutting off his emotions had a downside. It was turning him into something he didn't want to be, something he didn't know how to handle. Emotionless. It was the only word people used to describe him and yet he wanted to feel something, so he turned toward pain. It seemed to be the only thing that helped, so when he wasn't pushing himself physically to the brink, he was tattooing his body. She must not have gotten a good look at the rest of them, otherwise they would be having a much different argument. However, tattoos or why he got them weren't the problem at the moment, and he needed to stay focused on what was.

“How many more were on this so-called shortlist?”

His boss wouldn't be happy about that. Although when he thought about it, he wasn't particularly speaking to his boss, so why he gave a fuck was beyond him. And he wouldn't be speaking to the man until he found out why the hell he was sent for Kendra. Something wasn't right about the assignment and he needed to figure it out before his boss sent someone else.

“See, that's something I'm not entirely sure I feel comfortable telling you. You were sent to kill me.” She held

up one finger, and he kept his mouth shut. Yes, he was sent, but he didn't plan to follow through, something he didn't want to keep rehashing.

“Which makes you the enemy.” Another finger was added. This one he felt was true, but also made him want to chuckle, considering barely thirty minutes before she was fucking the enemy. He thought it best not to mention that. At least not yet. It likely wouldn't win him any favors.

“Oh, and there's this little fact that I don't know anything about you.” She held up a third finger. “Your service record is bullshit. Something I fully expected for someone in the Special Forces community, but considering you seem to have two personalities, the little I discovered seems to mean even less.”

He thought about what she said. She was wrong. Just her knowing he was the Reaper meant she knew more about him than anyone else. Aside from his boss, no one knew. That was done on purpose. He was a cold-hearted bastard that didn't do mushy feelings. They were a wasted emotion. So why did that last point about her not knowing anything about him bother him so much?

“At any point do I get to defend myself here?”

See, that right there was unlike him. He didn't ask to do anything. He did as he wanted. And he sure as shit never felt the need to defend himself. There was no point. People got what they got. He didn't change, and he didn't attempt to

prove himself. People could gladly keep their opinions to themselves.

“Feel free to start anytime. I can’t wait for the explanation.”

The sarcasm both turned him on and grated on his nerves. He understood why it got him off. She was a challenge, and a man like him needed that in a woman. It was why she intrigued him so much that first night. The fire in her eyes was dimmed, and he wanted to see it burn. But he couldn’t understand why what she said bothered him. Everything about Kendra didn’t make sense. She should’ve been a one-night, great-sex-and-happy-to-see-her-go situation. But she wasn’t, and he hated that he didn’t know what to do about it.

“As I’ve stated before,” he replied with just as much sarcasm, “yes, I was sent to kill you. At no point have I lied about that, and I’m not in the habit of hiding my intentions. However,” he cut her off before she could say anything, “if I wanted you dead, you would be. This isn’t my ego talking. I’m a hell of a sniper and the reason my kill count is so high is that I have no issues getting into tight situations and finishing the job. I didn’t do that. I approached you instead.”

“No, you didn’t *approach* me. Let’s not pretend this was some chivalrous attempt to protect me. You broke in. Something that pisses me off considering I spent all day yesterday having a shit ton of cameras installed against my wishes, and for what?”

He was going to risk it all on this one. Nothing he did was going to make the situation better, so he did what he did best.

“Yeah, I noticed that. Seems you have a blind spot. A man like me exploits those.”

If looks could kill, he would be dead. That should worry him. Instead, he was back to being turned on. Something he was quickly finding happened a lot when he was around her. That was going to be a major problem.

“And what kind of man are you, Jaxson?”

The kind who clearly gets stiff the second his name falls from her lips. He could just imagine what it would sound like when she screamed it while he fucked her again. If he didn't watch himself, Kendra was going to actually use that gun she was still pointing at him. If she had any inclination of what he was thinking, he was pretty damn sure that would be her first reaction.

“The dangerous kind. The kind that you should stay far away from. The kind who will take the smallest opening and exploit it. The kind of man that mothers warn their daughters about.”

He was doing his best to scare her, but the glint in her eyes spoke volumes. He had the feeling he missed his objective by a mile. His assumption was confirmed the second she opened her mouth.

“It's a good thing I can take care of myself.”

This time, he threw caution to the wind and lunged her way. Knocking the gun out of her hand, he wrapped his arm around

her waist and brought her back down to the floor and ground
his pelvis into her.

“You sure about that?”

Chapter 9

“**F**uck! Don’t stop . . . I’m so close . . .”

Jaxson continued to slowly enter her, bringing her to yet another orgasm in as many minutes. It amazed him just how good her pussy felt hugging his cock.

When she’d pointed the gun at him, the only thing he could think about was how sexy she looked and how badly he wanted to fuck her again. So that’s what he had done. He knocked it away and showed her just how much he could pleasure her, even if she didn’t want it.

“You gonna let me take care of this beautiful cunt, blue eyes?” he moaned in her ear.

“No talking. Just fucking.”

He chuckled at her denial. She wouldn’t cave and admit just how much she was enjoying this, but that was fine with him. He would relish bringing her to a wriggling mess each time. When her next orgasm hit and she screamed his name for the whole neighborhood to hear, he smiled with satisfaction.

Tossing his own head back, he let his own release come with a roar. Never in his life had he come as hard as when he was inside her, something he had desperately forced himself to forget all those years ago.

Using his already dirty shirt, he cleaned her up again, this time taking the moment to sniff their combined juices when she was distracted. She smelled so fucking good. Just a hint of citrus. He would gladly wear her scent on him. Hell, he just might never wash the shirt and keep it as a damn souvenir. Some men liked to steal their women's underwear, he much preferred this trophy.

Tucking himself back into his pants, he locked eyes with her. As much fun as fucking was, there was a reason he'd snuck into her house. Sex wasn't the objective, even if it was an added bonus.

“We need to talk.”

Kendra shot him a look that screamed her displeasure, erasing the sex haze she'd worn just moments before. Replacing it was a look that likely meant she wanted to kill him for the change of conversation. He understood why. What he had to say wasn't going to sit well with her. And considering he'd just gotten her to stop talking by using sex, it was a little redundant that now he was forcing her to start up again.

It would seem the only way he could communicate with Kendra was through sex. That was fine with him. He was better at physical actions anyway. He fucked up when he

opened his mouth. The irony wasn't lost on him when the next few words left his mouth.

“We need to figure out why I was sent to kill you.”

This time, Kendra didn't stiffen up. She also didn't pull a gun on him, which was a damn shame now that he'd discovered he had a thing for women hell-bent on killing him. A therapist would likely have a field day trying to figure him out. What she did do was walk towards where her pants lay in a crumbled mess on the floor, her eyes never leaving his. Without answering him, she pulled out her phone. He watched as her fingers quickly typed out a message. At no point did she feel the need to explain what she was doing, but he had a feeling she was contacting her team. Or at least her boss. He knew a lot about Wes James. It was hard not to in the Special Forces world. The man was a legend. If he had an idol, Wes likely would have been it. He respected the hell out of the guy for all he accomplished.

It was several minutes of complete silence before Kendra willingly answered him.

“Better get dressed, Jaxson. Reinforcements are on the way.”

Kendra didn't bother to wait for him to respond before her sexy ass walked away, completely naked this time, and damn if it wasn't a sight to behold. If her team was about to kill him, he was going to sear that image into his brain and use it as his last memory.

He snagged his boxers and jeans and tugged them both on. He found his shirt next to where he had fucked Kendra the last time. There was no salvaging it. At least, not until he got the chance to toss it in the washer. Since that wasn't going to happen right now, he wrapped it up into a ball and tossed it off to the side. He would deal with that later. All thoughts of saving it were pushed to the back burner. He had bigger things to worry about.

Kendra didn't come back out of her bedroom until just before the first vehicle rolled up. Freshly showered, she looked like a siren with her long wet hair flowing down her back.

Knowing Duke was still waiting for him outside, he moved that way. Jaxson made it to the bottom of the back steps before the first gun was pulled on him. He recognized the man instantly from the file he had on Kendra. Luis Oliveira.

Duke, being the good dog he was, stepped in front of him and let out a fierce growl. It was then he noticed another of Kendra's teammates slide around the small house. Camron Jones also had a gun pointed in his direction.

Since he wasn't the type of guy to put his hands up in surrender, he merely kept them by his side. But he also wasn't stupid. These guys would shoot first and ask questions later. So, while he didn't put them up, he certainly kept them visible at all times. Dying in front of his dog wasn't on his to-do list for the evening.

"You two were fast." Kendra's husky voice smacked him in the back. "I figured Wes would be first." He could hear her

low footfalls making their way down. “Oh, and where the hell did the dog come from?”

That last part caused his hackles to rise. Duke was his best friend, and he didn't like people talking about him, especially when the tone of their voice wasn't exactly friendly.

“He's mine, blue eyes. Been right outside the whole time.”

Jaxson had just finished his statement when the rest of Kendra's team showed up, including the infamous Wes. Now there were five guns pointed at him. Wes was the only newcomer not to draw a weapon, but he figured that had more to do with the fact that, if need be, the boss would be cleaning up the mess, not making it.

“Do I wanna know why this guy's moving around your backyard shirtless?”

The anger he felt seconds before, in defense of his dog, quickly morphed to defend Kendra from her boss's remark.

“It got dirty,” he answered with a sneer.

“I'm sure it did.” Wes was precisely like people described him. Grumpy, but with a hint of ice. He couldn't tell if the response was sarcastic or bored. “Blue, you called us here. Said you had some information about who was after you. Care to share?”

“Sure.” That husky voice he thought sounded so sexy dragged out the one word. “You're looking at him. Meet the man who was sent to kill me.”

Fucking hell. He was sorely tempted to turn around and spank her pretty ass for that, but he was slightly concerned that one, if not all, of her teammates had their own itchy trigger fingers. One wrong move and they were likely to just kill him. Since he didn't have a plan to die today, he let out a slow whistle instead.

“Thanks for that one,” he sarcastically replied. “Could have mentioned the fact that I told you despite being hired to kill you, I had no plan on doing so.”

“Semantics at this point.” Kendra continued to speak from behind him. He should be grateful. Maybe if she stayed there, her teammates wouldn't shoot in fear of a ricocheting bullet. “Plus, until we know more, I'm not sure I believe you.”

“Pretty sure you believed him enough to fuck him.”

His gaze shot to Luis. The man was lucky he couldn't shoot laser beams from his eyes because one glance and the cocky son of a bitch would be cut in half. But he shouldn't have worried. It would seem his blue eyes could defend herself.

“Who I fuck is none of your business, Hollywood. I don't comment on the number of women you all bring around. Besides, it's called angry sex. It does the body good.”

Now he was just pissed off. It didn't matter that he had been thinking the same thing earlier. Hearing it come from Kendra was a blow to his ego. He wanted to mean more to her than just sex. Wait, who was he kidding? No, he didn't. Feelings ruined things, and it was best he remembered that. So instead, he would be pissed that “Hollywood,” he would need to ask

about the name later, was giving his woman shit about sex with him.

“It’s *our* business if he’s the enemy.”

This argument came from Camron and he was finding himself getting more pissed off the longer they stood there. The file he had on her showed she wasn’t in a relationship, and he doubted she was if she willingly slept with him. These two were bordering on overprotective, and it was getting to him. He wanted to growl *mine* but pushed the urge down.

“I get that, Panther, but my sex life will never be *your* business. So knock it the fuck off, the two of you.”

He finally understood this team went by code names. Her boss had called her Blue and now she was calling these two Hollywood and Panther. Those weren’t names of endearment and they sure as hell didn’t sound like derogatory names, if that’s what she was aiming for.

“Blue ... ” Luis or Hollywood, whatever the guy went by, didn’t get to finish what he was about to say because Wes’s booming voice charged the air.

“Knock it off, the three of you!” he grumbled. “Fuck, I can’t wait until the rest of you settle the fuck down already. Maybe then it wouldn’t seem like I’m trying to wrangle in fucking toddlers all the time. At least the other three have fucking mellowed some,” Wes continued.

“Not true, boss.” Hollywood didn’t seem to know when to quit. “Falcon here still walks around throwing tantrums

because of his girl. Granted, with her attitude it's understandable, same with Apollo, but still. Your logic is faulty."

A *fuck you* came from Wes. Jaxson wasn't sure which the other two were, but he assumed the two who told Hollywood to *fuck off* and *mind your fucking business* had to be Falcon and Apollo.

Even with all of this bickering going on, no one lowered their weapon, and he was still standing in the same spot, shirtless, with a growling Duke in front of him. He patted his dog's head, trying to reassure his friend that everything was alright even though he wasn't positive that was true. There was nothing he could do about being shirtless. Unless one of Kendra's teammates offered one up. Not that he would accept it.

They were right. He was the enemy at the moment, something he normally wouldn't give a shit about. He made his living that way, but for some strange reason, it hurt, knowing that's what Kendra thought of him. Since the moment he met the maddening woman, something in his chest felt lighter. He didn't like it and maybe it was best if he just went back to forgetting she existed. There had to be a way to go back to the heartless bastard he was before she re-entered his world. Just a few hours in her presence, and he felt himself changing.

He risked a peek over his shoulder and found she was smirking. Whether it was at him or her teammates still

grumbling, he would never know, but just seeing the upturn of her lips did something funny to his heart. Fuck, he needed to shut that shit down. The damn thing was only an organ. A necessary evil to keep the blood flowing throughout his body and keep him alive. It had no other purpose besides that. It certainly wasn't there so he could catch feelings.

The commotion stopped when another person arrived. This guy he easily remembered from the day before when he was scouting out Kendra's house. He was the man hooking her up with her new cameras. It was a damn good thing he missed one tiny spot. Otherwise, Jaxson admired how good he was at his job.

“Did I miss all the fun?” Ray asked when he joined the group. “I'm guessing not, since our boy here is missing his shirt. Hey, Blue, was that you? Do I even want to know?”

“Probably not.” Her voice traveled over him.

“Not this shit again,” Wes snapped. “We're done talking about why he doesn't have a shirt.”

“Well, alright, boss. No need to get so snippy. How about we talk about why Blue called us, then, since I'm clearly late to the party.”

He liked this Ray guy already. The man seemed to have a bit more of a sense of humor than the rest. Understandably, considering Ray was the only one who wasn't former military in the group. Although you'd never know that based on the guy's size. Ray wasn't the typical tech geek that TV shows made the job out to be.

There was more grumbling about how he was sent to kill Kendra. Suddenly, gone was the relaxed Ray, and now he could understand why the guy fit in so well with the team. Since he was getting sick of everyone looking at him like he deserved to be stepped on, he finally spoke up and turned the tables around.

“You have a blind spot.”

Ray’s fierce stare whipped in his direction. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“It’s how I got into the house. You have a blind spot,” he repeated. “Add in the fact that sneaking into places is one of my specialties, and that’s how I got in.”

Suddenly there was a flurry of activity from Ray and a whole lot of colorful words being tossed around as the man pulled out his tablet. Sure enough, it only took the guy a minute to figure it out. He had to give Ray credit. Most people would have needed a hell of a lot longer. It just showed how good Ray really was.

“You cloned the program to gain access, but only here to Kendra’s house.” Ray’s disbelief couldn’t be missed.

“I’m not stupid enough to try the same thing at the barn. I don’t exactly have a death wish.”

“That’s debatable.”

It was obvious Wes didn’t find humor in what he had to say. He wondered if the rumors were true that the man never

smiled. No wonder he was a legend among his peers and enemies.

Chapter 10

Kendra should have probably felt an ounce of sympathy that she was essentially throwing Jaxson to the wolves, but she would be lying to herself, and that wasn't how she rolled. So instead, she continued to watch as he dug his grave just a little bit deeper each time he spoke.

It was also probably bad that she was silently making bets with herself on which of her teammates shot him first. That was when she would step in. She didn't want him dead; he was too good at giving her orgasms. No way in hell would she want that talent wasted. If push came to shove, and she was forced to lock him down, she would just turn him into her sex slave. Inappropriate yes, but sometimes desperate times called for desperate measures.

“That’s debatable.”

She nearly laughed out loud at her boss's response. If that were the case, he would never have broken into her home. The barn wasn't the only place Wes considered sacred. He cared for every one of his employees plus their significant others. An

attack on one of them might as well have been one made on Wes himself.

“For the last time, I had zero intention of killing her. I don’t kill women or children as a rule.”

Jaxson was slowly losing his temper. She could see it in his body language. The way every muscle tightened and the veins in his neck popped. She could hear it in his voice. She didn’t need to know him long to understand that a guy like that, one who was dangerous in every way possible according to him, kept a tight rein on his anger. But that hold was slipping, and fast.

“Then tell us who hired you.”

Wes sounded equally as frustrated. The situation was deteriorating quickly, but she wasn’t sure how to fix it. There was no way her team would accept Jaxson so easily. Not that she would, either. His bio was nothing to sneeze at even with a majority of it being redacted, so she still had her reservations about him. No amount of good sex was going to wipe those away. Even if he did manage to give her more orgasms since she met him than she had in her life altogether. All that proved was that she had a shitty choice in men. *Just like your mother.* Kendra pushed that thought away immediately.

Jaxson stayed quiet throughout her musings. Wes and her team waited him out. She was about to scream at either side to move things along, but Jaxson opened his mouth first, and she was not prepared for the name he gave.

“General Pritcher. I’m one of his elite. The sniper he calls when the jobs aren’t exactly sanctioned by the Army, but a necessity by the brass.”

A single nod to her boss was all it took for the man to understand what she needed. “Bravo Team, a moment.”

She sidestepped Jaxson without a glance in his direction. She needed to keep her wits about her, and looking at his naked chest wouldn’t help. It was bad enough when her eyes were fixated on his back. Covered in tattoos and the way his muscles rippled each time he took a frustrated breath. Couple that with the way his jeans hung loosely on his hips and it took every ounce of control she possessed to keep her wandering eyes off him. She had slipped multiple times, and she was aware Wes noticed it more often than not. She was sure her teammates had as well. The combination of dirty and surprised looks were a dead giveaway. She needed to improve her poker face and stat.

“What the fuck were you thinking, Blue?” Hollywood started in on her as soon as they were far enough away. The low hiss in his voice had her snapping back.

“We are *not* doing this again. Butt out of my business and focus on the problem at hand.”

She turned her attention back to Wes. Everyone had moved several feet away, including Ray, their unofficial seventh member of the team. However, both Falcon and Giggles kept their attentions firmly on Jaxson. Without even being told to, the two team members were protecting the group.

“Blue’s right. We have more important things to discuss,”
Wes started.

“Fine,” Hollywood huffed. “But don’t expect me to like or speak kindly to the man.”

Kendra stopped herself from rolling her eyes for what felt like the hundredth time since her team showed up. At the rate she was going, her eye muscles would be getting one hell of an exercise regimen. Hollywood was starting to sound as dramatic as Trista. Maybe if she told him that, he would be offended enough to cut the shit.

“No one said you had to,” Apollo shot back.

She wasn’t sure if she wanted to thank Apollo for responding to Hollywood so she didn’t have to, or if she was slightly peeved that her own gut reaction was to trust Jaxson. She knew the second part had more to do with her sex drive than common sense, and that pissed her off.

“What do you know about General Pritcher?” Wes asked her.

“I know he’s old school. Believes that women still belong barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen. He wasn’t happy when I earned my scroll. I wasn’t around, but I heard through the grapevine that he pitched a holy fit,” she explained.

“So, is the hit out against you because you’re a female, or because of what happened with your team?”

She doubted Wes expected an answer. It was likely he was thinking out loud. And if he did expect one, then he was shit

out of luck because she had no idea. Either option could be possible. Although, waiting four years after she left the Army to put the hit out seemed a bit extreme. The man should've been happy she was out, not targeting her. But what did she know?

“Not a clue. I would say it's my charming personality, but we all know that's a crock of shit, so it's anyone's guess.”

Everyone laughed at her remark, just as she knew they would. She didn't pull punches, and more often than not, her wit was one of her best qualities. It was that wit that kept her ability to keep up with the guys. Most women thought she had a dark sense of humor and wrote her off quickly. Guys, on the other hand, embraced it because they too had the same humor.

“Fair enough. Until we can learn more, we aren't trusting Jaxson. I know he says he won't go through with the hit, but I have no intention of gambling with your life.” Wes looked her in the eye as he said the last part.

She wanted to argue that she could take care of herself, it was on the tip of her tongue, but she stopped. This was her boss, and while she never had issues in the past confronting him, she figured this time he deserved a little slack. She knew without a shadow of a doubt if it were one of her teammates who had a target on their back, he would be doing the same thing. It was just who Wes was. Being a female had nothing to do with his comment.

Before she could say anything, her boss was calling Jaxson over.

“Here are my terms. I won’t let you out of my sight. You have two choices. Stay here with Blue, or at the safe house. I don’t care which place you choose, but either Hollywood or Panther stays with you at all times. Or you can choose a hotel in which the same rules apply. One or more of my team watches your every move until we figure this mess out. I’m not going to bother to sugarcoat shit. I don’t trust you. My team doesn’t trust you. And until we know why your boss put a hit out on Blue, I don’t want you alone with her, or alone period.”

