

PELICAN BAY BILLIONAIRES

JOINT
Business

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MEGAN MATTHEWS

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Edited by Amanda Brown

To every reader who loves a good kidnapping.

**Sometimes being the identical twin to a notorious hacker is
the pits.**

Especially when it gets me kidnapped. The bad guys don't know they have the wrong brother, and I can't let them discover the truth before my big rescue. I'll be pissed if a case of mistaken identity gets me killed.

It's a waiting game until a fiery, stunning woman shares my cage. Imogen #something didn't ask to play this dangerous game, but now she only has me to save her. The spark in her eyes gives me a million silent promises and I can't let a bullet snuff out our future. It's time to stop waiting and become the rescuer.

Together we must navigate our way to safety and return to Pelican Bay if we want to live.

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CHAPTER 1

IMOGEN

The fog surrounding my thoughts slowly lifted, leaving me swaying. The water cleared from my surroundings and the dream where I'd been a mermaid swimming with the seahorses stopped making sense. We were having such a pleasant afternoon. Why did it have to end? I made a kickass mermaid.

What had I been doing before I turned into a mermaid?

The further away from the dream I swam, the more my memories returned.

And the smell. Icky, gross, moldy, wet smells filled my nose.

I wasn't a mermaid. No.

So what happened to me?

A parking garage. My hospital badge looped around my neck. A man standing next to my car.

His question. If I was a nurse.

My response. Yes.

Then the poke of a needle.

And then... nothing. Darkness until I met with the mermaids and seahorses.

Something more hovered in the recesses of my mind, but I couldn't pull the hazy details together.

I tried to open my eyes, but they were too heavy for me to control. Wherever I ended up on dry land, it was warm and hard. My head rested on a rock or something equally unforgiving. I appeared safe... which seemed wrong.

I shouldn't be safe.

The seahorses said I wasn't safe so I should stay with them, but I didn't.

Maybe I ended up in a clam, and the hard thing was the pearl.

But that made no sense. I shook my head and felt something scratchy against my face. Pearls weren't scratchy.

And I wasn't underwater.

The land swayed me from side to side, lulling me back to sleep, but I continued to pry my eyes open to figure out what happened.

A pearl would be nice, though. I could pluck it from the clam and use it to buy my mother a vacation. The idea of cashing in the world's biggest pearl made me smile. I sank into bliss again and let my body rest. The warmth and gentle rocking tempted me to go back to sleep. Resting sounded so good right now.

My thoughts drifted along with my body. Back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth. I came and went with the tide.

Wait.

The tide?

Land didn't sway. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

What happened to the seahorses?

Who stole my clam?

My head fell back, but I swam closer to the surface. Forget the seahorses.

I wanted to sleep but couldn't.

Fight it, Imogen.

I had to wake up.

My thoughts came more frantically now, jumbling together as they twisted and turned, falling over each other. Each one fought for my attention.

Where was I?

How did I get here? The man by my car. He stabbed me with a needle and then carried me to a vehicle. But from the

motion of my body, I was no longer in a car but somewhere on water. That explained the seahorses.

My head throbbed. Pounded. Like someone with a heavy fist beat at the edges of my skull. My attempt at forcing the memories caused a massive headache to dominate my now weary brain.

I had to figure out where they'd taken me. If not a car, then a boat. It matched the gentle pattern of movements.

My thoughts paused for a minute, and I lost control of them, once again falling into the ocean's swirl. The seahorses returned.

How did we breathe under water? How long could I live in my clam?

I studied nursing in college, meaning I lacked more than the most basic knowledge of aquatic animals.

Did clams even make pearls? Or did they come from oysters? What was the difference?

I tried to move my hand and find my legs, but I couldn't raise it enough to do more than twitch a finger. The seahorses waved goodbye with their long tails and I might have groaned.

I couldn't be a mermaid. They were mythical creatures. So what was I?

A nurse.

Right.

Yes. I remembered again. A nurse someone kidnapped from her work parking lot in North Carolina.

I tried to wiggle my toes since moving an arm had been too much, but they had tiny weights holding them firm. My eyelids wouldn't open no matter how much I pleaded with them. I also couldn't force myself awake by sheer will from yelling at myself in my head.

My brain didn't care.

It just wanted a few more hours of sleep. I hadn't had a vacation in years, so was a kidnapping and a long nap really

the worst thing in the world?

Oh, my word. Working at the hospital had me questioning if getting kidnapped might be a good thing. I needed a new profession.

I groaned for sure that time and it echoed in my delicate head.

My clothing didn't squish, but I also couldn't move my toes, so I might not have been a superb judge on that front. With tremendous effort, I made a finger twitch.

Hell yes!

I celebrated by giving a little dance, but only in my head. Fingers were the first frontier, even if all my other parts were frozen. Next, my nose crinkled.

Fish. Gross. Where did the smell start and why had it ended in my nose?

I wiggled my fingers again because fuck it. If that's all I could move, I'd move the hell out of them to show the other body parts how to get their shit together.

The warm thing flush with my body moved, forcing me along with it.

"Are you waking up?" a soft voice spoke much too close to me as if the man whispered right in my ear.

My eyes popped open, light smacked against them, and I slammed them closed.

If I'd had control of my body, I would have tensed every muscle. But I didn't have control over anything besides my fingers—and apparently my eyelids—so I did nothing.

My mind said, "Run for it, bitch!" but my legs said, "Ha-ha, no. Enjoy the murdering."

One thing I could do. Lie there like a dead fish.

Even my mouth wouldn't open to let me answer the person invading my personal bubble. I couldn't talk or move.

The only thing I could rightfully do was panic. So I did a lot of that with hopes the adrenaline would cleanse my body of the paralyzing drug faster. The longer I kept my heart rate up and worked it out of my system, the faster I'd be able to karate chop the man who had my head in his lap.

I never learned how to karate chop anything, but I figured once the drug released my body, I'd come out arms flailing and whatever happened, happened.

I stopped trying to wiggle body parts because I didn't want the person—who definitely wasn't a pearl—realizing I'd gained control of anything other than my fingers. If I resumed function