She waited for Wes to finish before she butted in, all but raising her hand to speak. “Really, boss? You want me to allow Hollywood to stay in my house?”

It wasn’t a question, per se. More like a mini fit considering she had just gotten free of him. She wanted to slap the smirk off said man’s face. Hollywood knew damn well she never enjoyed living with him.

“Non-negotiable,” was Wes’s only answer.

“Fine! But I want it noted that I warned you ahead of time. If I shoot Hollywood for messing up my house, I don’t want to hear you bitch about it.”

Chapter 11

Jaxson watched Kendra walk away after her explosion to the new predicament. There was nothing sexier than a confident woman, and Kendra had it in spades. He continued to watch her despite the seven pairs of eyes he could feel burning into his back. He wondered if it would win him any favors if he told them all they could shove their suggestions up their asses. The last thing he wanted to do was be babysat by Kendra's team. Playing well with others was one of those things he didn't do.

Then he remembered the exact reason he knew damn well he was going to do just as Wes demanded. His boss was relentless. The fact that he was given the job, despite his boss knowing he didn't kill women, showed just how desperate Pritchler was. This meant that if Jaxson didn't do it, the general would be sending someone else. So he had no choice but to play nice. But he didn't need to like it, and he didn't need to do it with a smile on his face.

“Well, I can’t actually say it was a pleasure to meet you all, but it also wasn’t my worst, so I guess I’ll consider that a win.”

He finally turned around and met each man’s gaze. He considered Wes the fiercest of the bunch, but it was followed closely behind by Kendra’s team leader. Erik Lamont looked as though he could rip Jaxson’s head from his shoulders and not even blink, and that was saying a lot because Jaxson was no small man.

“The night is still young,” was the only response Wes gave him.

It wasn’t the best, but he would take it considering the first impression they got of him was walking around without a shirt, and not exactly hiding what he and Kendra had been doing before they arrived.

“That it is.”

The excitement in his tone probably didn’t help his cause, but he found that needling Kendra’s teammates was fast becoming his favorite sport. If he was going to be forced to stay here and spend his time with these people, then he needed something to pass the time. Well, something besides burying himself in Kendra, that was. That, of course, would be number one. But pissing the rest of them off was fast becoming number two.

“Get it out of your damn head that you’re going to be screwing Blue,” Hollywood snapped. “I see that look on your face.”

“And what look is that, exactly?”

“The one with the hungry look in your eye. I’m not sure how the two of you met before today, but you better wipe that fucking smirk off your face.”

Jaxson wondered aloud.

“Are you jealous, Hollywood? Is that why you’re so hell-bent on keeping me away? Do you want Kendra all to yourself?”

“*Blue’s our teammate.*” Hollywood emphasized each word. “We protect her just as we do each other.”

“That wasn’t a no,” Jaxson taunted.

He was poking the beast, and he knew it, but these guys needed to realize that while yes, he would fully cooperate with their plan, that didn’t mean they could just treat him like shit. He was their equal in every sense. They all served and, although he was General Pritchler’s go-to hit man, everything was done within regulation, or at least most of it was. It wasn’t like he was killing innocents. He was exposing the dirty little secrets that those men thought to keep hidden. He was doing the world a service, so he wouldn’t feel bad and he wasn’t about to let Kendra’s team judge him.

“No.” Hollywood dragged the word out. “I’m not jealous. Blue is the little sister I was fortunate enough not to have. I push her buttons on purpose, but not because I’m attracted to her. But don’t think for a second that doesn’t mean any of us

won't throw down for her in a heartbeat. Consider yourself warned."

"Duly noted." This time, he turned to Wes when he asked. "And why is it I'm being allowed to stay here? I figured you'd be shipping me off the first chance you had."

"Because I don't trust you not to disappear the moment you're out of my sight."

Now that pissed him off, though it shouldn't. Every man standing there had made it known they didn't trust him, so it shouldn't be any surprise that's how Wes felt. The kicker was it did tick him off because it meant they thought he cared so little about Kendra. He wasn't about to go spouting off any romantic notions, but he didn't want her dead either. That should count for something.

"Then I'm going to need to go to my hotel outside of town and get my things," he informed Kendra's boss.

"That's fine, but you take Hollywood with you." This time, a rare smile crept up on Wes's face. Now he understood why the man likely never did it. He had fucking dimples that Jaxson was sure the ladies fell all over. They also made him look almost soft. Something he was sure would end up with him dead if he ever gave his opinion. "The two of you are on your way to becoming fast friends anyway."

With that parting shot, Wes walked away. Jaxson didn't know whether to laugh at the man's audacity or toss the middle finger at his retreating back. He didn't get the chance to do either. Duke's whimper reminded him it had been hours

since he had last fed his dog. While he always carried spare stuff when he traveled, he had left everything in his rental.

“If you don’t mind, it’s past Duke’s dinnertime, and he gets pissy when he’s hungry.”

“That sweet dog?” Marco Ricci motioned to Duke. He was sure the guy had a nickname, but neither Kendra nor any of the others had yet to use it. “He doesn’t look like he could hurt a fly.”

Jaxson wasn’t about to acknowledge just how right the man was. Duke had no problem growling and stepping in front of him to show his dominance, but when push came to shove, his dog was a lover at heart. It was ironic, given what he did for a living, but maybe he needed that. A best friend who could even him out. Duke certainly fit that bill.

Instead of answering, he started in the direction of his vehicle. One of them could follow him if they so chose. He didn’t need to look back to know that’s exactly what was happening. He had to force himself to loosen his fingers and release the fists his hands instinctively wanted to make at the notion. He hated knowing he was about to have a babysitter for the foreseeable future. The only way to make sure that was no longer the case was to find out why his boss wanted Kendra dead so damn badly and put a stop to it. No big deal.

Chapter 12

Kendra watched from her kitchen window as Jaxson and Hollywood sauntered to Hollywood's truck. Yes, sauntered, because she would be lying if she said she didn't stare at Jaxson's ass the entire way. And what a fine ass it was. Some would say so was Hollywood's, but he wasn't her type. No matter how hot he was, and she could secretly admit that all of her team members were hot, she wasn't blind. Yet, it was like Hollywood said; they were practically brothers to her. Their good looks did nothing for her. Unlike Jaxson's body, which made hers tingle just a little too much.

She hadn't bothered to hide when she had stomped her way into the house. Instead, she used her time to cool down by scrubbing her kitchen counter clean while eavesdropping through the open window. She should be ashamed, but she wasn't. Curiosity over how her teammates would react to Jaxson when she wasn't around won out.

Kendra nearly blew her cover the second Jaxson had the nerve to challenge Hollywood for being jealous. The amount

of effort it took for her to contain the laughter was just the ab workout she needed for the day. The idea of Hollywood being jealous was preposterous, even before she knew about his secret crush.

She wasn't Hollywood's type any more than he was hers. Kendra had seen the women Hollywood picked up; dainty was the best way to describe them. Then there was the little secret that her friend was in love with the little sister of his childhood best friend. The problem was, the best friend would never let the two of them be together as per a confession one drunken night with Hollywood. She wasn't sure what kind of best friend wouldn't want the two people in their lives to be happy, but it was none of her business. He never spoke about it when he was sober, so she dropped it.

All thoughts fled her mind of Hollywood and his secrets when she noticed another vehicle approaching her house. Just seconds after Hollywood's truck left her long driveway, it was quickly replaced by someone else's car she was very familiar with. This time, she let the laughter bubble out. Her evening was about to get much more entertaining.

Stepping out onto the back porch, she waited for the car to stop. "Your girl is a magnet for the drama." She winked at her team leader.

Falcon grumbled, "Don't I know it," before Trista joined him.

"Next time you decide to have a party and not invite me, I'm taking it to heart," Trista hollered with her usual flair.

“Wasn’t a party, Princess.” Falcon shook his head.

“We would never dream of leaving you out,” Wes added when he joined them again. The sarcasm clearly evident in his tone, and to no one’s surprise, Trista picked up on it.

“Sarcasm from Wes.” Trista gasped and threw her hand over her heart. “Who would have thought?” If the dramatic hand wasn’t enough, the eye roll Trista tacked on sure showed her friend’s displeasure.

All of the girlfriends and wives argued with Wes, but it was Trista and Ashlynn who gave her boss the most shit. Coincidentally, they were also best friends since high school, so they ganged up on him a lot.

Stepping in before Wes and Trista could ratchet up the argument to the extreme, Kendra said, “So what, Trista, have you resorted to stalking Falcon now? I mean we all know you’re crazy, but even you usually have boundaries,” she said laughing.

She was teasing her friend. Trista would be the first person to admit she was crazy and over the top. It was why Kendra loved her so much. There was nothing secretive about the former model. What people saw was exactly what they got, and that was a breath of fresh air in a world where too many people turned out to be backstabbing assholes.

“I don’t need to stalk him. He knows it’s best to just tell me what’s going on. Otherwise, I’m likely to get into trouble trying to figure it out,” Trista stated matter-of-factly.

And she was right, Trista didn't appreciate when things were kept from her. It was the reason that, when they were taking down Trista's evil friend, she and Falcon butted heads so much. Her team leader tried to keep Trista out of it, but her friend was having none of it. So much so that Trista had allowed herself to be kidnapped so they could get the information they needed. It was a scary time, but also completely badass. It was the moment Kendra knew Trista would be a friend for the long haul.

"It's about time he learned the best way to keep you out of trouble," Kendra laughed. "So what brought you here?"

"Falcon mentioned you knew who was trying to kill you, and I was curious. Can't blame a gal for wanting to check on her friend." Trista wore her most dazzling smile, the one Kendra knew got her what she wanted more often than not. "Took me longer than expected to wrap up the meeting I had to go to, otherwise my ass would've been here sooner." Trista looked around the yard expectantly. "So ... where is he? I'm assuming it's a he. Do you have him tied up somewhere, ready to be tortured?" Her friend wiggled her eyebrows as she asked.

Trista continued to look around the yard like she might find the answer hidden in one of the shadows. Kendra could only shake her head at the absurdity of it all. And she didn't just mean what was happening right that moment, but the whole thing in general.

She'd had sex with the person who was hired to kill her. And not just once, so she couldn't plead temporary insanity.

No, she had to do it a couple of times just to prove how sex-deprived she really was. It was like she was in an alternative universe. None of this was how she normally acted. Now she was having a bizarre conversation in front of her team, and boss, no less. Wes still being there surprised her because she had seen him walk away. She wondered what kind of trouble he was looking for.

“I’m not sure which is more concerning,” Giggles started. “The fact that you sound eager for us to be torturing someone, or the hint of curiosity I hear in your tone, as if you’re wondering if this is going to turn out to be something other than a guy hired to kill Blue.”

“Probably a little of both,” Kendra piped in, earning her a scathing look from her friend.

“Is it too much to hope that maybe, just maybe, I’m hoping this is more romance novel and less murder mystery?” Trista huffed.

“Guess you’re in luck. Seems Blue here already took her hit man for a test run.”

If looks could kill, the one she was sending to Giggles would have him bursting into flames. But it didn’t. That was a bummer.

“Stop! No you didn’t,” Trista screeched. “Girl ...” The one word was dragged out. “You best start telling me about that right damn now!”

“You really want me to do that in front of my team?” She didn’t need to tack on the *duh* for Trista to get where she was going with her question. Falcon’s intense stare was enough to send a silent message to Trista.

She figured her friend understood when she looked around the backyard. Kendra doubted the rest of her team, plus Ray and Wes, wanted to hear what they would call “girl talk.” Something she didn’t do regularly, but really wanted to with Trista right now. She needed someone to validate everything that happened.

“Okay, I see your point.”

Trista wasted no time grabbing Kendra’s hand and dragging her across the yard. She didn’t have some fancy backyard as Wes did. There was no pond or pretty lights and benches. What she had instead was acres of green grass, and that was exactly where Trista opted to plop them down to have their discussion.

“No more stalling. Spill, bitch.” Trista’s brash tone made her smile. These girly conversations were the last thing she expected to experience when she came to work for Wes.

“I will, but first I need to tell you about a night just a few weeks before I came to work for Wes.”

Kendra spent the next twenty minutes explaining the night she met Jaxson. How she hadn’t known his name because what she needed was simple and great sex without any lingering effects. She had gotten that and so much more. She told Trista how she’d thought about him over the past four

years, and when she had seen his face show up in the situation room, she hadn't known how to react. Throughout it all, Trista sat back and simply listened. Until the part about him breaking in and the multiple rounds of sex they had before she finally decided that calling her team was a better plan.

“Shut the fuck up! A guy breaks into your house and you decide fucking him is the best course of action?” Trista's high-pitched squeak suddenly had all eyes on them.

Before Kendra could come up with a good response, the sound of Hollywood's truck caught her attention. Deciding to let actions speak louder than words, she waited for Jaxson to step out. She was sad to see he had found a shirt to wear, but one gasp from her friend and she knew Trista understood.

“Holy hell. No wonder you let him fuck you. I would have too,” Trista exclaimed.

A menacing growl stopped the retort from leaving Kendra's mouth, but it was her team leader's next sentence that had her clamping her mouth shut.

“You better rethink that statement, Princess.”

She looked at Trista and swallowed down a gulp, but instead of her friend doing the same, Trista's eyes sparkled. It didn't take a genius to recognize that her friend was about to get herself into trouble.

“Or what, big boy?”

There was a reason the two of them were perfect for each other. Falcon needed someone who wouldn't back down from

the surliness that radiated from him, and Trista needed someone to keep her in line. Not that Falcon really did that, but he knew of better ways to focus her energy, and Kendra had a feeling that was exactly where that conversation was headed.

“Or you’re going to get a reminder of the first night I broke into your apartment and how that ended.”

Trista giggled. Fully and truly giggled like a damn schoolgirl. A pang of jealousy shot through Kendra. She wanted what her friend and team leader had. Never before did she think that would happen, but now she knew. She wanted a love that included the silliness those two had. Stealing a quick glance at Jaxson, she sighed.

“Sorry, girl, I need to go, but before I do, let me give you a piece of advice.” Trista leaned over and whispered in her ear. “Find out what’s going on so you can be safe, but the second you know that man over there isn’t here to hurt you, hang on and enjoy the ride with him. I think you’ll find it was the best decision you ever made.”

Kendra thought about what Trista said as her friend hopped up and ran straight for Falcon. Her team leader might be a hard-ass most of the time, but Trista was slowly wearing him down. Hence, him allowing her to jump onto him for a scorching hot kiss. It didn’t last long and there was a good chance Falcon would teach her a lesson about it later, but there was also no missing the smile that sat on her team leader’s face as he left her house with Trista tucked beneath his arm.

Everyone else said their goodbyes and slowly filed out. One by one, they warned her to be careful and on the lookout. Unlike Trista, her team wanted her to be wary and stay away from Jaxson. She listened to their concerns and nodded her head, all while wondering if she was being played.

Finally, the only ones left in the backyard were her and Jaxson. Hollywood was inside making himself comfortable, as he would be first on watch. He and Panther would rotate out staying with her. It was annoying as hell, but she understood their point. No way would she have allowed one of her teammates to live with a hit man, either.

Speaking of a hit man, Kendra was suddenly aware she was very much alone with Jaxson and his dog. The damn thing was cute, and if she hadn't been thrown off earlier, she would've been excited to see it. He was exactly the kind of dog she pictured running in her big backyard.

Now all she could do was stare at the man who took up too much space in her mind. He had showered and changed while he was gone. It was a sin just how well he filled out his jeans and the way his shirt hugged him in all the right places. *Down, girl*, she reminded herself as she looked him over. It was easy enough to understand why she kept ending up in bed with him, not that they ever made it to her bed, unfortunately. But she could see why they would.

It was only with the knowledge that Hollywood was somewhere close by that she broke eye contact, and the hold he had on her. Things were a mess, and they were only going

to get more complicated. She hated to admit it, even to herself, but she was falling for the hit man who was sent to kill her. And if she was lucky enough to make it out of the situation alive, then maybe she would get her happily ever after. Too bad she underestimated the need someone had to see her dead.

Chapter 13

Jaxson tried to suppress his smile. He wasn't interested in the leggy blonde and barely glanced at her, even though it only took one quick look to know she was sexy as hell. Add in that she was clearly taken by Lamont and that was a definite hell no. There weren't many guys taller than his six-foot-three frame, but Lamont was, and he was sure the man had a darker soul than even he did.

But that didn't stop the cocky smile from spreading across his face. It would appear he had one ally in all this. He would take it. For now. He didn't need the rest of them, nor did he care what opinion they had of him. It wasn't the first time he wasn't liked.

In the Army, he met resistance because he was hand-picked by the general. Some people didn't like that he was pulled to complete solo missions. He wasn't a team player. No, that wasn't true. He wasn't given the chance to be a team player. Early in his career, he showed potential, and those skills were capitalized on. There wasn't time for him to form the usual

bonds that came with being in the military, and furthermore, the Special Forces world. On a rare occasion, he would let himself feel sorry that he missed out, but then he would remember that he was better off. Personal connections never worked out for him, but physical ones? Now those he was good at. He was a cold motherfucker whose hands brought both pleasure and pain. So much pain.

Slowly, the rest of Kendra's team left until it was just the two of them. Hollywood had moved inside her house, likely to claim one of the bedrooms. Unfortunately, Kendra's house had three bedrooms, so the chances of convincing either Kendra or Hollywood to let him sleep in her room would be impossible. Jaxson didn't mind, though. Sneaking around was half the fun, and he had a feeling riling up Hollywood would be his new favorite pastime. Only compared to convincing Kendra to invite him into her bed.

“What's that cocky smirk for?”

Damn, it was juvenile of him, but hearing the word “cock” slip from her mouth had him instantly hard. It brought out so many memories of her moaning the same word while he was deep inside her. He wondered how long it would take him to convince her to go another round. If her “fuck me” eyes were any indication, not long.

“I didn't realize I was wearing one.”

Bullshit. Yes, he did, and he should've realized she was going to call him out on it.

“You’re such a shit-ass liar,” Kendra didn’t hesitate to tell him. “You know exactly what kind of smirk you’re wearing and I would bet you’re proud of your damn self after hearing what Trista had to say.”

“So, that’s the lovely woman’s name.” He waited to see how Kendra responded to the taunt. To his surprise, she merely laughed.

“Yes, that’s Trista, and before you even think of using her to make me jealous, I should warn you. I don’t get jealous. But if I did, Trista is off-limits, and that has nothing to do with me. She’s shacking up with Falcon and he doesn’t share, but it’s not even him you should be worried about. Trista herself would chew you up and spit you out. She’s a force to be reckoned with, and it’s why I tolerate her when most women make me want to strangle them.”

There was so much to unpack in that little confession. He didn’t do cheaters. He always looked for a ring first and made sure a man wasn’t around. Not because he cared, but because he didn’t need the drama. If a woman wanted to cheat, that was their prerogative. He figured if a woman hit on him, then she best be single. So knowing Trista was taken was enough for him to steer clear, but the explanation Kendra gave hammered the fact in. Trista was drama, and he could do without that. What really interested him was what Kendra said about other women. He should’ve figured as much, considering her career choice, but to hear her say it caught him off guard. From his experience picking up women, they stuck together in packs.

“Noted. Although I will say I’ve only got one woman on my mind these days.”

Kendra rolled her eyes and turned away from him, but it was the comment she tossed over her shoulder that really had him cracking up. “Real smooth, Romeo. I can see why it took me being half wasted that first night to even acknowledge you.”

He was still laughing when he followed her into the house, Duke at his heels. Kendra had yet to say anything about him, so he assumed she was fine with the additional houseguest. It wasn’t like Duke would be in the way, most of the time they were attached at the hip. Duke liked the company and vice versa.

The laughter didn’t even die when Hollywood cut him off with a scathing look. “What has you so fucking happy?”

“Just something Kendra said before we walked in. There’s just something about her that makes me happy.”

He gave the man his most sarcastic smile, poking the bear. He had been deprived of the luxury on the ride to his hotel earlier. Hollywood had cranked up the music and effectively ignored him. Now was time for a little payback.

“Well, you can wipe that smile right off your face. You have only one job here and that’s to find out why your boss wants Blue dead. Everything else is off the table.”

If they hadn’t already established that Hollywood wasn’t jealous, he would be considering it once again. In fact, he

would make sure to ask Kendra about it when they were alone. Something he most definitely was going to make happen, no matter what Hollywood said.

“Knock it off, Hollywood,” Kendra snapped. “I get it. You’re not a fan of Jaxson here, but I’ll be damned if the two of you are going to continue having pissing contests all over my hardwood floors. If that’s the case, I’m calling Wes and having him send someone else over.”

Now that was a solid plan. Maybe he could keep niggling Hollywood until that happened. A bit of an asshole move, but sometimes a man had to go to extremes. Although that might piss Kendra off more, and that wasn’t his goal. Unless it led to angry sex again. That he would gladly do. He found angry sex was his new favorite kind.

“I’ll behave,” Hollywood grumbled.

He had to give the man credit. He didn’t say only if Jaxson did. He took Kendra’s lashing better than most would have. It made him almost want to respect the man. Almost.

It was already late, and Kendra didn’t appear to be in the mood to play host. After a grunt to let him know what bedroom he could use, she mentioned something about needing sleep before walking away from him. He noted which bedroom was hers, but respecting the fact that she was likely tired, he turned to his own room. Tomorrow would be soon enough to turn on the charm and convince Kendra that having him in her bed was better than being there alone.

Chapter 14

A new day, a fresh start. Too bad Kendra's new day was starting with two houseguests that she hadn't invited over. Yet, she still woke up disappointed that she was in bed alone, knowing Jaxson was just one room over. What was wrong with her? First, she never cared before that she was alone. She actually preferred life that way and waking up with a man never crossed her radar. Until now. Secondly, Jaxson was wrong for her on so many levels. The biggest reason being he was hired to kill her. It wasn't a joke, not a prank one of her teammates was playing. Jaxson was legit there to end her life, and instead of being afraid, she let him fuck her not once, but multiple times, and to make it even worse, she wanted more. If that didn't scream fucked in the head, then she didn't know what would. She needed to get her priorities straight, and that meant meeting with her team.

Kendra rushed through getting ready. She wasn't late, but she also wasn't in the mood to just dillydally around. She told herself it wasn't because she was itching to see a particular

guest, but that lie died the second she walked into her kitchen and found a shirtless Jaxson standing over the coffee maker.

“Is there a reason you insist on wandering around my house shirtless?”

Jaxson turned her way slowly, that same cocky grin back on his face. The one she secretly loved.

“Is there a reason you object to seeing me without a shirt?”

He lifted one eyebrow, but she was ashamed to admit that she only gave his face a cursory look before traveling lower. Kendra was having a hard time not checking out his sculpted pecs and chiseled abs. The tattoos covering his chest and arms only added to the air of darkness that constantly surrounded him. She had to lick her lips to moisten the suddenly dry skin before she could speak.

“Yes. It’s distracting.”

She was only fueling his already overinflated ego, but to hell with it. It wasn’t like Jaxson didn’t know how fucking sexy he was. The man must own a mirror, but she was sure that women lined up to fawn over him. A small hint of that jealousy she claimed she didn’t have over those unnamed and faceless women tried to claw its way out, but she pushed it back down. She wasn’t going to allow herself to become one of those people. That was an emotion she refused to let herself feel.

“Then I guess I’ll have to keep doing it.”

“Har har.”

Kendra rolled her eyes at Jaxson's chuckle. Fortunately, he did it as he left the kitchen, leaving her alone to enjoy her coffee in peace. At least for a few seconds before Hollywood showed up.

“Morning. The boss wants all three of us in the situation room within the hour. He wants to see what he can learn about why the two Rangers who were captured with you are now dead.”

Hollywood's statement sobered her. Here she was thinking about sex and playing grab ass with Jaxson when two of her former teammates were dead, and the man who killed them was just a few feet down the hallway. She needed to stop thinking with her vagina and remember she had a job to do. One that involved Jaxson in ways that weren't good.

By the time they left her house to go to the barn, her mood had gone from carefree and fun to somber and focused. There was no way Jaxson could've missed the switch, but, to her surprise, he said nothing. Nor did he speak as the three of them went through the security protocols of the barn. Most visitors commented on the level of over-the-top requirements Wes had in place, but not Jaxson. He simply looked to be contemplating something. She wondered what it could be, but never got the chance to ask. Most of her team, except Ray and Panther, were already waiting.

Kendra knew she wasn't late. It was just that most of her team took early to the extreme. She normally did as well, but

since she had Hollywood with her, it had taken a little extra time to get out of her house.

“Glad to see you could join us.”

She wasn't sure if her boss was talking to her, Hollywood, or Jaxson. Possibly a combination of all three, but it was Jaxson who answered.

“Didn't have much of a choice, but if I can help, then I'm at your disposal.”

Kendra bit back the snort that threatened to deny that statement. She doubted Jaxson even knew how to be helpful, but she would keep her comments to herself for the time being.

When Ray entered the room moments later, with Panther in tow, the images of her two dead teammates immediately popped up on the screen. Daniel had been able to access some of the crime scene photos before they were classified as top secret. His words, not hers. She was surprised to find that Daniel wasn't among those in the room. He had been the one to gain intel, so she figured he would be a part of the discussions. Although maybe not. Daniel was what she liked to call a lone wolf. Right now Wes paid his salary, but she doubted it would always be that way. The man worked in the shadows and wasn't a fan of being tied down.

“Tell me about these two jobs.” Wes pointed to the men on the screen.

It was still hard for her to look at the men who were rescued with her. Their bruised and battered faces haunted her for weeks after she came home and still did occasionally even after she left the Army. She wasn't sure there would be a time that she didn't remember what happened to them while they had been held captive. Except now, she knew these images would join the ones she already had.

“Jenson liked himself some kiddie porn. When I was given his file, there was extensive evidence as such, but the reason I was sent in was that some of the people he was getting his pictures from were in organized crime and terrorists. From what I could tell, he didn't seem to care how he got them, just that he did.”

Kendra's stomach was turning. It didn't matter that just yesterday Wes had told her the same thing. Hearing it from the person who did the deed made it that much worse. To learn that a man who she had served with, had suffered next to, had such a dirty and despicable secret. She never would've guessed, and she wondered what that said about her. Kendra used to think she could read people better. Not so much anymore.

“And Packton?” Wes pointed to the second picture.

“He was getting regular deposits from a terrorist organization. From what I was told, he was selling state secrets, even though he no longer served. His brother-in-law, on the other hand, works at the Pentagon, so the assumption

was he was stealing the secrets from him and passing them along.”

“So, all the information you received has come from General Pritcher?” Falcon asked.

“Correct.”

She wondered what General Pritcher had put in her file. She wasn't doing anything illegal, so she couldn't imagine what reason he had for putting a hit out on her. She doubted being a woman was an approved justification.

“So, what does my file say?” she asked Jaxson. “What reasoning did he give you?”

A silence fell over the room. When his response finally did come, she definitely wasn't prepared for the answer he gave her.

“That you were behind your team being captured and tortured.”

Chapter 15

To say the room exploded at his answer would be equivalent to him casually mentioning that Hiroshima was just a big bomb. The one word didn't even begin to clearly explain it properly. But it was Kendra's stricken face that he focused on. Why did that look gut him? *No feelings! Remember, asshole?*

“He told you that I was responsible for my team being captured?”

Her voice was hollow. Jaxson had to fight the urge to go to her and wrap her up in his arms. He didn't do comfort, and he didn't think that would be well received, so he kept his arms down at his sides. His fists were tightly wrapped in a ball as they tingled to touch her. He could learn to control that need like he did so many other urges.

“That was his reasoning, yes. But I knew there was no way it could be true. Not when I looked over your service record.”

He tried to reassure her, but he could see the walls building up right before his eyes. It gutted him, and that was a foreign notion he didn't know how to handle. Still, he hated telling her why he was sent after her. He might not know her all that well, but it didn't take a genius to figure out that night they met in the bar she was harboring some trauma from something. He hadn't known what it was at the time, but it only took one look at her file for him to understand, for him to know without a shadow of a doubt that the file was wrong.

“So, knowing that Blue's file is horseshit, is there any chance that it's the same for the other two?”

Jaxson thought hard about what Wes asked. A week ago he would have said fuck no. He trusted that his boss sent him on missions that were sanctioned, or at least done for the greater good. Now he was questioning every decision he ever made. Every mission he ever went on. And for a man like him, that sucked. He thrived on routine and doing as he was told. If he were to learn that some of his missions weren't sanctioned, he wasn't sure how he would react. A cold-blooded killer was the only line he refused to cross.

“I'll take that silence as your answer.”

“Before Kendra, I would have wholeheartedly disagreed with you. Now, I'm not sure I could do that with the same level of confidence,” he answered Wes honestly. The words tasted like acid on his tongue.

Wes merely nodded. The rest of Kendra's team looked pissed. Whether at him or the situation, he didn't know, but he

understood it. Kendra still looked a little green. The proper thing to do would be to ask her about it later when they were alone. He didn't want to be proper, but Ray cut him off before he could say something that might come off as soft.

“I can hack into both of their databases and see what I learn. It would be easy enough to verify if Jenson was looking at child porn and Packton was selling secrets.” Ray didn't look up from his computer as he spoke.

“Do that,” Wes demanded. “And, Blue, get out of your head. This isn't on you. The only person at fault here is General Pritcher. We all know that you had nothing to do with your team's capture. I know this.” Her boss emphasized the last part.

This time Jaxson did move closer to her. Not close enough that he was wrapping her up like his traitorous body wanted to, but enough that he could whisper to her.

“Wes is right.”

He refused to say more. Not while he was still under the general's command. He might believe the man was wrong about Kendra, but he needed proof. Something he could probably get with Ray's help. Not that he wanted to go that route. There was a lot he could do on his own, but at least with Ray, there was some deniability on his part. Something he might need considering he was still an enlisted soldier.

He spent the next few hours with Kendra's team. He answered questions when asked and listened when he could. And he took the opportunity to learn as much as he could. By

the time they were ready to leave, he knew everyone's call sign. This time, it would be Panther who was staying with them. Jaxson grew more concerned when Kendra didn't even flinch at the mention of a change of shift. The entire day she had been in a fog, miles away. He needed to get her alone and make sure she knew none of this was her fault, but he had a feeling it would be easier said than done.

It wasn't until they turned down her driveway that she finally spoke up. "How long have you had Duke?"

The question was strange, but he would go with it. "Since he was a puppy. Since I'm not deployed with a regular team, I have the flexibility to have him. He stays with a really great kennel when I'm out on assignment. Otherwise, he stays with me."

"He seems well-behaved." Her tone didn't sit right with him, but he wasn't sure why exactly.

"He really is. I took him to a trainer when I first got him, but I think most of it has to do with the fact that he's always with me. We put a lot of mileage in."

In typical Duke fashion, the moment he heard his name he was sticking his nose in. He wasn't even sure if Kendra realized she was rubbing his head. Jaxson figured that Duke was comforting her. Something he didn't know how to do.

"I'll get started on dinner," Panther said the moment they rolled to a stop in front of the house. He didn't wait for a response before he was getting out of the vehicle, leaving

Jaxson alone with Kendra. He wasn't sure how he lucked out, but he wasn't about to complain.

"Talk to me, blue eyes," he said much more softly than he even realized he knew how. "Tell me what's going on in that gorgeous head of yours."

"What if it's true?" He had to lean in to hear her talk. "What if I am the reason my team was captured?"

"Bullshit," he spat. "There's no way you ever would have done something like that." He believed that with every fiber of his being. Kendra just wasn't that type of person. Plus, he saw the devastation firsthand. There was no way a person could fake that.

"Not intentionally, but what if my being a woman was the reason my team was captured? It was no secret that a lot of people felt I didn't deserve to be a Ranger. What if that's the reason?"

"Then it's on whoever ordered it, but in no way is it your fault. I looked over your service record. I saw your scores. You deserved to be there. You didn't request special treatment. You didn't allow them to lower the standards. You didn't come in last in any area. There was no reason for anyone to question your right to be there. So if, and that's a big if, the reason your team was captured was because someone wasn't happy there was a female on the team, then that's on them. I don't ever want to hear you blaming yourself. Fuck that. You deserved to be a Ranger and I would have been damn proud to have served with you."

If he ever found out that someone in the Army was the reason Kendra and her team were captured, he would lose his shit. Nothing would stop him from ripping people apart. In just two short days, this spunky woman had wormed her way in, and he hated to admit it, but he wasn't mad she was there.

Chapter 16

Kendra let Jaxson's words flow over her. She had been blindsided by his confession and fell into a hole of confusion and bewilderment for the rest of the day. She had known that General Pritcher disliked her but the level of hatred shocked her. She had done nothing to the man, and yet he sent a hit man after her. Who did that?

“Thank you.”

The gratitude was barely more than a whisper. It was all she could manage without breaking down. She hoped like hell that the wobble she could feel in her voice wasn't noticeable. Jaxson had basically just told her how strong she was and yet, there she was, on the verge of tears. She never cried. It was another emotion she didn't allow herself to express.

Before she could make an idiot out of herself, she climbed out of her SUV and moved quickly inside. She needed a few minutes to compose herself. Fortunately for her, Panther was keeping busy putting together dinner and didn't bother to look in her direction. She hightailed it to her bedroom and took a

quick shower. Ten minutes later she was throwing on sweatpants and a sweatshirt, her hair hanging loosely down her back. She was refreshed and prepared to take on the world. Or at least, the two people waiting for her in the kitchen. The rest would just have to wait for another time.

Panther was busy plating some pasta since it was likely the only thing he found to make. She sucked at grocery shopping and more often than not ordered in. Jaxson was sitting at the kitchen table with Duke by his side. No one was talking, and she wasn't sure if that was good or bad. Panther was naturally quiet, but since her team seemed to hate Jaxson, she didn't know if that was the reason for the silence. She debated which one to approach first. Knowing Panther was the more laid back of the two, that was the direction she moved.

“Thank you for taking on the dinner plans. I'm ashamed to admit if you hadn't, we all would have likely gone to bed hungry.”

She tried for a laugh, but it came out a little stiff. Panther didn't seem to mind, and he gave her a soft smile.

“I figured as much. It wasn't that long ago that we lived together and cooking was never something you enjoyed. Or grocery shopping, for that matter,” he chuckled.

“Oh, please. Like you and Hollywood cared where your food came from. Pretty sure pasta is the only dish you know how to make,” she huffed in return.

It wasn't true. Panther was actually a half-decent cook, but it was one of those things he kept hidden. There was a lot her

teammate didn't like to share about himself. Even as roommates, for years he kept to himself as much as possible, only socializing when he was forced to. She often wondered if he was lonely. She realized now that maybe she should have tried to get him to open up more, which made her feel like both a shitty friend and teammate.

“I plead the fifth.”

She rolled her eyes at his remark and turned in the direction of Jaxson. The first thing she noticed was how good he looked in her house with Duke. The second thing that caught her attention was the curious gaze he was giving her and Panther. By now, he should've realized she had nothing going on with her team except working together.

“What about you, huh? Any hidden cooking skills we should know about?”

“I can hold my own,” was his only response.

She tilted her head and tried to read his expression, but she was coming up blank. She let it go for now. She was just getting over one emotional roller coaster and wasn't sure she was up for any more heavy conversations.

The dinner passed by uneventfully, if not in rather awkward silence. It seemed that both men weren't in much of a talking mood and to be honest neither was she. She didn't have it in her to carry the conversation, so she left it as is. It was still early, but she needed the time alone, so she mumbled her goodnights and retreated to her room. Slipping into a tank top and shorts, she crawled into her bed.

For several hours, she tossed and turned. She listened as Jaxson took Duke out and then finally went to bed. She listened even longer until Panther finally claimed the last bedroom. Just when she finally thought she could force herself to sleep, the need to see Jaxson overwhelmed her. Easing out of bed, she tiptoed across her floor like a rebellious teenager and slipped from the room.

She checked the hallway a couple of times before finally getting up the nerve to move to the next bedroom. To her surprise, the door was unlocked. Holding her breath, she twisted the knob and moved like a thief in the night. Just when she thought her cat burglar skills were up to par, a voice grabbed her attention.

“I was beginning to wonder if I would have to come to you.”

Jaxson’s deep rumble soothed her nerves. Using the glow of the moonlight, she padded over to his bed.

“How did you know I wanted to see you?” she challenged.

“I didn’t,” he replied truthfully. “But I hoped you did. It killed me today not to be able to comfort you. My palms itched several times to hug you. Now get your sexy ass in here.”

He tossed the covers aside and patted the spot next to him. She should be ashamed that she was sneaking around her own house, but she couldn’t find it in her to care. She needed this, and Jaxson had one thing right. There were several times that day that she too had wanted him to pull her close and make her

feel better. She had fought it, of course, because showing a sign of weakness was just something she couldn't do. But she longed for it.

“Yes, sir.”

She jumped in beside him before she could change her mind or talk herself out of it. Snagging her around the waist, Jaxson had her pinned to the bed before she could finish catching her breath.

“So damn sexy when you throw attitude.”

She laughed at this playful side of Jaxson. The side she hadn't seen since that night at the bar four years ago. Every second since he came back into her life involved the two of them fighting and nothing but angry, hot sex. She liked it. Really liked it, but this change of pace was nice. Especially when his lips were brushing soft kisses along her skin and leaving goose bumps in their wake.

“I thought you hated my attitude,” she challenged while simultaneously opening up to give him better access to both her neck and cradle him between her legs. His rock-hard erection pushed against her skimpy sleep shorts.

“Well, I couldn't exactly tell you it turned me the fuck on.”

That had her nearly laughing out loud. Not wanting to wake up Panther in the room down the hall, she buried her face in Jaxson's naked neck. She realized her mistake the moment she inhaled his intoxicating scent. There wasn't a single thing about this man that she didn't find sexy.

“Did you come in to cuddle or take advantage of me? Because the way you’re grinding on my dick says it’s the latter.”

Did the man always have to be so vulgar? It didn’t matter that he was speaking the truth. Couldn’t he just pretend for five seconds? Of course, she asked exactly that.

“Why would I pretend when sliding into you is exactly what I want right now?” He chuckled.

“So crass,” she mumbled before capturing his lips. She was done with him talking and had better things for him to do with his mouth.

Running her hands down along his arms, she enjoyed the feel of his biceps. Since he was currently hovering over her in an almost plank position, she could feel every corded muscle. But she didn’t stop there. She had plans after all, and the only way those plans could work was if she relieved him of his boxer briefs. With a quick squeeze of his toned ass cheeks, she used her fingers to inch the tight material down. Frustrated when she couldn’t any further, she let out a little whimper. Jaxson’s hips immediately thrust back, giving her just enough room to shimmy them the rest of the way off, using her toes.

Without breaking their kiss, Jaxson slid her own shorts down her legs like a damn contortionist. Settling back between her legs, he nudged her opening with the tip of his erection, and slowly entered her. This was nothing like the other times they had come together. There was something intimately sweet in the way he moved within her. Almost like he was using his

body to speak the words he couldn't say. And she let him. They were two halves of the same coin. Both were unable and unwilling to express how they felt.

The slow sensual movements brought tears to her eyes, but she refused to let them shed. There was no way Jaxson could know just how much this meant to her. She wasn't some weak woman who relied on a man and she didn't let feelings dictate her life. Soon enough, Jaxson would be gone, and all she would have left were the memories they shared.

It was a slow buildup, and by the time she let go, Jaxson was joining her. They both shuttered with their releases. When her heart felt like it couldn't take anymore, Jaxson surprised her by shifting the two of them, so he was still inside her as she lay snuggled into his chest.

Curious about something, she asked, "Why are all your tattoos the color black except for the blue lily on your chest?"

She thought nothing of it that first night he broke in, but now that she had a chance to see him in the daylight, she realized it was the only colored one he had.

"It's for a memory I locked away years ago," he mumbled.

Sensing that he wouldn't explain any further tonight, she didn't ask again about it. But she wondered what that memory could be and how special it must've been that he had it tattooed over his heart.

"Rest now, blue eyes. I got you." Jaxson's soft whisper fanned across her temple as he placed a kiss.

Caving for just a bit, Kendra closed her eyes. It wasn't much later when she felt Jaxson's now soft shaft slide out of her. She thought back to what they just shared. She was ashamed to admit that, if she let herself, she could easily fall in love with Jaxson. Since that wasn't an option, she needed to shut that down and build her defenses back up.

Kendra listened to Jaxson's breathing even out. Once she was sure he wouldn't wake up again, she slipped from his bed and grabbed her discarded clothes. She had allowed herself to be weak long enough and lean on him, but now that time was over. With her clothes in her hand, she snuck out of his room and back to hers.

One thing she knew for sure. After getting dressed and crawling back into her own empty bed, it wasn't the same as having someone there with her.

Chapter 17

Jaxson wanted nothing more than to stomp next door and shake some sense into Kendra. He had fallen asleep with a smile on his face and woke up to a cold bed. Damn the woman for sneaking out sometime during the night. Logically, he knew why she did it, but fuck if it didn't sting. His ego was taking hit after hit on this trip. If he was smart, he would stay away, but he knew better. One look and he would be back at square one, waiting for any scraps he could get from her. It was pathetic. He should hate her for it.

Pulling on a pair of jeans and a shirt after his shower, Jaxson stepped out of his room to let Duke out. But one foot into the kitchen, he knew his morning wasn't about to get any better. Sitting in the same spot he had last night for dinner was Hollywood.

“Where's Panther?”

“Change of guard,” Hollywood sneered. “Why? Does it piss you off that I'm here to keep you in line?”

The look on the man's face said it all. He wasn't happy, and the reason for it likely had to do with something Jaxson did or didn't do.

"I need to let Duke out and get some coffee before I can handle whatever problem you have with me now."

He didn't bother to let Hollywood answer. He didn't really care what he had to say and the chances that it would piss him off were high. Since killing the man was off the table, he needed to fortify his reserves.

With half a cup of coffee already flowing through his bloodstream and a now relaxing Duke, Jaxson finally met Hollywood's gaze. "Okay, proceed with whatever tongue-lashing you're going to give me."

"You're awfully cocky for a man who is essentially our captive for the time being," Hollywood started.

Jaxson figured this was an excellent time to cut the man off, so that's what he did.

"See, that's where you're wrong. I could leave at any moment. I choose *not* to, and the reason for that choice is sleeping just down the hall." At least, he assumed so after she snuck out on him. It had taken a lot of effort not to check before he jumped in the shower. "You might not believe me, but I do give a shit what happens to her. And I'm not stupid enough to think that I'm the only person my boss is going to send after her. So, no. The reason I'm here has nothing to do with being held by your team and has everything to do with

the fact that I refuse to let anything happen to Kendra. So you can kindly fuck off.”

Hollywood was on his feet and in Jaxson’s face barely a second after the last word left his mouth.

“You expect me to believe you care about her? You met her what, once before you were assigned to kill her? You’re telling me that one encounter stuck with you so much that you decided it was your job to keep her safe?”

That’s exactly what happened, but he refused to tell Hollywood that. Not without confessing more than he cared to. He was a mercenary, the man his boss sent out to handle the dirty jobs. He didn’t have a soul left, let alone a heart. He wasn’t the man who would fulfill Kendra’s wildest dreams, but he sure as shit could keep showing her a good time while he was around, and keep her mind off the fact that someone wanted her dead.

“I don’t really give a shit if you believe me or not. I’m not here to impress you or get you to like me. I’m here to keep Kendra safe. Period. After that, I really don’t give a fuck what you or your teammates think about me.”

“Not a team player, I see.”

He was tempted to tell Hollywood where he could shove his comment, but a reflection caught his attention. Not taking the time to think, he flung himself at Hollywood. The two of them crashed to the floor just as the kitchen window shattered, raining glass down around them. Jaxson looked up to see a

bullet hole in the back of the chair Hollywood had been sitting at just moments before.

“Kendra!” the two of them hollered at the same time. Staying low and army crawling across the floor, they moved in the direction of her room. Glass embedded itself into Jaxson’s forearms and he was sure he was leaving a trail of blood behind, but now wasn’t the time to check. A second shot hit the wall a foot or so above his head, sending plaster floating down. He cursed under his breath. Sending a second shooter was exactly what he suspected the general to do. He just didn’t expect it to be someone so careless.

“What the fuck is going on?”

Kendra met them halfway down the hallway. She, too, was on her belly, working her way toward them. More shots rang out. Jaxson waited until they were closer before answering her.

“Looks like my boss finally got sick of waiting for me to complete the job and sent in a secondary shooter. We need to hunker down. I’m assuming the goal right now is to flush us out.”

“Agreed,” Hollywood said from his position next to him. “The team is on the way. I notified them when we hit the floor.”

It was probably the first, and only, time he was going to give the man credit. He hadn’t seen the moment Hollywood contacted his team, but he was glad he had; his focus had been on finding Kendra. It was good knowing the faster they arrived, the faster they could eliminate the person sent to kill

them. A pang of regret coursed through him before he shut it down. Would it be someone he had worked with? He rarely worked with anyone, but that didn't mean he didn't know the other two men the general also used. He wouldn't call them friends, but certainly acquaintances. He had to wonder if either of them felt guilty about being sent to kill him or, like him, were they told lies in order to complete the mission.

Less than a minute later, Hollywood's phone beeped. "Our team's in position. They are searching the area as we speak. Wes said to give it three minutes and then we could move toward the back of the house."

Thank God for small towns. Everyone on Kendra's team lived within a few miles.

"I need to grab Duke," he told the other two.

One of the things he trained Duke to do as a puppy was to hunker down during situations such as these. Sure enough, the moment he entered the bedroom, he found Duke just inside the door, belly to the ground, waiting for him. Praising him for being a good dog, he gave the command to follow.

By the time he met Kendra and Hollywood back out in the hallway, it was time for them to leave. Trusting that her team did in fact have the situation under control, the three of them stood up and walked out, taking care to avoid stepping on any glass, Jaxson looked at the ground. He had been right. Traces of blood could be seen where he and Hollywood had crawled. He could barely feel the cuts on his arms, but there was no

mistaking the small shards of glass that would need to be dug out.

They'd just stepped out the back door before Hollywood stopped him.

“Thanks, man. I know I've given you a lot of shit, but thanks.”

It wasn't a ringing endorsement, but he would take it. Just then, Jaxson realized something. Nothing in his life was what he thought, and there was a chance he would need to trust this team if he wanted to make it out of this alive. And that pissed him off.

Chapter 18

What the fuck was that shit about? Kendra had woken up after only a couple of hours of sleep to what she could've sworn was a gunshot and glass breaking. No buts about it, when she exited her room to find Hollywood and Jaxson crawling her way, she knew for sure. It would appear General Pritcher wasn't going to give up. That pissed her off and had her wanting to hop on a flight and find the asshat. Show him what it would be like to be in someone's sight.

Instead, she was now standing in her backyard, surrounded by her team. Whoever the sniper was, they were long gone. Both Falcon and Apollo had searched the surrounding woods to no avail. She wanted to scream at the fact that there were now bullet holes in her house. The brand-new cottage that she had searched tirelessly for. The first real home she ever had, and it now looked like a damn crime scene. Fuck General Pritcher and fuck whoever he sent to shoot up her home.

“Any ideas who the fuck did this?” Wes barked out.

“I can’t imagine it was either of Pritcher’s other two men,” Jaxson answered. “The general has a strict rule that if it can’t be done with one shot, then we are to abandon the mission. The fact that whoever shot at us continued to try even after we were no longer in their line of sight concerns me. That’s against protocol.”

“So, if not one of the general’s usual go-tos, then who would it be?”

Kendra didn’t like the question because it meant they were dealing with something outside someone’s usual behavior. From past experience, that never boded well.

“I’m not sure.” Jaxson sounded as frustrated as she felt. “Again, a week ago, I would’ve bet my life that this had nothing to do with the general. Now I have no idea. I wouldn’t have thought he would go outside his usual three. There was no way the shooter couldn’t see me talking to Hollywood, so while the first shot was intended for him, the rest was to draw us out. Kendra, I don’t think this was just about you anymore.”

“Agreed. I think it’s safe to say Pritcher now considers you a liability,” Giggles added.

Giggles’s declaration sobered her. She had no intention of getting Jaxson wrapped up in her mess. Come to think of it, *she* didn’t even want to be wrapped up in it. The point of taking the job with Wes was so she could separate herself from the Army and what happened to her; not to have it brought back up four years later once her life was finally going well.

“Well, he’ll quickly learn that was a bad decision,” Jaxson fumed. “Attempting to kill me is one thing, I always knew my life was expendable. But sending another person after Kendra just pisses me off.”

Kendra had a thing or two to say about Jaxson’s life being expendable, but she would wait until they weren’t surrounded by her team. This whole “being targeted” thing was getting old. She was more than ready to quit sitting around and waiting for someone to shoot at her. It was time to turn the tables.

“I think we need a different approach,” she spoke up.

“I’m listening.” Wes met her eyes.

She kept her attention on her boss and didn’t bother to look at Jaxson. She didn’t need to see his face to know he wasn’t going to like her suggestion. In fact, neither would her team. No matter how hard she tried, a small part of them would always see her as a little sister who needed protection.

“I say we bring the fight to Pritcher. No sense waiting around, and to be honest, I would prefer if we could avoid any more bullet holes in my house. I happen to like the place. So either we draw him out or take it to him. I don’t particularly care which as long as this shit ends sooner rather than later.”

She waited for the explosion, and sure enough, Jaxson didn’t disappoint.

“Are you fucking insane?”

Not one to back down from a challenge, she faced him head-on and replied in a serious tone. “That depends on who you ask. The likely answer is absolutely, but there are probably a few people who would attempt to give me the benefit of the doubt.”

“This isn’t some damn joke,” Jaxson snapped. “That’s *two people* now who were sent to kill you.”

A moment ago, she would have cared that they had an audience, one that included both her boss and her team. Now, she didn’t give the first fuck and would say exactly what was on her mind.

“I’m well aware, Jax-son.” She broke up his name into two words. “A little hard to forget when one of them was sleeping in my house for the past two nights, so don’t fucking lecture me about the hit out on my head. I know it’s there and the only way to eliminate it is to get rid of the person who put it out. Now, you can try and stop me, something I strongly wouldn’t recommend, or you can help me. The choice is yours, but know this is happening whether you like it or not.”

Jaxson’s face turned a funny shade of purple that she had only ever seen on one other person, and that hadn’t ended well for her. But instead of snapping at her as she expected, Jaxson let out a string of curses before storming off across her yard. Kendra watched his retreating back. Strong muscles were wound tight, and each step portrayed just how angry the man was. Despite how pissed she was, she still admired the sexiness of his backside. *Focus, Kendra!*

There was a quiet tension in the air, but Falcon was the first to speak up. “Give him a minute to cool down. It’s hard for guys like us to admit that we can’t always step in front of danger for the women we care about.”

Falcon would know. Trista had done something similar not that long ago, but there were differences. Did Jaxson care about her? No, she didn’t think so. Physically, they were compatible, but that could only take people so far. Emotionally, she wasn’t sure the two of them could ever get to that point. They were like brake fluid and pool shock. Mix the two together and a person had one hell of an explosion. She knew all about that. It was one of her favorite combinations to make things go boom as a kid.

She really didn’t want to think anymore about what her team leader said, so she didn’t bother to remark on Falcon’s comment.

“You can’t deny it’s not a solid plan,” she said instead. “Our team doesn’t cower. We deal with problems before they escalate, and this should be no different. I refuse to sit around and wait to see what the damn general has in store for me.”

Her team had never treated her like a weak link before, and she refused to let them start now that Jaxson showed up. She’d proved time and time again that she was a valuable member of the team, despite her former insecurities. Wes had helped her do that and there was no way she was going to let one incident set her back. She was stronger than that and screw anyone who tried to tell her differently.

“It is,” Falcon agreed. “Which is why as soon as we get things handled here, we’re going back to the barn to put a plan in place.”

Good. That’s exactly what she wanted to hear. Screw Jaxson and his alpha macho tendencies. He didn’t control what she did and damned if he thought he was going to put her in some ivory tower like a stupid princess. Breaking barriers was what she did, and she didn’t plan on stopping for any man.

Chapter 19

Stupid stubborn fucking woman. Jaxson forced himself to rein in his anger as he stomped as far away from Kendra as he could. Never in his life did he feel the need to shake someone so damn badly. Did she have a death wish? Something to prove? He'd read her service record, knew she was badass, and that didn't even compare the fact that, while she was home from deployments, she had earned her pilot's license. Add in the work she did for Wes and there was no denying she was one strong chick.

So why, then, did she purposely want to put herself in harm's way? General Pritcher wasn't someone a person messed with. There was a reason the man was given leeway in the Army; he had three men under his command whose sole purpose was to take care of the individuals the government deemed too much red tape.

Jaxson was torn between wanting to wring her damn neck and being proud that Kendra refused to just sit back; she wasn't willing to leave her life in someone else's hands. But

damn, he was conflicted. And damn, he didn't know how to handle those fucking emotions.

His fingers itched to protect her.

His fists wanted nothing more than to smash something.

He was a walking contradiction, and he didn't know what to do about it. He preferred the lack of emotion he wore like a glove. It was better than what he felt now—the urge to protect and defend. The need to wrap her up and make sure she was safe. That wasn't who he was or who he wanted to become.

“Did walking away do anything for that temper of yours?”

Fuck. He was so engrossed in his thoughts and mental lashing, he hadn't heard Wes approach. That was deadly. That could cost him his life. He needed to be sharp, and it was obvious Kendra was making him lose his edge. He needed to fix that shit and now.

“Not particularly,” he spat. “I'm still tempted to drag her away and lock her up. And in case you were curious, that pisses me off even more.”

“Because you care.”

Hearing Wes say it out loud only fueled his anger. “Because I don't *want* to care. A guy in my line of work doesn't bother caring. It's an emotion that can get me killed and hurt others. I was picked because I lacked that particular emotion. Because my upbringing shaped me into the type of man who learned quickly that feelings were useless. People don't give a shit about me, and I'm fine with that.”

“If that’s what you think about yourself, then why are you so angry at her suggestion when you know, as an operative, it’s a smart move? Something you yourself would have done if you were in her position?”

And there was Jaxson’s problem. Why was he so angry? Kendra’s boss was right on all accounts; it was a smart move. Sure, the general was powerful, but no one was invincible. In fact, the plan was exactly what he would have done the moment he figured out someone was after him. There would’ve been no hiding. No waiting. He would have tortured someone to learn who had sent him and then gone after the other person in a heartbeat. So why was he so pissed that was exactly what Kendra wanted to do?

“I don’t know.” He let out a frustrated growl.

“I think you do,” Wes said slowly. “I think you know exactly why you’re so angry, but you don’t want to face it. There’s nothing wrong with admitting it. Caring for someone doesn’t make men like us vulnerable. It just makes us fight that much harder to make the world just a bit of a better place.”

He was about to say something snarky in return since he hated that the man was able to read him so well, but he didn’t get the chance. Wes cut in again.

“And you should know, you’re not the only one who had a shitty childhood. There’s a reason Blue works as hard as she does. She also has something to prove, even though I’ve told her a million times those days are over. The men over there?

They trust her with their lives. Not because she needed to prove herself, but because of who she is as a person. Blue has a hard time admitting her strength. You want to protect her? Fine. But do it standing beside her. Not by shuffling her away. I can promise things will go much smoother for you.”

The rage was back, but this time for another reason. What did Wes mean when he said Kendra’s childhood? The file he was given only went as far back as when she joined the Army. There was nothing about her life before that. He hadn’t thought much about it at the time, but now he knew that was done intentionally. His boss wouldn’t have wanted him to see anything that would make him relate to her. The general was hoping he would follow orders blindly. He couldn’t have known about their one night together, or the fact that Jaxson had fought to keep that one night locked down after all these years. But then, something else had him curious.

“Why are you telling me all this? You haven’t exactly hidden that you hate me.”

“First off, I hate everyone I meet, until they prove otherwise,” Wes started. “You proved today that you had not only Blue’s back, but Hollywood’s as well. Second, I’m not an idiot. I knew who you were the moment you showed up here. Blue might not talk much about her life, but I could tell the difference four years ago. I’d watched her closely when I considered recruiting her. I saw the shell of a woman she was. Saw her the night she went off with you, then suddenly the next day, she was different. A little lighter. It was at that moment I decided to bring her on. She was suffering

unwarranted guilt, but I knew she wasn't broken, she just needed a different purpose in life. This team gave her that, but she still has a bit more to go before she's completely healed."

So Wes had been there that night. The man had known who he was the whole time. No wonder he didn't shoot him on the spot. Jaxson had thought the man was going soft, but that wasn't the case at all.

"And you think I'm the man to heal her?" Jaxson hated the sliver of hope in his voice. He didn't want to be that man.

"Fuck no. She can do it herself with enough time. But I won't deny her a chance at happiness if it means she walks a little lighter the next day."

With that parting shot, and a quick nod of the head, Kendra's boss turned and walked away. Jaxson didn't know what to think about the man. He was a damn enigma if he ever met one. For a second, he had thought Wes was giving him some sort of blessing he didn't want. Yet he didn't think that was the case. He wasn't sure what Wes meant, but it likely did what he wanted. It got him thinking harder about what he wanted with Kendra, and at the same time drained the anger.

Jaxson was still lost and confused when Duke nudged his hand. Squatting down, he rubbed his best friend's head. "What are your thoughts, boy?"

Duke didn't give him an answer. Jaxson hadn't expected one. Duke merely provided the unwavering support he had learned could only come from an animal. Jaxson had a

decision to make, and he needed to do it quick before anyone else tried to talk to him.

Chapter 20

Kendra watched as her boss spoke to Jaxson. She watched as Duke went over to comfort him. She had thought he would come back once he cooled down, but when his back snapped straight and he didn't bother to look her way before moving in the direction of his vehicle, she knew. He wasn't coming back. Jaxson didn't agree with her, and felt she couldn't handle the situation. That was fine. She didn't need him anyway. She didn't need any man. She had her team and her friends. That was enough.

“He'll come back.” Hollywood stepped up next to her and spoke with more conviction than was probably necessary.

“No, he won't, but it doesn't matter anyway. It wasn't meant to last. It was only ever supposed to be one night.”

One night four years ago.

No names.

No details.

That was the plan. Then General Pritcher had to fuck it up by sending Jaxson after her. Now she not only knew his name, but knew him. The passionate person he was. It would be harder to forget him this time, but she would because there was no other choice. She refused to be a whimpering woman who pined after a man. If Jaxson wanted to leave, then good riddance. She just needed to get her damn heart and body on board with her mind.

“I don’t believe you.” It was clear Hollywood had no intention of dropping the conversation despite her attempts. She would let him have his say, then do what she wanted anyway. “I think the two of you are both harboring feelings that you would rather ignore. Trust me, it only bites you in the ass when you make a stupid decision.”

“I appreciate the advice.”

“But you’re not going to listen to me, are you? Just like Jaxson clearly didn’t listen to Wes.”

She had no idea what her boss told Jaxson, but she could guess. There was no one who constantly reminded her of her strength like her boss did. He had seen her at her worst and still he continued to believe she could do anything, could be anything she wanted, with the right motivation.

“No, I’m not, but that doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate you trying. The man saved your life, so I would bet it means you don’t hate him as much. I’m glad. Jaxson never deserved everyone’s anger. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to finish

getting this mess cleaned up so we can get rid of the general once and for all.”

She walked back into her house. Panther was busy sweeping up the glass, while Giggles and Apollo boarded up the smashed window. She would deal with the bullet holes in the walls at a later date.

She was about to snap that she could clean it up herself, but her team didn't deserve to deal with her pissy mood. Fortunately, crossing the threshold seemed to have brought her back to reality. These guys weren't the reason she was trying her damndest not to feel abandoned by Jaxson leaving. It wasn't their fault that she was lying to everyone, including herself, about how she felt.

“Thank you for this.” She let out a long exhale.

“Welcome. Although it should be Hollywood in here cleaning up. The fucker shot at him. Maybe they realized how annoying he was. Tried to do us all a favor.”

She laughed at Giggles's remark. Which, if she had to guess, was his point in making it. He earned the name for a reason, and right now she needed his goofiness to break the tension she was feeling.

“Are you kidding? He's likely outside using the excuse that someone tried to kill him to get out of it. Not that he needs any excuse to leave a mess.” She smiled.

“Ain't that the truth ...” Panther mumbled.

“You’re the dumbass who insists on still living with him,” Apollo added his own opinion.

“Free rent.”

The simplest of explanations and yet Kendra doubted that was the reason Panther stayed. Pay was never an issue. Wes was the opposite of stingy. He took care of those he employed, and considering that all those years they moved around Mexico rent-free, she had a good idea that Panther wasn’t hurting for money. So something else kept him rooming with their messy teammate. While she was curious, she would give him the same respect he gave her. She would stay out of his business until he needed help.

“Alright. Cleaned and boarded up. Falcon dug the bullets out of the wall. Sorry, he tried to be gentle.” Giggles winced. She understood why. The small holes were now bigger than a half dollar. It was going to take a little more than spackle to fix the mess.

She waved her teammate off. “It’s fine. Hopefully, we can learn something from them.”

The state of her home wasn’t her concern at the moment. It was just a house and it would take little to repair it. Materials. That’s all it was. Finding the man who caused it, now that was something worth her attention.

She and her team headed to the barn, and she used the time to reaffirm her stance. Jaxson had walked away. He made his choice and she would make hers. Wes was already in the situation room with Ray by the time they arrived, and she held

up her hand and stopped whatever her boss was about to say. She didn't want apologies or excuses made for Jaxson. Being the good guy he is, Wes dropped the subject. It wouldn't be forever, but for now, he would respect her wishes.

“Ray has some info for us.”

The man in question didn't bother to look up from his computer before he spoke. “General Pritcher hopped on a military transport this morning. Final destination classified. I'm trying to get more information but I'm hitting stonewall after stonewall. The Army doesn't seem to like outsiders poking into their business.”

Even if that outsider was a man who's considered a legend in the Special Forces world. Wes might have himself a shitload of friends still serving, but no one wanted to get slapped with a dishonorable discharge.

“What about the other two men we originally had on the list?” Before they learned it was Jaxson, she tacked on in her head.

“Both are accounted for.” Ray picked up his head that time and gave her a sad smile.

So Jaxson was right—whoever was sent earlier wasn't trained. At least not by the Army. She couldn't decide if that comforted her or freaked her out. An untrained individual could be deadlier than a trained one.

“So, the general is getting desperate is basically what you're saying.”

“Yes, that’s what we think,” Wes answered Giggles. “Even if Blue hadn’t already expressed that she wanted to go after him, it was a move we would be making. Desperate means dangerous and I refuse to allow him to continue putting bounties out on one of my team.”

There was the fierce boss everyone knew. The low tone and fist on the table spoke volumes about the amount of restraint her boss was showing. Usually, he would explode, so this mildly calmer version was a bit scarier. God help the general if Wes got to him before anyone else.

Chapter 21

Jaxson thought about what Wes said as he drove farther away from Kendra's home. He couldn't decide if he made the right decision or not. He needed answers, and the only way to get them was to find his boss.

As much as a part of him wanted to go back to her, he couldn't do it. He wasn't the man for her. Kendra deserved someone who wasn't afraid to show emotions. Hell, someone who wasn't afraid to have them. That wasn't him. Emotions and feelings were ripped out of him at a young age. That's what made him good at his job, that's who he was. Kendra didn't realize it, but she wanted more. So he was bowing out, letting her think what she wanted about him and hoping that by not saying goodbye, she would resent him. That was the only way she would move on and he could go back to living his emotionless life.

Pulling his burner phone from under the seat where he hid it that first night he went into her house, he powered it up. Seconds later, he was dialing the only programmed number.

His boss always answered. So the fact that he didn't this time could only mean one thing. General Pritcher was officially done with him. The shots taken back at Kendra's weren't a mistake. Whoever his boss sent was likely ordered that no one was to be left alive. That grated on his nerves. Nearly twenty years in the Army, fifteen of which were spent directly under the general, and this was how things would end? It had him questioning every assignment the man sent him on. Were they really sanctioned, or had the general turned him into an assassin? A killer, like his father? There was only one way to find out. General Pritcher's answer would be the deciding factor as to how Jaxson handled the man. Sometimes murder was justified.

Chapter 22

Finally, they had something to go on; an old Army commander of hers had agreed to meet. Said he had some information that she would find both helpful and insightful. She hoped so. Ray was spinning his heels looking for Pritcher, and without Jaxson and her team fighting, she had nothing to distract her, so she was getting edgy. Not wanting to think about him, she pushed the thoughts away and focused on the task at hand.

“Are we sure we can trust this guy?”

She gave Apollo’s question some thought. After everything that’s happened lately, she didn’t know who, besides her team, she could trust. She would’ve assumed she could trust the men she served and were captured with, but that turned out to be false. She just had to hope that the commander disliked the general more than her.

“Right now, we trust no one,” Wes answered.

They were a block away from the port where they were scheduled to meet. Strapping on her vest, she went through her equipment for the third time.

Thigh holster. Check.

Spare piece on her ankle. Check.

Knife clipped to her vest. Check.

Some might think she and her team looked like they were headed to war, and the truth was, they could be. She had no idea how far the general's reach was. This whole thing could likely be a setup. They were meeting at the Port of Corpus Christi—not exactly the team's first choice. It was overcrowded in most areas, and if things went to shit, they could have several civilian casualties on their hands.

Thirty minutes later, completely kitted out, Kendra and Falcon walked to a deserted area of the port. Most didn't even realize the area existed, but it was convenient for what they had planned and it was the best they could do with the location they were given. The rest of her team was set up in different locations to continue recon.

“Retired Master Sergeant Lanes?” Kendra quizzed.

Kendra stopped a few feet away from the still-fit man. She remembered Lanes from her time in the Army. He was one of the few officers who didn't give a shit about her gender and considered her an equal. Which is why she felt comfortable enough to reach out. Not having the same views as the general was a plus in her book.

“Kendra Beck? Erik Lamont?”

The man’s tone was formal. Almost robotic. There wasn’t a hint of friendliness on his face. It immediately put her on alert, and from the corner of her eye, she could see the same could be said for her team leader.

“You mentioned having some information for us,” Falcon responded, matching Lanes’s tone.

Falcon had requested that he do the talking. As her team leader, it was well within his right. Although more often than not he was fine allowing others to take the lead, but she understood why he wanted to this time. They were both looking to gauge how the sergeant would handle her presence.

“I do, but shouldn’t Beck be asking? It pertains to her, after all.”

She didn’t let the smile show, but damn, she wanted to. The man clearly passed Falcon’s first test.

“I’m asking now,” she clarified. Her declaration earned her a respectful nod.

“There are a few who believe the power General Pritcher holds has gone to his head. Everyone knows he wasn’t happy when you received your scroll. What most people didn’t realize was he actively tried to have you discharged. Everyone knew it was bullshit because he voiced loudly his dislike for women in the Special Forces world.”

“Discharged for what?” she snapped.

“Petty shit. Nothing he could ever make stick.”

That wasn't really an answer, but the tone told her he had no intention of going into detail. Her hands clenched at her sides and she was going to need dental work done if she continued to grind her teeth. Kendra was desperately trying to control the nasty retorts she wanted to let fly. Out of respect for her former teammate she reined it in.

“So, where does that leave us now?”

Lanes had yet to tell her anything she didn't already suspect, so this couldn't be the only reason he agreed to meet. For the first time since she and Falcon approached, Lanes looked almost uncomfortable. It put her on edge.

“There were rumors at the time amongst the higher-ups that your team's capture wasn't random. Some thought information about your whereabouts was leaked, but there were the faintest whispers that Pritcher orchestrated it himself.”

She couldn't make out the angry words flying from Falcon's mouth around the ringing in her ears. Did Lanes really just say that people thought Pritcher had purposely had her team captured and tortured and did nothing about it? Her brain was short-circuiting from the information and she suddenly felt nauseous.

“I'm sorry, what?” She was finally able to string the three words together.

“There was never confirmation, mind you, but yes, there were a couple of higher-ups who suspected that was the case. They couldn't find any proof, and considering all three of you

who were rescued left the Army within a few months, a proper investigation was never conducted.”

But now the other two were dead. She thought it was something she said in her head, but she quickly realized she must have spoken the words out loud because Lanes rushed on.

“That’s why I decided it was best to meet when you reached out. I heard about the deaths. It’s not exactly a well-kept secret who Pritcher uses when the government wants deniability. The real question is, were those team members involved and Pritcher is cleaning house, or did something else set him off?”

With that bomb, Lanes said his goodbyes and walked away. Kendra was still standing in shock five minutes later when the rest of her team, along with Wes, gathered around her.

“Well, this is a clusterfuck of epic proportions,” Wes muttered.

She had to agree with her boss. The more they learned, the worse it got. Her past was coming back to haunt her. The shitty part was that she did nothing to deserve any of it. Unless karma was coming back to kick her ass, in which case she must have been one hell of an asshole in a past life to deserve the shit she was being handed.

“Call Ray,” Wes ordered. “Let him know he needs to dig deeper into Packton and Jenson. Oh, and anyone else who served on Blue’s team when they were captured. There has to be some trail if what Lanes says is true. No way that shit stays hidden. Especially not if Lanes is thinking Pritcher is cleaning

house. A person only does that because whatever they're using to keep the people quiet is no longer working. I want that shit found!" he finished up with roar.

Kendra winced at his loud rumble. It was a good thing they were outside, because she was pretty sure the tone of his voice would have shattered glass. Something she herself wouldn't mind doing at the moment. She had the need to let out some pent-up frustration. Maybe she could convince Apollo to have a sparring session with her.

Gunshots rang from the direction that Retired Master Sergeant Lanes had departed. Drawing their weapons, her team moved as a unit, and mass chaos ensued. This part of the port was busier than where they'd been gathered, and now all she could see were people running in every direction. Pushing and shoving led to some lying on the ground. She did her best to check those knocked down as she passed. The gunshots had stopped, but the hysteria left behind was still in full force. Her team fanned out, searching for the source of the shots.

"Lanes is down!" Giggles's voice came over her earpiece. "North side of the port."

Kendra moved that way. The farther north she went, the more crowded it became. She lost count of the number of times she was pushed in her attempt to reach her teammate. By the time she found Giggles in the crowd, he was leaning over a dead Lanes. The single shot to the forehead said it all. The man didn't stand a chance.

“Son of a bitch.” She dropped down next to her teammate. “There’s no way those shots we heard did this. This was from a long-range rifle. One clean shot.”

She didn’t need to see the back of the guy’s head to know it was likely blown off. She cursed at her stupidity. She had led Lanes right into a trap without even realizing it. Another death that was her fault. This whole thing was bigger than any of them realized.

“Fuck,” Wes hissed when he stepped up next to them. “Those other shots must have been a diversion to create chaos, so we didn’t know where the shooter was coming from.”

It worked too. Her first thought had been that they had an active shooter at the port, but from what she could see, the only casualty was Lanes. Except for those injured in the stampede, the man she just met with was the only target.

For a brief second, she wondered if this was Jaxson’s handiwork, but she quickly pushed those thoughts aside. She couldn’t believe that the man she let herself get close to could possibly be behind this. But there was still that nagging feeling of how well did she really know Jaxson. Not well enough, maybe.

Chapter 23

Jaxson stalked his way across the Army base. Two straight days of calling his boss to no avail and he was done screwing around. He hadn't wanted to drop Duke off at the kennel farm with the nice family, but he needed answers. And the only way to get those answers was to stay on base, in one of the barracks, so he was notified the minute the general showed up.

So no, he wasn't happy. He wanted to wring his boss's neck, consequences be damned. He wanted things to go back to the way they used to be. When things were simple and he didn't have to overthink all the missions he was sent on. He was pissed at Kendra and her team for making him doubt the good he thought he was doing. The good he needed to know he was doing because yes, taking out the scum of the earth through any means necessary was his definition of "good."

Jaxson was still pacing when footsteps broke his thoughts. He stopped in his tracks when Jameson entered. Jameson was likely another name Kendra's team had on the list, a list he

wasn't privy to in his short stay. Jameson was another one of the guys General Pritchler pulled, but unlike him, Jameson only handled a handful of assignments. The man's moral compass was a lot straighter, and the general knew that.

"Boss wants to see you."

About fucking time.

He followed in silence. Jameson didn't deserve to deal with the anger that was pouring off him in waves. It only intensified when he walked into the general's office and found the man casually sitting at his desk looking over reports like he didn't have a care in the world, or he didn't ignore nearly a dozen calls over two days. Like he hadn't just sent someone to kill one of his best operatives, despite fifteen years of good work.

"Jaxson, have a seat."

The general didn't bother to look up as he gave the order. Biting back a rather nasty comment, Jaxson chose to give the man the respect he didn't deserve. For the time being, anyway.

"I'd rather stand, sir."

"Very well." Finally, the general looked up and met his gaze. "You disobeyed a direct order. You were given an assignment and failed to report in when the assignment was complete. I don't tolerate failure."

Jaxson's temper finally snapped. Gone was the emotionless man he turned into for the sake of others. "So you sent someone else in to finish it? To finish me? Was it even someone from the team, or did you just hire someone off the

street because they didn't seem to care that they nearly killed me?"

Jaxson didn't miss the uncomfortable shift in Jameson's position. It made him wonder if the guy was guilty, or just uncomfortable about the conversation he was witnessing. This was well outside the man's moral compass. He doubted Jameson had been sent in, but he had been known to be wrong before. Case in point, the general.

"I don't answer to you!" General Pritcher slammed his fist on the desk, his face beet red at the audacity that he would be questioned.

"I told you, women are off-limits to me. You knew that when I started. You knew that when you sent me the file. Yet, I reminded you again. So why you thought I would deviate is beyond me. I didn't fail. I chose not to take this particular assignment. You just didn't listen."

"Your assignment wasn't a woman. It was a traitor to this country."

His boss was unhinged. Spit was flying across his desk and Jaxson was sure the man was close to a heart attack. The veins in his temples were popping so hard he was afraid they might burst. But that didn't stop Jaxson from pushing the issue. His boss wasn't the only pissed-off person in the room.

"Bullshit," he growled. "There's no evidence. Nothing in the file even hints at that. You asked me to complete an assignment based on speculation. That's not my job. That's the

job of an assassin,” he hissed. “I’M. NOT. A. KILLER.” He punctuated each word to get his point across.

Morally gray? Absolutely.

Cold-blooded killer? Not a chance.

At least, not yet.

General Pritcher’s sadistic laugh put him further on edge. “That was always your fear, wasn’t it? That you would turn out like dear ole dad. A serial killer. Do you really think there’s any difference between what your father did and what you’re paid to do? Killing is still killing, no matter how you choose to justify it.”

He swallowed at the accusation. Jaxson joined the military because he wanted to prove everyone wrong. People tended to look at him differently once they realized his father was a serial killer who murdered women that looked like his mother until he finally killed her when Jaxson was only twelve. Even his own grandparents had a hard time looking at him. It was why he vowed that, when he got recruited by Pritcher, he would never kill a woman or child. He was going to stick it to the people who thought poorly of him. But here was his boss, throwing his past in his face.

“I am *nothing* like the man who fathered me,” he seethed.

“Keep telling yourself that, but I know the truth. You needed an outlet to kill freely, and I provided that. It’s why I picked you out of all the others. It’s the same reason why you never questioned the assignments I sent you on. Deep down,

you didn't care. As long as you had a reason to let yourself act on those urges you tried to hide.”

Each word cut him a little deeper. Donning his mask, he didn't let his boss know just how much what he was saying hit close to home. One of his biggest fears was that if he didn't have structure in his life, he would turn out like his father. It was the number one reason he opted to join the Army. He had hoped it would be good for him, but now he was thinking he had been played. General Pritcher saw his background and figured he hit the jackpot, exploiting a weakness that Jaxson hadn't even noticed he had. Deep down, he knew he killed those men because of the wrongs they committed. Because it was the only way to get rid of men like his father.

“I can tell you're trying to deny it, but we both know it's pointless. You lack emotions. You lack empathy. You're a hired gun and you do as you're ordered. The only difference between you and your father is I pick your victims. Not you.”

Fuck this. His control finally snapped, and he was across the desk before he could finish thinking about what he planned to do. Jaxson got one shot in before Jameson was pulling him off. General Pritcher's sadistic laugh followed him.

“A cold-blooded killer, just like your father,” was the last statement he heard before Jameson dragged his ass out of the office and back to the barracks.

Jameson shoved him into a now empty barrack and barricaded the door.

“You need to calm the fuck down, man.”

Jaxson wanted to plow through the man and finish what he started, but Jameson was bigger than him. At nearly six and a half feet tall, he was built like a damn mountain and he wasn't entirely sure if the two of them went head-to-head, he could beat the man. Anger would only get him so far against Jameson's brute strength, and right now he was plenty angry. But so was Jameson.

"I'd rather rip his head off," Jaxson snarled in return.

If he couldn't fight his way out and release his frustration, then he would pace instead. Back and forth he walked, unable to destroy anything in his wake. He was on an Army base and there were rules. Smashing apart a barrack would certainly not be overlooked, no matter what position he held.

"Why didn't you ever say anything about your family?" Jameson started. "When the rest of us talked, you made it seem like you didn't have any."

By the rest of them, Jameson meant himself and Roberts, the three who Pritcher recruited. He and Jameson had been in the same unit when they were handpicked. What his friend said was true; he never spoke about his family. He led people to believe he never had any, and the reason was right in front of him.

"I didn't have any family. My father took that away from me when I was twelve years old. And the reason I never spoke about them was because of that look right there. I didn't want pity, and I didn't want people to look at me differently. Yes, I'm the son of a serial killer, but I'm nothing like him."

“I never said you were.”

Jameson might be a mountain of a man, but he had a softer heart. He had emotions, ones that he wore on his sleeve rather than hid from the rest of the world, as Jaxson did. And right now, how he felt was written across his face.

“There’s nothing wrong with someone feeling bad that you had your childhood ripped away from you because of what your father did. What happened to your mother?”

He didn’t want to have this conversation, he’d avoided it for years, but he owed Jameson an explanation.

“She was my father’s last victim. Every woman he killed looked exactly like her. When he was arrested, I was sent to live with my grandparents, my mother’s parents,” he clarified. “They had a hard time looking at me. They finished raising me, but I don’t think it bothered them when I left right after high school. I never heard from them again after I joined the Army.”

This time, Jameson didn’t look at him with pity, but with anger. It was rolling off him in waves. And Jaxson knew from experience that a pissed-off Jameson wasn’t good. The man felt every emotion deeply, and that included anger.

“That’s shitty, and the fact that the general threw that in your face is even shittier. I can see why you want to tear into him.”

“It’s more than that. This last assignment has me questioning a few things.”

Jaxson went on to explain the assignment he was sent on, and the stuff he learned about both Kendra and her past association with the general. How two of his latest assignments had once been in her unit. He explained both her capture and torture. He spilled everything he knew and hoped like hell that his instinct was right and Jameson wouldn't betray him, that his morals and the facts he was given would help him understand what was really going on. By the time he was done talking, Jaxson realized just how far he had come from the man he used to be.

“So, what's your plan?” Jameson asked thoughtfully.

“I'm going to kill General Pritcher.”

Chapter 24

Lanes was dead and Jaxson was still gone. Ray was able to find out that General Pritchler was back in the States but he was secure on an Army base. There was nothing her team could do except draw him out. Only it wasn't working. The bastard was a coward, hiding behind those he sent to kill her.

It had been four days since she last saw Jaxson. She was ashamed to admit that she missed him. Last night, she had slept back in her house for the first time. Kyle, a member of Charlie Team who also happened to be a carpenter, fixed her house up. Brand-new windows and some spackle later, there was no longer any evidence her house was shot up. Except for the memories. The sound of glass smashing. The split-second fears that someone had killed either Jaxson or Hollywood. The momentary relief when she came out of her bedroom and found the two of them crawling her way. Then fear again as bullets continued to fly through her then broken windows.

She couldn't stop seeing it, not when she was alone at night. It wasn't her first time being shot at. It wasn't the first time her team had been shot at. And yet this one time stuck out to her more than any other. The only thing she could contribute it to was the fact that Jaxson was in danger. He was the only anomaly. She shouldn't care. He was in the Army and he put his life on the line on the regular. And yet, she couldn't shake it.

It was his choice to leave. That should've voided any concern she had for him. It should've eliminated any feelings that were growing. But it didn't, and she hesitated to admit that with each passing day it got harder rather than easier. She really, really wanted to hate him for that.

"You seem to be thinking awfully hard over here."

She looked over to find Hollywood walking her way. They were meeting at Wes's house for their weekly barbeque. Everyone was there. Not really, more like everyone Wes employed, plus their significant other. Add in the shit ton of rugrats running around and it was mayhem of the best kind.

"A lot on my mind," she responded.

"I happen to be told I'm a good listener."

Kendra laughed and gave her full attention to Hollywood. He *was* a good listener. They'd spent many nights just sitting and talking while hopping around Mexico. It was how she knew he was in love with a woman who, he felt, was off-limits. She also knew that, while they were back in the States,

he felt that one of those rare times he made a mistake cost him that same woman's friendship.

Kendra didn't know who the woman was, but she hoped for his sake they worked things out. A man like Hollywood deserved happiness, and she wasn't just talking about his looks. Although he had that in spades, and with genes like that, they surely needed to be passed down to the next generation. The man could easily pass for a movie star, but also had the brains to go with it.

Sexy, smart, and humble. The man was the perfect package. For someone else. She preferred her men a little darker and more mysterious. The quintessential bad boy.

"Just trying to figure out where I fit into all this," she finally explained. "I joined the military because I needed away from my hometown. Away from the judgmental pricks, but it looks like that was exactly what I found."

She never talked about her life, especially not her childhood. She grew up on what people called the wrong side of the tracks. Her father was a two-bit criminal. Her mother was a whore who would spread her legs for anyone as long as they supplied her with her next fix. Kendra looked exactly like her. Well, until the drugs did their damage. People loved to comment how it was her mother's blue eyes that hooked people in. The same electric blue that Kendra saw in the mirror each day.

It drove her insane growing up knowing people compared her to her mother. Everyone in their small town knew who her

parents were, so of course they didn't want their children hanging around with her. She couldn't blame them. Statistics showed that she would end up like either of them. She had set out to prove them wrong. And she had. She joined the Army and never looked back. She served her country with honor and was captured and tortured for the same.

“Unfortunately, I have learned that there will always be judgmental pricks no matter where you go. It's how you handle them that says more about you than them. Now, in Pritcher's case, having a member of the armed forces purposely captured and tortured simply because of their gender, well, that's some bullshit.”

Her lips turned up in a small smile. Her teammate had a way with words. He wasn't nearly as crass as some of the others. Hollywood had that “boy next door” charm that women flocked to.

“What's my handling game saying about me?” She bumped him in the shoulder.

“That you're a much better person than the rest of us. Very few people show as much grace as you do, and considering what we've learned about how you were treated in the Army, I have to say you're one of the strongest women I've had the pleasure of knowing and working with.”

Damn, Hollywood was pulling out the big guns. He was going deep on her and she didn't know what to say. She sucked with emotions. She didn't have the feminine bone in her body that got all touchy-feely.

“I see that makes you uncomfortable.” Hollywood chuckled. “I think that makes me like you all that much more.”

“I don’t see why”—she looked at him with curiosity—“we fight nonstop.”

“That we do, but it’s because you don’t know your worth. Four years together and not once have you tried to push things. You’re a part of this team, but it’s almost like you’re comfortable hiding in the background and doing what you’re told. You’re the best pilot I know, but you don’t brag about it. The only person who can beat you in hand-to-hand combat is Apollo, but again, you don’t brag and you don’t show off. You’re like Wonder Woman, but act like Jane,” he huffed.

Kendra threw her head back and laughed. “Okay, that analogy sucked. Kinda like your jokes do, but I get where you’re coming from,” she finally said.

“Okay, yeah, so maybe that wasn’t the best way to explain you, but you get what I mean. The first time I ever saw you light up even a little was when Jaxson was around.” He sobered quickly, and so did she. “He brought out the real spark in you.”

Kendra avoided talking about Jaxson. Her team didn’t like him. Well, maybe they did after he kept a bullet from entering Hollywood’s heart, but then the man had to go and leave. Not exactly the best way to earn any points.

“He left, remember?” Damn, why did her voice have to crack at the first mention of him?

“He did, but I think you’ll find when he returns, he had a good reason for it. The man was conflicted, and unfortunately, we tend to make mistakes when that happens.”

The anger Hollywood had initially held toward Jaxson no longer existed. She wouldn’t go as far as saying her teammate now respected him, but the level of disgust that used to tinge his voice was gone. It was an improvement. She wasn’t ready to think too much about what Hollywood said, but she did hone into one thing; he used the word *when*, not *if*. She didn’t want the spark of hope that one word caused to flare too much. So instead, she focused on the last part of his statement.

“What mistakes did you make?”

“One I wish I could desperately take back. I ruined something that was very special to me.”

She didn’t push any further. She didn’t want to talk about Jaxson, so she wouldn’t push him about his secrets. They sat in silence for a while, watching her teammates and the guys of Charlie Team. The laughs and smiles made her happy. So many of the couples in front of her had gone through their own tribulations to get to where they were now. She was glad they had worked out. Even if Jaxson didn’t end up being with her forever, something she wasn’t even sure she wanted yet, then that would be okay, because at least they had their time together.

Movement from behind her caught her attention. Glancing over her shoulder, she found Ray striding toward her at a fast

clip, his phone to his ear. Before she could get up to meet him, he was standing by her side.

“We have information on Pritcher.”

Chapter 25

Something had Duke on edge. The hair on the back of his dog's neck was standing up and a low menacing growl filled the small house. Jaxson didn't have a nice house like Kendra's. More like a run-down shack, just off base. There was no fancy security. Just Duke to warn him when something wasn't right, like he was doing now. He hadn't picked the place for the house, he picked it because it had a decent-size backyard for Duke to run. A yard this size was hard to come by in this part of town.

“What is it, boy?”

Duke stood firmly in front of him. No amount of nudging would move the stubborn dog. Jaxson would be proud if his own senses weren't tingling. Something was close, and he had no idea if the person was a friend or foe. He doubted Pritcher would suddenly have the balls to come after him. The man was a coward who hid behind his rank and ability to send others to do his dirty work. He didn't think it was Jameson or Roberts, not after the conversation he'd had with Jameson,

who promised to speak with Roberts. It would seem both men had noticed a severe change in Pritcher as well, and were concerned.

With his gun in hand, he moved to the back of the house. Turning on the outside light, he nearly shot first and asked questions later when he saw a figure standing just feet away from the sliding back door. It took him a second to realize where he recognized the man from. He had never seen the person, except in one of his files.

“You got a fucking death wish?” Jaxson seethed at the hooded figure after throwing the door open.

“I had it on good authority you knew who I was.”

Of course, he knew who Daniel was. The man was a legend in his own right, spending years undercover taking down a human trafficker. He only joined on with Wes after he realized the agency he worked for cared more about the criminals than the agents they sent undercover. After that, Daniel was a ghost. The guy had more holes in his past than Jaxson did.

“Sure, I know who you are, *Daniel*, but that doesn’t explain why the fuck you thought it was a good idea to creep around my backyard and sneak up on me. I’m not exactly a man who stops to ask questions.”

“Yet, you did. Besides, you call it sneaking, I call it passing information.”

Expressionless. That was the best way he could describe the man. They could have been discussing something as simple as

the weather for all the emotions Daniel showed.

Jaxson relaxed the grip on his weapon, but only slightly. He might know who Daniel was, but that didn't mean he trusted the man. Sneaking up on him only made what little trust he did have nearly vanish.

"Then, out with it," he snapped when Daniel didn't provide anything more. "I'm not a fan of small talk." And Daniel's mood was starting to irk him.

"Testy." Daniel's lips turned up the slightest. "It's a good thing I don't take offense. Here's everything you need to take down Pritcher. Including the mission he sent Blue and her team on. The one that ended with them being tortured."

Jaxson snagged the envelope out of Daniel's outstretched hand. He wasted no time ripping it open and pulling out the contents. A quick scan proved Daniel was telling the truth.

"How did you get this information?" he asked in disbelief. The records he held in his hand should've been sealed, or at least parts of them redacted. But here he was, holding what had to be an original. It took a lot to impress him, and this was one of those times.

"Friends in high places."

When Jaxson just popped his eyebrow in a challenge, Daniel chuckled.

"Okay," the guy said laughing. "More like I called in a very old favor. It helps in my line of work to rack those up and rarely call them in. When I do, people know I mean business."

It just so happens that Pritcher has made quite a few enemies over the years and some people wouldn't mind seeing his reign end."

"Why me and not Wes?"

While he appreciated the information, it was odd. Kendra was an employee of Wes's and everyone knew he took care of his own. So why wouldn't Daniel give it to the man whom he also worked for? Something didn't add up, and the one lesson he recently learned was to question everything.

"Getting smarter, I see. Don't worry, Wes knows what I'm giving you. It was his suggestion to come here. I think the man might actually like you, and that's saying a lot considering I'm not sure he likes anyone outside of his small circle. But the why is simple. You deserve to know the truth about the man you work for. The truth about the woman you were sent to kill. I know about your past." Daniel held up his hand when Jaxson started to interrupt. "I don't give a shit where you came from. I care about the man you are now. From what I've seen and heard, you're a good soldier. Don't let Pritcher ruin that. Leave the Army if that's what it takes, but do what's best for you."

He didn't know what was best for him anymore. He thought the Army had been the answer, but now that he was questioning that, he didn't know what the best course of action should be. It sucked that he was nearly forty years old and didn't know what his future held. A week ago, he had his entire life planned out. One assignment, and that went to hell.

“I can see that has your wheels turning. Want a bit of advice?”

Daniel waited for him to nod his head in agreement before he continued.

“Don’t run and never let your past dictate your future. Regret is the single worst thing in the world to have. Trust me on that.”

Jaxson looked at Daniel with a new set of eyes. His first impression of the man was that he was dangerous. Like himself, he was used to the dark sides of life. Something had shaped Daniel similar to how his childhood shaped him. A normal person would’ve been curious as to what that event was. Jaxson wasn’t normal, and since he hated people looking into him too closely, he would give Daniel the same benefit. But something else clicked for him.

“You’re not going back to work for Wes, are you? It’s why he agreed to let you bring me the file.”

It’s the only thing that made sense. Daniel gave off the impression that he was the type of man who preferred to work alone. Being on a team wasn’t what he wanted, and Jaxson recognized it. They were the same in a lot of ways.

“No, I’m not. I’ve finally decided to take my own advice and stop running. I have some unfinished business to take care of.”

“Thank you for this.” Jaxson thrust his hand forward and Daniel wasted no time shaking it. “If you ever need any help,

don't hesitate to call. I owe you for this.”

He watched in silence as Daniel slipped back into the shadows. The man truly was a ghost. Pulling the file out of the envelope again, he looked closer at the documents Daniel provided. Fuck, it was finally nice to see something without all the damn black lines hiding what he really needed.

Slapping the file against his palm, he whispered to the empty yard. “Gotcha, motherfucker.”

Chapter 26

It looked like Daniel had come through for them once again. The file he'd provided on Pritcher was damning, to say the least. Someone had spent a lot of time gathering information on the general and it was comprehensive. She almost wished she knew who the anonymous source was, but as usual, Daniel was keeping that close to the vest. That man had more informants than Jewels, who was a former reporter.

Kendra was slightly disappointed to learn that Daniel wasn't coming back to W.J. Wes had explained that the man had some personal stuff he needed to take care of. She should've known it would happen sooner rather than later. Daniel wasn't a team man. When he was in the CIA, he worked alone, and even when he came to work with Wes, most of the things he did were separate from how the other two teams operated. Not bad, just different. Daniel intrigued her and it sucked that she wouldn't get the chance to figure him out. She liked a good mystery.

The phone ringing through the speaker of the SUV jarred her. She had flown her team to a remote part of northeastern Pennsylvania where Pritcher was known to have a hunting cabin. Supposedly, he spent most weekends there, especially this time of the year. They had left late in the night, hoping to fly into the rural airport about an hour away. She wasn't a huge fan of flying at night because it messed with her sleep, but she would do just about anything at this point if it meant getting the problem taken care of. That didn't mean she wasn't relying solely on adrenaline to get her through the situation.

“Whatcha got?” Giggles asked from the driver's seat when the call connected.

Giggles and Hollywood were in the SUV with her, while Falcon, Apollo, and Panther were in a separate one in front of them.

“Patching in the other SUV.” Ray's confident voice came through the speaker.

Moments later, a grunt from Falcon came through the line. She smiled at her team leader's response. The sound reminded her of something Trista had said about how Falcon was the spitting image of a Viking. Right at that moment, Kendra could understand the comparison. Falcon even sounded like one with his non-verbal response.

“Now that I have everyone together,” Ray continued, “satellite shows you're ten miles out.”

“How accurate is the information we were given?” Hollywood, the least trusting member of the team, asked. It

didn't matter that the information came from Daniel. The information first came from an informant and that, of course, was who Hollywood didn't trust.

“The cabin is definitely owned by Pritcher, according to the deed. I used the information Daniel was able to get me from his contact. It seems like the general didn't cover his tracks nearly as well as he thought. Once I knew where to look, I was able to find the connection, but it would appear Pritcher wasn't working alone. I'm trying to find his partner. In the meantime, watch each other's six. There is more going on here than we know.”

Ray ended the call. They had been hesitant to travel without all the necessary information, but they couldn't pass up the opportunity to question the general when he was currently off the Army base. They needed him vulnerable, and the best place for that was his cabin. With any luck, they would have everything wrapped up in a couple of days and the general court-martialed. It was the least the man deserved after everything he put her former team through. A bullet to the head would've been preferable, but she was trying to play by the rules.

As luck, or the lack thereof, would have it, a heavily tinted SUV swerved in front of them, coming out of a side dirt road and effectively cutting them off from the other half of their team. Giggles slammed on the brakes to avoid smashing into the vehicle when it suddenly stopped and angled across the road. Reaching for her weapon was the last movement Kendra

made before the SUV was rocked by a sudden explosion and sent flying.

The forward motion of her body was stopped by the locked seat belt, jarring her body so badly that there was no denying the instant bruising that was forming across her chest. The feeling of riding one of those upside-down roller coasters, where the only thing keeping you from plunging to the earth was the lap bar over your head, was exactly how she felt as the vehicle continued to tumble from the force of the blast. But that pain was nothing compared to the airbag deploying when the vehicle landed on the hood. Stars danced behind her eyes and her face felt like Apollo had gotten in one too many shots.

Kendra choked on the chalky powder as she opened her mouth to scream for her team. She couldn't be sure if that was a grunt she heard over the ringing in her ears.

“Gig-gles,” she choked out. “Hol-ly-wood.”

Damn, the shit from the airbags tasted nasty and coated her tongue. Kendra cleared her head and reached for the seat belt buckle. Bracing herself so she wouldn't fall, she hit the release button. Despite her efforts, her body still crashed to the roof, sending pain shooting through her shoulder. She had the sinking suspicion that it was dislocated, but she would need to wait and see. Gunshots from outside the vehicle registered the moment the ringing in her ears dimmed a bit.

Kendra reached for the gun at her hip, only to find the spot empty. Cursing, she realized it must have flown out of her hand when the SUV was flipping. In her new position, she got

the first good look around the vehicle. Giggles was slumped over the steering wheel while suspended upside down, his body at an odd angle as blood trickled from his head. Scooching over to him, she sighed when she felt the faintest pulse. She needed to get medical help and fast.

She twisted to find Hollywood when the sound of someone attempting to smash the glass distracted her. Trying to locate Giggles's weapon, she had her hand on the holster when the glass finally gave way. A yelp escaped her lips when rough hands hauled her out the front windshield, glass slicing her exposed arms. Kendra let out the loudest scream her lungs could produce to try and alert the rest of her team before something heavy crashed against her head and the world went dark.

Kendra wasn't sure how much time passed when she woke up again. Her head felt like someone was smashing it over and over with a shovel. It wasn't until she tried to rub it that she realized her arms were tied down. Pushing the pain away, she willed herself to focus. She was unnaturally propped on what felt like a broken wooden table. Her wrists were bound with rope and she could see dried blood from where the glass had cut her earlier. Her shoulder hurt and she was pretty sure she had a concussion, not to mention the bruises from the seat belt. Overall, she was lucky, but her body hurt like a bitch.

Flashes from the crash flittered through her mind. Checking Giggles's pulse and finding it faint. Not being able to see Hollywood. Hearing the gunshots. Was her team okay? Who had attacked them? Was it Pritcher, or whoever the mysterious

partner was? Ray had said he was looking into it. She needed to find the answers, the sooner the better.

She tried to move and loosen the ties, but all she managed to do was chafe her wrists and cause fresh blood to trickle down her fingers. Memories of another time she was strapped down tried to suck her in, but she managed to push them back down. Now wasn't the time to remember what happened when she was captured. Those memories wouldn't help her. Remembering the screams of her teammates being tortured in the next room while she was tied down wouldn't help her. She lost three good men that day. Men she served with. Thinking of them now would do nothing for her.

Kendra needed to keep strong if she was going to survive and figure out who ambushed her team. Nothing made sense. Pritcher wasn't the type of man who handled problems on his own, which meant he had hired someone new to deal with this situation. That, or Jaxson had finally decided to finish the original job he was sent to do.

No, he wouldn't do that. She couldn't go down that line of thinking. She was still puzzling out who could be after her when footsteps in the hallway alerted her to someone approaching. The creaking of the door was the only warning she got before her past literally slapped her in the face.

"No," she whimpered. Her mind must've been playing tricks because the person before her couldn't be behind all this.

Chapter 27

Jaxson crept through the woods. He had parked about a klick away from Pritcher's cabin and Kendra's team was about an hour behind him. With any luck, he could slip in, get the answers he needed, and end the miserable man's life. After everything he did to hurt Kendra, the man didn't deserve to continue his career, or continue to walk this earth. Unfortunately, he'd promised Daniel he'd let Kendra make the choice.

He was skeptical at first of the information Daniel provided. After all these years, he had never known Pritcher to travel hundreds of miles away most weekends to spend time in a cabin. The man didn't seem like the type. Though nothing should surprise him anymore. It was obvious Pritcher wasn't who he thought he was, but that didn't mean Jaxson wouldn't verify the information. Turned out Daniel was right.

The walk through the woods gave Jaxson time to calm down and think. This wasn't how he usually operated. He was a sniper. His time was spent observing and lying in wait for the

perfect shot; it wasn't spent facing his enemies head-on. He found he much preferred the impersonal aspect that sitting behind his rifle gave him. Up close and personal was too reminiscent of what his father did. He never wanted to feel like that, and he hated the general all that much more for turning him into the man he despised.

Maybe after he handled Pritcher, it would be time to leave the Army, to find himself something that wouldn't remind him of his past. Something that would make him better suited for Kendra. It was what she deserved. Although there was still the possibility she would never speak to him again. He'd left. He walked out without even a glance back, and he wasn't sure it was something that could be forgivable. *Was it even what he wanted?* The same question had plagued him time and time again over the past several days.

Jaxson could see the cabin ahead. It was nothing more than a hunting shack on the outskirts of the woods. It looked to be one large open area, but someone was definitely there. A light was on inside. That gave him hope that he would find the man he was looking for.

As silently as possible, Jaxson checked the perimeter. There was only one door, and both windows were too small for him to enter through quietly. Realizing that his best bet was to surprise the man, he rushed through the front door.

He realized how right his assessment was of Pritcher when he opted to try and run rather than fight back. A solid punch to the head was all that was needed to take his boss down.

Dragging Pritcher across the small area, he hauled him onto a chair and slipped the backpack off. He took out a length of rope and tied the man to it.

The cabin was exactly what he expected after seeing it from the outside. The entire place was open. What looked to be nothing bigger than a twin bed sat in one corner and the bathroom area was only partitioned off by a curtain. If it weren't owned by the prick currently unconscious in front of him, he would think the place was decent. Very rustic and perfect for time away from the world. Since he was here to gain information, he stopped looking around and switched his focus back to the man who would soon be his former boss.

“Wakey, wakey, asshole.” Jaxson tapped the man's face a few times. When that didn't work, he resorted to a softer punch. It only took two of those before the general finally stirred.

Watching Pritcher realize what was happening was the best part. To see the confusion in his eyes turn to fear was worth it. Long gone was the cocky prick who had sat across the desk from him.

“How did you get in here?”

“For a general in the Army, you've gotten awfully soft. Do you even know how to protect yourself anymore?”

Pritcher pulled on the restraints and failed to make any headway. Jaxson let him go at it for a while, enjoying watching the man struggle. It wasn't until the general tipped

the chair over in a fit of rage that Jaxson let out a deep sigh and hauled him back up. The game was over.

“As much fun as that was to watch, I have an agenda and you’re cutting into it. See, Kendra Beck and her team will be here soon and I would much prefer to have gotten the information from you first so I can hand you over on a silver platter. After I did a little reading, I think she deserves her revenge, and I fully plan to let her have it.”

Jaxson didn’t miss the way Pritcher’s face drained of color at the mention of Kendra and her team. *Interesting*. Not enough for him to feel bad, though. Nothing could make him care about this man who used to be his role model.

“How ... how did they f-find out about this place?” The general’s voice actually stuttered when he asked.

“Seems an old friend of yours didn’t like some of the things you were doing and started to take a closer look. Now, I’m not sure of this friend’s name, but we have a mutual friend in common and they were more than happy to share all the illegal shit you’ve been up to. Including having Kendra’s team captured and tortured, all because you didn’t think she deserved to be a Ranger.”

Fear poured out of the general in waves. The confident man who had just days earlier taunted him about who his father was, and why he was picked, no longer existed.

“It’s not what you think.”

The words were no more than a whisper, and Jaxson had to lean in a little just to be sure he heard them.

“Then explain,” he hissed.

Pritcher didn't get the chance. His phone vibrated in his pocket, and while he was tempted to ignore it, a few people knew he was coming here and promised to keep a lookout. Slipping the phone from his pocket, his heart stopped when he saw who was interrupting him.

“Everything okay?”

“The team was ambushed.”

That was all Jaxson heard Ray say before it suddenly felt like he was floating underwater. His mind was working overtime, trying to figure out how everything could have gone so wrong. The man they knew was responsible for hurting Kendra was tied down in front of him, so who the hell ambushed her? Unless Pritcher sent someone else to finish the job? *But wait, he hadn't known she was on her way.* So much just wasn't making sense.

“Are you listening to me?” Ray's harsh question filtered through the speaker.

“I'm sorry,” he admitted. “Repeat that.”

“The team was ambushed. They cut off the vehicle Blue was in. Falcon's vehicle took heavy fire. Panther took a round in the arm. Falcon and Apollo returned fire, but not before they blew up the second vehicle. Giggles got it the worst. A concussion from smashing his head off the window and a

round in the leg. Hollywood was tossed from the vehicle when it rolled, but other than a few bangs and bruises, he's good to go. Both were knocked out when they took Blue."

They took Kendra. That was all he could hear playing over and over in his head. Someone had once again kidnapped her.

"Do we know who the fuck it was?"

"Brace yourself, brother. You're not going to like this." No, he didn't think he was going to like what Ray had to say, but he needed to know. "I got word as the team was getting hit, it was what I called to tell them when Falcon reported in they were ambushed. Peter Edwards. One of Blue's teammates who died when they were captured isn't dead after all. And the man's been in communication with Pritcher."

Jaxson didn't bother to wait and see what more Ray had to say. Ending the call, he turned and smashed his fist into the general's jaw.

"Peter *fucking* Edwards? You better tell me everything I need to know and do it now."

He was in the general's face, and it was taking all of his self-control not to beat the answers out of the man. He could leave now and try to catch up with Kendra's team. There was no way the people who took her had much of a head start, but he needed a direction. He needed to know what secrets the general had been hiding all these years.

Pritcher appeared to gain a little of his confidence back at the mention of the other man. So much so that a little smirk

tipped up on his blood-covered mouth. That was all it took for Jaxson to lose the little control he had left. With a swift kick to the chest, Pritcher crashed to the floor with a scream. Kneeling onto his throat, Jaxson got down into the man's face.

“If anything happens to Kendra, there isn't a force in the universe that will stop me from killing you. If you thought I was a killer before, it's nothing compared to what I will do to protect her, so tell me where the fuck I can find Edwards.”

The general's face was turning a shade of purple and his eyes were bulging out of his head, even so, Jaxson didn't let up. When he was sure Pritcher was close to passing out, he finally released just enough pressure to cause the general to choke and sputter.

“I'll show you,” he coughed.

“I had a feeling you would see it my way.”

Wasting no time, he cut the confines and lifted the general off the floor, then dragged his sorry ass back out of the cabin. The walk back to his car took nearly twice as long. Three times he was forced to pick up a stumbling Pritcher. By the last time, he was completely out of patience. Tossing the man against a tree, Jaxson growled, “Keep stalling and I promise you I will draw your death out nice and slow.”

“You really think you'll get away with murdering me? The Army will have your ass.”

The general tried to sound sure of himself, but Jaxson could hear the tremor in the man's voice. He was one step away from

pissing his pants.

“Who said anything about murder? There are plenty of ways to make it look like something else, but really? I couldn’t care less. It’d be worth it to end your miserable life. Now move!” Jaxson pushed the man into motion.

The rest of the walk to his vehicle was uneventful. His former boss seemed to have lost the little confidence he gained at hearing Edwards’s name. Positive that Pritcher was secured in the backseat, he called Ray.

“Please tell me you have a location on Kendra,” he spat out the moment the call connected.

“Not yet, but her team is meeting five minutes from your current location. Team up with them. Did Pritcher give you anything?”

He looked in the rearview mirror at the man hogtied in his backseat, a mix of fear and rage burning in his eyes.

“Not yet, but I’m sure with a little persuasion he won’t mind sharing what he knows. Give me the location of the team.”

Exactly five minutes later, he was pulling into the abandoned lot. One way or another, he was going to get the information he needed. There was no way he was going to lose Kendra before he had the chance to tell her he was sorry.

Chapter 28

Kendra couldn't comprehend what was going on. Peter Edwards died a hero on that mission. His screams haunted her for months, no *years*, afterwards. Yet, here he was, standing in front of her with the most sadistic smile. This was not the same man she served with.

“Don't you just hate when the author throws a twist into the story?”

“You ... you died,” she stuttered. “I heard them kill you. Your screams were the source of my nightmares for years. I *mourned* you!” She hissed out that last part because the shock was starting to wear off and anger quickly took its place. How fucking dare he?

“An award-winning performance, if I do say so myself,” Peter bragged. “I'm touched you cared enough to cry, but did you really think I would let some terrorist reduce me to screaming and begging for my life? I needed it to sound convincing, and it was obvious my ploy worked.”

She was going to be sick, physically ill, and she doubted it had anything to do with the concussion she was sure she had. Her stomach turned with all the betrayals. People she thought she knew were turning out to be assholes left and right. What did that say about her judgment?

“But why?” Kendra’s brain couldn’t compute more than that simple question.

“See, I’m so glad you asked.” The excitement pouring out of Peter made her almost wish she hadn’t, but it was too late to take the words back now. “The moment you were assigned to the team, I knew it would take drastic measures to get you to leave. Everyone thought you were so fucking special. A revolution that would change the old stigmas. But no one realized that we didn’t *want* change. There is no room for women in Special Forces. There is no room for women in the military in general, but someone higher up in command decided that we needed to be more ... inclusive.”

The hostility radiating from her former teammate was concerning. She would have never guessed that this was how he felt. In fact, she had taken his loss the hardest because he seemed to be nicer to her than the others. She was wrong, but he wasn’t done ranting to her.

“A woman doesn’t belong in a man’s world. We should never have allowed them to even leave the home. The role of a woman is to be home waiting for her man with a hot meal ready on the table, not out fighting. It weakened us. They had to lower the standard to allow you in. How were we supposed

to win wars when we were too busy catering to your sensibilities?”

Spit smacked her in the face. Peter was so close that, with each vicious word he flung at her, she was getting hit across her cheek and eye. It was disgusting. Just like the words he was throwing out. She pulled on her restraints, getting more and more angry that she was being stopped from wiping the mess away.

“I never *asked* for special treatment and I made *damn sure* I took the same physical test as the men. I *earned* my spot on the team!” she yelled back, her whole body tense from trying to fling herself at him.

She was too pissed off to keep her mouth shut, too enraged about his biased view of women and their roles in life to care about what could happen to her. She was tired of hearing men bitch about her wanting to be a Ranger. Kendra had trained harder to prove that she could keep up, had pushed herself past her limits on more occasions than she could count. And she didn't do it so some sexist asshole could throw it in her face that she wasn't good enough. Not once did she claim to be better than a man. Biology said it wasn't possible, but that didn't mean she couldn't keep up. Fuck Peter Edwards for his way of thinking. She had nothing to prove to the sexist pig.

She didn't realize that some of what she was thinking slipped out of her mouth in her fit of rage until Peter punched her in the temple. Her head snapped back and pain exploded through her brain. Not willing to give him even an ounce of

weakness, she slowly turned her direction back to his, with fire in her eyes.

“Is that the best you got? Taking it easy because I’m a damn woman and not worthy of being your equal?”

Taunting him wasn’t her best decision, but rational thought had left the moment she realized that a man she thought was dead was back to kill her. She had nothing left to lose at this point.

“So what? You set the whole thing up or turned traitor when we were captured? Which one was it, Edwards? Traitor before or traitor after?”

She wanted answers. If she was going to die, and there was a strong possibility that was the outcome she was looking at, then she needed to know what caused a man, a career military man, to turn on everything he knew, and vowed to serve.

“Don’t fucking look at me like that.” Another fist to the face accompanied his outburst. “It wasn’t until *you* came along that I was forced into drastic measures. I loved my country. I served with honor. *But you ruined it!*” More spittle flew. “So, yes, I plotted. Yes, I planned. General Pritcher was more than happy to help me. The team was supposed to die heroes, while you lived with the guilt for the rest of your miserable life, knowing there was nothing you could do about it. Knowing you were too *weak* to save us. Everything was planned. With any hope, you would end your miserable life knowing how worthless you were.”

How could someone hate her so much? All because of her gender? It was sickening, and the worst part was that, if the plan had gone as it should and she was the sole survivor, guilt would've eaten her up. It already had, and that was only knowing half of her team didn't make it. She was sickened by how well Edwards knew her.

“But everything went to shit because we were rescued,” she finished for him. “Jenson, Packton, and I were rescued before your plan could be fully executed. Were they in on it as well? Is that why Pritcher had them killed?”

Edwards's sadistic laugh was back. How in the hell had the Army missed how psychotic he was? How *she* had missed it was astonishing. There wasn't a sane bone left in the man. Maybe that's what happened when you had to pretend to be dead for four years.

“Pritcher is an idiot and so damn gullible,” Edwards answered. “Both men were blackmailing him. Once they found out he was behind the ambush, they demanded their share. Too bad they didn't realize it wasn't just the general, and that he was merely the puppet in all this. He did what I said because the man was too dumb to realize he was being manipulated.”

She needed to keep him talking. Her team would be out looking for her, as long as they weren't hurt during the ambush. The only one she had been able to check on before she was taken was Giggles. She had no idea what was done to the other SUV. She remembered hearing gunshots, but was it

her team firing or Edwards? She was almost too afraid to ask. But she wasn't scared to ask about Pritcher.

“Where is the general now?”

“Hopefully dead. Your little boyfriend arrived at the cabin before you, so with any luck, he killed the man. One less job for me to complete.”

Kendra really hoped that wasn't the case. Daniel had provided Jaxson with the same information as her team, but she hadn't known how he would respond. Pritcher was Jaxson's boss, and while she would've been happy to end the man's life, she didn't want that for Jaxson. From what Wes told her, he harbored enough guilt about some of the assignments he was sent on. But something Edwards said had her curious.

“How did you know what we were doing?”

That sadistic look was back.

“How do you think Daniel got his information? I knew after he was sent to look into our team's deaths that eventually he would be calling in some of those favors, so I made sure the appropriate information was available to him. He never even realized that he was leading you right to me.”

Daniel would be crushed when he found out. It was no wonder the man had finally left the CIA. She didn't know if that was who gave him the information, but it was apparent that no one could be trusted anymore.

“My team will figure it out,” she taunted. “At some point, they will learn you didn’t die the big hero you want the world to think you did.”

“No, they won’t, because you’ll be dead and I’ll slip back into the night and live my life in luxury. Now, enough talking. I have plans to finish.”

She didn’t get the chance to respond. Punch after punch slammed into her body. She tried desperately not to give him the satisfaction of crying out, but by the third blow to her head, she couldn’t take much more. She welcomed the dark, and her last thought before her body shut down was of Jaxson. She hoped he would find peace without her.

Chapter 29

It didn't take Jaxson long to hook up with Kendra's team. One look and it was clear why most people feared the team leader. Falcon looked murderous with good reason. One of his teammates was kidnapped and two others were currently getting stitches. While neither condition was life-threatening, it still sucked that they were three men down. From the brief introduction he got, Falcon had to forcibly send the two men to the hospital because they hadn't wanted to leave. So yeah, he got why the man might be more pissed than usual.

“Does Ray have a location on this supposed dead guy?”

“No, and everything he's found has him hopping around. It would seem for a dead guy, he gets around a lot. Our best bet is to get Pritcher to talk.”

Falcon jerked his head to where the general lay hogtied in the backseat of the car. Jaxson hadn't bothered to move the man when he stopped, nor did he listen as the general begged him to let him go. Pathetic was the only way to describe the man he had once looked up to.

“No time like the present,” Jaxson declared.

He didn't wait to see if Falcon was following him. Moving to his vehicle, he opened the back door and dragged the general out. With a satisfying *thunk*, the man hit the pavement. Maybe later he would feel a hint of remorse for how he was treating his old boss, but right now, he couldn't find it in him to care.

“Time's up!” he yelled. “Tell us where to find Edwards.”

“I can't. He'll kill me,” Pritcher whined.

So much for the tough general he once was. The longer Jaxson spent with him, the weaker Pritcher became. Bending down, he grabbed the man by the neck and hauled him up against the vehicle. The rapid pulse of the general's neck beneath his palm spurred him on. Maybe this “up close and personal” thing wasn't that bad after all.

“I don't really give a shit. You're a dead man either way. At least you have the chance of it ending quicker if I do it. But the longer you drag this out, the less likely I am to take any mercy on you.”

Jaxson was stepping into dangerous territory. He could feel his humanity slipping slowly with every second that was wasted. He wanted to care. He really did. Considering he had spent a good majority of his life fighting off even the smallest hint that he was anything like his father. However, Kendra's life was at risk and he found he cared about that more. He could worry about his own humanity later.

When Pritcher still chose not to answer, he leaned in close and harshly whispered, “The more she suffers, the more I make you suffer. Unlike my father, I actually care about women being abused, so you better hope to God that she’s still alive by the time I find her. Otherwise, I’m going to take out my anger on you and rip you limb from limb.”

Jaxson threw “dangerously close” out the window and embraced the new feeling. For the first time in his life, he let the anger consume him. He let go of the tight leash he’d held on to for so many years. He no longer feared what he would do, but used it instead. Pritcher could call him a monster or a murderer. He would be whatever he needed as long as he got Kendra back. Humanity didn’t mean shit if she was dead. Jaxson wouldn’t give a flying fuck what happened to him if she died.

Within seconds, the general was spilling his guts, confessing to yet another cabin close by that Edwards was known to use when setting up meetings with him. After a phone call to Ray to have satellite images sent over of the area, Jaxson tossed Pritcher back into the vehicle.

“I hope for your sake you’re not lying to me.”

The fear in the man’s eyes said it all. He knew he wasn’t coming out of the situation alive, but something told Jaxson that the general was praying for a quick death.

He followed Falcon and his team over, jumping out of the vehicle the moment they arrived. But a tight fist on his arm stopped his forward progress.

“*What the fuck?*” He whipped his head around to see who had the nerve to stop him.

“Lock it down, or I lock *you* down,” Falcon snapped. “I’m half a team down and don’t have the time for you to go rogue. We play this smart. Grab Pritcher and let’s move.”

No bullshit. No comforting words. Straight to the point. That was exactly the way Falcon operated and Jaxson didn’t know if he should be grateful, or if he wanted to deck the fucker. Unfortunately, the team leader didn’t give him the chance to decide. Doing as he was told, he grabbed the general and followed suit.

They parked a good half mile away from the cabin, which turned out to be more of a hassle than anything. Most of his time was spent dragging a very reluctant general through overgrown brush and over downed trees. He wanted to leave the man behind, but Falcon insisted they may need him for negotiations. Jaxson didn’t bother to admit he had no intention of letting the man help in any way. He was merely added weight, a means to an end.

With the cabin in sight, they slowed their movements. This one was just as small as the one he found Pritcher in. It only took a quick look around to realize that there was only one way in. Not willing to get too close, the team kept to the woods.

“The only way in is through the front door.” Apollo was the first to speak. “The place isn’t all that big, so drawing him out

could be the best option. Use Pritcher as the bargaining chip. If he won't come out, we go in."

The need to get eyes on Kendra had Jaxson clenching his fists. He was so close. Something inside was screaming for him to get to her, that something was seriously wrong.

"No, we go in hard and fast. End this shit once and for all," he snapped.

All three men glanced at him and Jaxson braced for the protests, for Falcon to tell him he was being benched. It wasn't going to happen. And he would knock everyone on their asses before he let them stop him.

One hard look from Falcon and he prepared for the outburst. But the team leader surprised the hell out of him; instead of locking him down, he nodded his agreement.

"We go in fast. Catch Edwards by surprise."

He and Falcon were the first at the door. Falcon went high, he went low. Smashing through the door, they indeed caught Edwards off guard. From his periphery, he could see Kendra strapped and propped up on a table. Her head hanging and not a flicker of movement from the loud noise. Seeing her like that was it. The last bit of humanity he had left snapped.

With what could only be described as a war cry, he went after Edwards. Smashing the bastard into the wooden wall. Jaxson smiled when the man's head cracked against the hard wood, but unfortunately it didn't stop him. Edwards was back up and throwing a right hook, barely missing his jaw.

“Pritcher’s loose.”

Falcon’s snap momentarily distracted him enough to allow Edwards to get the drop on him. Landing a punch to his head. Shaking off the pain, Jaxson dropped his shoulder and caught the asshole in the sternum. Driving him straight through a table full of tools. Ones he expected were used on his Kendra.

The loud crack of a gunshot filled the cabin. Using his forearm to cut off Edwards’s air supply, he glanced quickly over his shoulder and found Pritcher on the floor just a few feet away. Blood pooling under his leg.

“The asshole tried to interfere. I was sick of his shit.” Falcon walked over and flipped the general onto his stomach. “Figured a flesh wound wouldn’t take away all your fun.”

Jaxson smiled as he watched Falcon zip-tie his old boss.

Turning his attention back to Edwards, he leaned down and whispered into his ear. “You made a mistake touching what’s mine. Now you’re going to see exactly how I deal with people who piss me off. Just as soon as I make sure my girl over there is still breathing. And for your sake, she better be.”

Jaxson eased his arm off Edwards’s throat. Once he was sure Falcon had the situation under control, he rushed to an unconscious Kendra. Working feverishly to untie the binds that strapped her to the wooden table. “Come on, blue eyes. Wake up.”

He searched for a pulse. He held his breath until he found the faintest one. As carefully as possible, he picked her up and

ignored her team as they asked how she was. He disregarded their orders to wait. Instead, he walked along the path until he met the ambulance, needing the time to hold her close, to categorize every one of her injuries. Transferring her to the paramedics, he leaned down and whispered in her ear.

“You deserve better. I love you, blue eyes.”

Then he walked away again. He had a score to settle, and this time, nothing would stop him.

Chapter 30

*“Whore like your mother or criminal like your father?
Which one are you going to be?”*

Kendra ignored the little’s boy taunt. It wasn’t the first taunt she received on the bus and her eight-year-old self was fast learning it wouldn’t be the last. She hadn’t even known what that word meant last week. She’d made the mistake of asking the other boy who had been taunting her. She really wished she hadn’t. She was eight years old, she didn’t need to know what fucking was, even though she heard the noises every time a man came to visit her mother. But now that she did know what it was, she never wanted to be anything like her mother.

“Cat got your tongue, little girl?”

She did her best to ignore the boy who she knew was a few years older than her, and lived on what others called the better side of the tracks. The boy lived in a nice house with two parents who loved him. Parents that walked him to the bus and were there when he got off. Unlike her own parents, who half the time didn’t even know she existed. The only reason they

were even on the same bus was that this was the only one in town that picked up from the trailer park she lived in. Only a couple of kids from her neighborhood rode the bus, but even those kids looked down on her. She was all alone, and it had nothing to do with who she was as a person.

The memory of that day on the bus slowly slipped away. She got in trouble after that incident. It was the first time she let herself express how she felt. Only, for an eight-year-old, her way of expressing herself was to punch the boy who teased her and picked at her ponytail. She could still remember the screech of his mother when she met with the principal.

That white trash little girl doesn't belong here mudding up the school. Look what she did to my poor boy! A criminal like her damn daddy, that's all she'll ever be.

It was that day Kendra learned how mean people could really be. She knew the kids could be, but it was the adults that surprised her. The principal started looking at her differently along with all her teachers. The next nine years of school would drag by slowly.

The jog down memory lane caused her head to pound. She never thought about that time in her life, so why did a memory from her childhood make her head hurt so damn badly? And what was that fucking beeping noise? Kendra tried hard to remember what was going on, but before she could figure it out, another memory was sucking her in, this one from her junior year in high school.

Kendra looked down at the pink prom dress. It had taken her three months to save up for it. Every penny she made at the bowling alley she'd tucked away. If her mother knew about it, she would surely steal it for her next high. She was lucky her mother was stoned more often than not. Otherwise, she would've noticed just how much her daughter worked. It wasn't just about the money. It was about having a way to leave this backwoods town and getting away from the people who judged her simply for who her parents were.

Except for Bobby. She didn't call him her boyfriend, but that's what it felt like. She had questioned his attentions at first, but that was six months ago, and each day things got better. He hung out with her after school when she wasn't working, usually in the back of his pickup truck. He swore up and down every day that he would walk her to her classes if their schedules weren't so different. She understood that. Bobby was a senior, an amazing athlete, and in all honors classes.

She was a junior, and while she earned decent grades, they weren't anything to brag about. Her biggest hope was that she could get into a community college. Someplace far enough away that people didn't know who she was, and then maybe one day transfer into a university. She'd earn herself a degree and show her town that she was nothing like her low-life parents.

Kendra checked the alarm clock in her bedroom for the tenth time. Bobby was supposed to pick her up twenty minutes ago, and it wasn't like him to be late. Concerned that

something was wrong, she snuck out of the house and used her bike to pedal to the school. By the time she arrived, her hair was a mess from the wind, and the dress she had worked so hard for was dirty along the bottom. But holding her head up high, she walked into the school gymnasium.

The second her foot stepped through the door, a hush fell over the room. Everywhere she looked, someone was staring at her. Some whispered behind their hands while others openly laughed. She ignored all of them. Her gaze slowly moved through her classmates until she found the person she was looking for.

Her heart stopped when she recognized the girl in Bobby's arms. Jennifer Adams. Captain of the cheer squad and the most popular girl in school. Also known as "the mean girl." There wasn't a day that went by that Jennifer didn't harass her in some way.

Kendra was about to turn around and save herself the humiliation when Bobby moved in her direction. For the briefest moment, her heart skipped a beat. Maybe the whole thing was just a misunderstanding. A mix-up. Maybe Bobby thought they would meet at the school rather than him come pick her up. Kendra was embarrassed about her home and Bobby seemed to respect that and never pushed the issue.

"Hey, Bobby." Kendra tucked her wild hair behind her ear. "Sorry I'm late. I guess I mixed up the details."

Something was wrong. The Bobby she was used to seeing wasn't the same guy standing in front of her now. This Bobby

looked cocky and more like the school superstar than the nice boy who shared milkshakes with her.

Bobby laughed. "Come on, Kendra. You're the daughter of a whore and a criminal. I'm the son of an attorney. It would never have worked out. I only hung out with you to see if you were as easy as your mother. Turns out, you're not. It took six months just to get to second base. You're boring and a waste of my time. Go back to the other side of the tracks where you belong."

Kendra had left prom in tears. Little did Bobby know she had planned to give him her virginity that very night. Fortunately for her, he had saved her from making a bigger spectacle of herself. She had gone home and ripped off the dress, throwing the ruined thing in the garbage. It was that same night that she decided to change her life. She had researched the military and decided to join the Army. It would be one very amazing Army recruiter that helped her see her potential.

This time, when Kendra shook off the memory, she recognized the beeping sound and the smell of antiseptic. Just like after she was captured and tortured, she was in a hospital. It took her several minutes before she could remember why, and then it was like a movie reel behind her eyes.

She remembered her team traveling to Pritchler's cabin. The SUV that cut them off from the other half of her team. She remembered the explosion, and the SUV she was in flipping and flying through the air, landing on the roof. The way the

seat belt cut into her. Moving her hand, she rubbed the now bruised area.

“She’s awake.”

Kendra recognized Hollywood’s voice immediately. Doing her best to open her eyes, she squinted when the bright light made the pounding in her head that much worse.

“What ... happened?” she finally managed to choke out. Her tongue felt heavy and coated, like she had chewed on a piece of chalk. She assumed it was a lingering effect from the airbag deploying.

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

This time it was Wes who asked. Since she figured he wasn’t talking about her high school prom or the way Bobby used her, she thought back to the last thing that happened. Her body hurt everywhere, but that didn’t make sense. She remembered being able to move through the SUV after the accident, but when she tried to think about what happened next, a shooting pain caused her to wince.

Kendra tried to focus on some of the images flashing through her brain, but only one stuck out. Giggles hunched over with blood trickling down his head.

“Giggles?”

She could only manage the one word but her boss seemed to understand what she was asking.

“He’s fine. A concussion and some stitches, but fine.”

Kendra breathed a little easier hearing that. She still didn't understand though how she managed to end up in the hospital and why everyone was looking at her with such concern.

“What happened? Tell me.”

Wes didn't look happy to explain but he did so anyway.

“While the team was on the way to find Pritcher, Ray learned that Edwards didn't die when you and your team were captured. It appears that he faked his death. We were calling to let everyone know, but we were too late. The SUVs were ambushed, and Edwards took you hostage.”

She didn't miss the pause or the need for her boss to compose himself before he continued. Wes was trying hard not to let his anger fly. She would realize why as he continued explaining what happened to her.

“We got Pritcher to confess where Edwards was holding you. By the time the rest of your team found you, you were unconscious and barely breathing from multiple concussions. You had cracked ribs, and a multitude of bruises both externally and internally. It was a miracle you didn't need surgery, but the doctors want you to stay in the hospital for a few days for observation.”

With each new fact, a memory popped up. She remembered finding out that Peter Edwards was behind everything. Both in the past and now. She remembered each punch and every word he threw at her. His hatred because she was a woman and dared to try to enter a man's world. Then the faintest memory

of Jaxson whispering something to her just as the paramedics took over.

“Where’s Jaxson?”

She didn’t miss the exchanged looks, or the lack of comments from her boss and team. He wasn’t there. Jaxson had left her yet again. She wasn’t good enough. Just like when she was younger.

Chapter 31

Jaxson looked down at the two men who hurt Kendra in more ways than should ever be possible. All because they didn't like the fucking gender she was born with and had the nerve to prove that she was good enough. Well, fuck them. They were about to feel every ounce of pain they put her through.

“What ... do ... do you plan to ... to do, Hayes?”

His former boss stumbled through the question, as blood trickled out of the cut on his lip and his swollen face. There was a bullet hole in his thigh from when he unsuccessfully attempted to help Edwards, and several additional bruises from being tossed around before Jaxson got bored and finally tied the guy to a chair once again.

Edwards looked worse. The blood from the bullet hole in his shoulder was a steady flow down his arm. There was a good chance the bullet hit a major artery, so the guy would die either way without medical attention. That was fine with him. The world thought the guy was dead anyway.

“I plan to kill you,” Jaxson hissed, “but not until you feel the amount of pain you put Kendra through. Every bruise, cut, and emotional stab she received will be tenfold for you. I plan to make you beg me to kill you in the end.”

“You really are your father’s son,” Pritcher coughed out, blood spraying from his mouth.

Any other time, that comment would have sent him into a tailspin, but not now. Jaxson was finally embracing who he really was. Yes, he was the son of a serial killer. Yes, anger coursed through his veins. But unlike his asshole father, Jaxson would never hurt a woman. Instead, he would defend them until his dying breath. So if that meant he killed the two men in front of him to avenge the torture they put Kendra through, then so be it.

“I am.” Jaxson leaned in close, mere inches from Pritcher’s face. Placing his hands on the general’s legs, he pushed his thumb into the gunshot wound and ignored Pritcher’s howl as he hissed, “And you’re about to see how vicious I can be.”

For the next few hours, Jaxson rotated between Pritcher and Edwards, torturing one until they passed out and then moving on to the next. As predicted, Edwards didn’t last very long. Jaxson didn’t feel an ounce of remorse for the man, not after he learned of his involvement. He didn’t know the extent of what happened when Kendra was captured, both times, and he wouldn’t until she told him, but he could guess. The world assumed Edwards was dead; Jaxson just helped make it true.

Surprisingly, Pritcher held out longer. He cursed Jaxson to hell and back with each new cut and blow. The man he once admired was now just another traitor to the nation Jaxson loved. By the end, the general was more than happy to spill everything, and a part of Jaxson's soul died with each new secret he learned. For years he thought he was ridding the world of evil, but really he was just doing Pritcher's dirty work. While none of the men he killed were completely innocent, they also weren't nearly as bad as the general made them sound, and they certainly weren't a threat to national security. That betrayal cut the deepest.

Jaxson almost hated that the new information would not only bury the general but also himself. He could likely kiss his career goodbye. Almost twenty years down the drain.

With the last confession recorded, Jaxson slid his knife across Pritcher's throat and watched the life leave the man's eyes. Once he was sure both men were dead, Jaxson wiped the blood from the knife onto his pants and began cleaning up the cabin.

He was just about finished when his phone vibrated in his pocket. Pulling it out, he checked the caller ID. The name flashing on his screen had him swiping to answer the call after just one ring. With a fortifying breath, he brought the phone up to his ear and listened to the news that he didn't realize how badly he needed.

“She's awake.”

Chapter 32

“**A**re we going to talk about this?”

Kendra slowly turned her head and looked at Trista. Her friend hadn't left her side since the moment she arrived. Despite Falcon's many attempts, Trista dug her heels in and vowed Kendra wouldn't be alone. Not that she actually was. Her hospital room was a rotating door of her team members and their significant others. It was driving her crazy. She just wanted to be released and left alone, to mourn all the things she learned. She loved her team, but the smothering was ridiculous. How she had wished for this four years ago was beyond her.

“There's nothing to talk about,” she finally answered after it was clear Trista wasn't going to drop it.

“Bullshit. I love you, but bullshit, and honestly, I'm surprised by you.”

She shouldn't engage. Dammit, she knew she shouldn't, but it was obvious her mouth didn't get the memo.

“Why’s that?”

The satisfied smile on her friend’s face said it all. Kendra walked right into the trap Trista set and damn if that didn’t suck.

“What happened to my badass friend? The one who looked danger in the face and laughed. I heard you tell Wes about what happened with that asshole who captured you. You didn’t back down. You didn’t cower. Yet here you are avoiding talking about Jaxson.”

Kendra’s temper flared. How dare Trista say his name? She was doing her best to accept that he walked away again. She wasn’t a crying mess like most women; she refused to shed a tear, but that didn’t mean she wanted to discuss her feelings. Four years ago she left a man who took a piece of her heart, but she survived because she knew she could never find him. Now, she knew more about him, but still she couldn’t have him. So maybe she just wanted to lick her wounds for a few minutes before she went back to being the badass her friend claimed she was. Was that really too much to ask?

“There’s nothing to say,” she answered, her voice low. “He left, end of story. It wasn’t like we were in a relationship. He was sent to kill me. We had great sex a few times. Okay, *amazing* sex,” she clarified when Trista gave her a stern look. “But that’s all it was. No feelings. No promises of forever. Just sex, and now he’s gone. No reason to keep rehashing or bringing him up.”

Like he was never even there, she added to herself. She didn't even get a goodbye. Not the first time, and certainly not the second time. Her boss explained that Jaxson turned her over to the paramedics and went back to deal with Pritcher and Edwards. She had a feeling that meant he was likely torturing and killing them. It was the only outcome Jaxson would find acceptable. She didn't need to know the man well to understand that he wasn't like most of the guys she served with. Jaxson had a dangerous side. She saw it that first night. Recognized it. It didn't bother her as it should; his morally gray character was probably why she was attracted to him. But she needed to forget he existed.

“So, you're what? Just going to give up? Not even fight for what makes you happy?” Trista pressed on until she snapped.

“Yes! That's *exactly* what I'm going to do,” she hissed. “He left! Pretty good indication of how he felt about the matter. I'm not going to beg someone to stay in my life, so let's just drop it already!”

She missed the moment her boss slipped back into her room while she was yelling at Trista, but was alerted when her friend stomped off and Wes cleared his throat.

“Never thought I would see the day that anyone could render Trista speechless, but I guess hell really can freeze over.” Wes shook his head at her.

The lecture from Trista had worn her out. She really didn't want another one from her boss, and she told him as much.

“Don’t really care what you want at the moment. It seems what you *need* is a little tough love. Guess it’s a good thing I don’t mind being the one to give it.”

Kendra did her best to rein her anger in. If it was anyone else, she would have told them to fuck off and leave her alone. But this was her boss. The man who, just one week after she hit rock bottom, had shown up in her life and offered her a job. He didn’t question her service record. He didn’t question why she opted to take a medical leave rather than stay in. He didn’t judge her for the way she was living her life at the time. Wes gave her a job. A new purpose. She owed the man her life, so no, she wouldn’t tell him to fuck off. She would listen to what he had to say. Even if that was the last thing she wanted and would likely end with her in tears.

“I’m listening,” she reluctantly responded.

“I know you don’t want to talk about Jaxson, and any other time, I wouldn’t push. I would let the chips fall as they may ... and I will. After I share a story.”

Kendra kept her mouth shut and let Wes speak.

“Four years ago, when I was considering starting a second team, I had a list of men I was looking into. Scouting out, so to speak. I would take the recommendations of former team members, but I never made a decision until I looked into them myself. I was there that night at the bar.”

Wes stopped talking and let that sink in. Well, that’s what she assumed he was doing because he didn’t start speaking again until she nodded that she understood.

“I saw a woman who, by all accounts, was struggling with the transition back into civilian life. Especially after leaving under what most would consider ‘unfair’ circumstances. You were honest with the therapist about the dreams you had, and because of that, they forced you out. I know you said it was your choice, but really, in the end, did you have the final say? Not so much. I was there that night. I had every intention of speaking with you, but then Jaxson showed up.” His face softened at the memory. “I didn’t know a damn thing about you, but I was tempted to step in if he took advantage of a drunk woman.” Wes chuckled and continued.

“Luckily for him, he was smart and allowed you time to sober up before leaving with you. When I met you a week later, I could see a difference. It wasn’t anything big, but it was enough for me to know that my initial assessment was correct. Just didn’t think it would take four years and a bounty out on your head before it happened.”

“There wasn’t a bounty out.” Kendra laughed. The first real laugh in a very long time. The sound probably sounded a little weird, but it came out nonetheless.

“Semantics.” Wes waved her off. “My point is, I didn’t think it would take so long, but I’m happy I got the chance to see that smile again. I’m glad that Jaxson found you, and before you write him off, give it time. The man has his own demons and I’m thinking there will come a time when he’ll finally face them. Now, I’m not saying you should wait forever for him, but don’t give up on him just yet.”

Kendra thought about what her boss had said; he'd never steered her wrong before. Wes was more than just a boss. Not old enough to be a father and certainly more than just a brother. She often thought of him as the uncle that everyone hated, but only because he was brutally honest. He didn't mince words. So if Wes thought Jaxson needed time, then maybe it wouldn't hurt her to be patient. She didn't need to put her life on hold for him. She didn't need to be that nagging girlfriend. But she could let him explain when he did come around. And maybe, just maybe, if he had a good excuse, then she could see where things could go, because Wes did have one thing right. Jaxson made her happy. She knew it four years ago, but mistakenly walked away because that's what she needed at the time. She wasn't ready back then for more than just surviving. But now she was in a better place and could see her life with him.

A small knock stopped her musings. Kendra sighed and wondered who was visiting her now. She wasn't prepared for the man they were just discussing to be standing in the threshold, or for the intense look he was giving her. The confidence she felt just moments before turned into nervousness. What was Jaxson coming to tell her? Goodbye, or would he be staying?

Chapter 33

Jaxson looked at the woman who made him feel more in the short time he knew her than he ever thought possible. Kendra was just as beautiful with her bruises and cuts as she was four years ago when he sat down next to her in that bar. He hadn't realized it at the time, but that one conversation would change his life.

Two days. That's how long it had been since he last saw her, when he was handing her battered body off to the paramedics. In that time, he had effectively eliminated the two threats to her and handed over all of the information he had on his former boss. Just as he expected, since the Army couldn't punish Pritchler, being dead and all, they felt someone else needed to take the blame. A few months shy of being eligible for retirement and Jaxson was facing a dishonorable discharge. It would have burned his ass more, but now that he was looking at Kendra, all the anger slipped away. The retribution he got for her was worth it. She was worth it.

Kendra had a shit life growing up. He'd used the time he was waiting for Pritchler on base wisely. He took a closer look into her past. He knew all about her mother and father, and how Kendra had walked out after high school and never looked back. He wondered if she even knew her father was doing another four-year stint, or that her mother died of an overdose years ago? He doubted so, since she never went back. Not even once. Kendra had gotten out and ended the cycle by improving her life. How could he allow himself to be just another black stain in her history?

Those blue eyes he loved so much were staring a hole in him the longer he looked at her. Jaxson hadn't even realized that, while he was busy in his head, Wes had slipped out until it was just the two of them. Clearing his throat for the second time, he opened his mouth to speak, but Kendra cut him off.

“Why did you just walk away?”

Jaxson hated the uncertainty in her eyes. He never meant to hurt her. Protecting Kendra was the only thing he ever wanted to do. But how did he explain that he wasn't good enough? That she deserved someone better than the son of a serial killer? Better than a man who killed in cold blood? He never cared about how people viewed his past. Not until he met her. Now her opinion meant more than he could admit. It was both frustrating and exhausting.

“Because there's a part of me that wanted to protect you. You deserve better. Meeting you that night in the bar was the first time in my life that something good existed and I didn't

want to ruin that. Being sent to kill you was bad enough. I was selfish by forcing myself on you.”

There was no hint of the soft look she often gave him now. If he didn't know any better, he would've sworn she might murder him.

“*Forcing* is a bit of a strong word, don't you think?” Kendra didn't give him a chance to answer before she continued on. “And you know nothing about me or what I deserve. What could be so bad that you felt walking away was the better option after I'd already let you in?” The question came out as a hiss between her teeth.

Oh, yeah. Kendra was close to wanting to murder him. It was a shame he found that quality such a turn-on, but right now he wasn't thinking with the head below his belt. No, there was that damn feeling again. The one that was trying to bring life back to the dead organ in his chest. He didn't think it was possible, not after all these years. Jaxson tried to push it down.

Needing her to completely understand who and what he was, he snapped out, “I'm the son of a serial killer. For years, my father killed women who looked exactly like my mother. We never knew. There were no outward signs. He didn't abuse my mother or me. We lived a normal, quiet life. My father worked nine to five like most parents, came home, and spent time with the family, but all the while he was *killing women*.”

He had to give her credit. She contained the shock well. He could still see it in her gorgeous blue eyes, though. The way

they softened ever so slightly, but he wasn't done yet. Not by a long shot.

“I was an only child and my mother spoiled me like crazy. Every sport I wanted to play, she let me. It wasn't until I was twelve that things went to shit. I guess my father finally decided he was done killing substitutes. When the police came and took him, there wasn't an ounce of remorse.”

Jaxson could still remember that day like it was yesterday. His father hadn't regretted killing those women. He hadn't flinched when they charged him with the murder of his wife. Emotionless. It was the only way Jaxson could describe how his father looked. The same lack of emotions Jaxson showed when he completed an assignment. Maybe he was more like his father than he realized. Was he avoiding the signs all these years when they were right in front of his face?

“My grandparents took me in. My mother's parents. I think they felt they had no choice, but the love they once had for me was gone. I was the spitting image of her, so it was likely they were constantly reminded she was gone. I couldn't wait to leave. Joined the Army the minute I was able to. I finally thought I found my new family, but it turns out General Pritcher saw another killer in the making and figured he could exploit it.”

Kendra's kind eyes suddenly hardened, and in an instant, she was shaking her head violently. “No,” she hissed. “Don't you dare do that! Don't let whatever that asshole told you change your view on your career. You served honorably. It's

no one's fault but his that he let his ego take over. You *cannot* control the choices he made. I'm not saying how he used you wasn't horrible, but it wasn't *your* fault."

It felt good that she was willing to stand up for him, but it didn't change the fact that some of the men he killed didn't deserve it. That he had blindly followed orders without verifying. Those deaths were on him and he would wear the scars for the rest of his life. There was nothing he could do to change that.

"That's not what my discharge papers say."

It was finally time to tell her the rest. Kendra deserved to know everything he did. If they were going to have any sort of future, he needed to be honest right from the start. He was an idiot for thinking he could keep resisting her. He was going to take what he wanted and hope he didn't tarnish her along the way.

"The Army needed a fall guy, and since I murdered General Pritcher, I was the only person left. I was notified yesterday when I handed over everything we had on the general. I will receive a dishonorable discharge."

"And you incorrectly assumed that would matter to me." Kendra shook her head in disbelief. "I won't judge you because I know that sometimes you need to be both judge and jury."

And executioner, he mentally tacked on, but didn't get a chance to add, because Kendra started speaking again. "I get

we didn't exactly have that much time together, but I didn't know you thought that poorly of me."

He moved closer to her for the first time since walking into the hospital room. He had spent their conversation hovering barely inside, trying to gauge her reaction and half expecting her to kick him out.

"I have *never* thought poorly of you. I've told you just how strong I think you are and I know I've fucked up a few times, but me leaving was never about you. Every decision I made was because I only ever wanted what was best for you. You had a shit childhood and got a shitty end in the Army. I didn't want to add to that. I would do anything for you."

Jaxson was prepared to lay himself bare and show his vulnerability for the first time. Kendra was worth it. But could she forgive him for the choices he made? Did he deserve her forgiveness?

Chapter 34

Kendra looked into Jaxson's eyes, really looked at them, and knew he was telling her the truth. She could see how he would think he wasn't good enough; the son of a serial killer and now a murderer himself. At least, in his eyes, but she would never see him that way. She didn't care about any of that. Jaxson couldn't control who he was born to any more than she could, and as bad as it sounded, both Pritcher and Edwards had what was coming to them.

“Are you telling me you would burn down the world for me?” Kendra lifted her lips in the faintest of smiles, trying to break the tension that Jaxson was creating, but she realized her mistake the second his dark eyes burned with fire. She already knew he would kill to avenge her, but this look was so much more. For a man who claimed not to feel, his face and body told a different story.

“Nah, blue eyes.” He smirked. “I'm telling you I would stand by you and watch as *you* burned it down. I would hand you the match or can of gasoline and cheer you on. I would

make sure you knew that I supported whatever decision you made, because that's what you deserve. You don't need me to burn anything down for you. You're more than capable of that, but know I would if that's what you wanted. I would give you anything."

She let the words flow over her. Soaked up the meaning of them. No one in her life besides her team ever stuck up for her and even they wouldn't go this far. Putting her hand out, she waited for him to walk the rest of the way to her and take it.

"So, where do we go from here?" she asked.

Kendra hated the uncertainty in her voice. She promised herself she would be stronger than this, but she didn't think she could handle it if Jaxson walked away for a third time. She needed him to give her just a little more.

"I'll follow you. I know you love your team and I think with some time they might not hate me as much." He let out a half laugh. If only he knew they accepted him the moment he went back to finish Edwards and Pritcher. They all told her as much in some way over the past two days.

"As for what I plan to do while I'm there? Well, that's to be determined, but I hear my girl makes a killing from her boss, so I figure I got some time to figure it out."

Jaxson a dependent? She couldn't see it. A laugh burst out before she could stop it, but the pain in her chest from the bruising had her waving it off.

"Hurts to laugh," she mumbled.

“Okay, so no more laughing.” Jaxson slid onto the bed next to her. “But in all seriousness, I know I don’t deserve it, but would you be willing to let me follow you back to Texas? Give me a chance to prove that with time I could make you happy? I’m bound to screw up. Actually, that’s pretty much a given, but I love you enough to try.”

Her heart skipped several beats. She had thought she heard him whisper that the night she was rescued, but when she woke up and found him gone, she chalked it up to her imagination. Now here he was, saying it again, and this time she was sure she was awake.

“You love me?” She needed to be sure she heard him correctly.

“I promised to help you burn down the world if needed,” he answered. “I think that speaks volumes.”

She needed the words for him to confirm it, so she waited him out. Luckily, she didn’t have to wait that long.

“So damn much,” he responded fiercely. “And I plan to spend the rest of my life showing you just what that means. I don’t want you to ever doubt that.”

He was going to make her tear up if he continued saying shit like that. She had to clear her throat before she could respond.

“I love you too, and I’d let you follow me anywhere. My house would be lonely without you and Duke there. And since

we're being honest, there's a good chance I will screw up just as much, so we can fuddle through this together."

Jaxson leaned his forehead against hers. She felt the fan of his breath on her face when he whispered, "Together. I like the sound of that."

She did too. So much.

Epilogue

Hollywood looked around the safe house that he and Panther called home. It had been nearly a year since his team had stopped moving around Mexico. At some point, Wes was going to kick them to the curb and tell the two of them they needed to find their own place. In the meantime, he was going to enjoy not having to live alone. If one could consider Panther, who never spoke, as living with someone.

It was better than nothing. The memories didn't bombard him when other people were around. Plus, Panther was the only other person he knew who had sworn off women for the time being. Panther had his own issues, and as long as the man wasn't parading women around, he was fine.

His teammates wouldn't believe him if he told them, but it had been nearly three years since he so much as looked at another woman. Not after his last colossal fuckup. No matter how much time passed, he would never forget the stricken look on Abby's face when she found him the morning after his drunken mistake.

The sound of the doorbell ringing pulled him away from his pity party of one. He couldn't imagine who would bother ringing the doorbell. Despite no longer living there, each of his teammates still had a key and would've used it. Not in the mood for visitors or anyone trying to sell him anything, he whipped the door open with too much force, prepared to tell whoever it was to get lost. But he stopped dead in his tracks when he saw who was standing on the porch instead.

“Abby?”

Why the hell was his best friend's little sister standing on his porch holding the hand of a little boy who looked to be a mirror image of himself?

Are you ready to find out what mess Hollywood got himself into? Check out his book in the series next, *Securing Abigail*.

Curious to find out what Daniel is up to and how that ties into Jaxson? Check out the bonus scene [here](#).

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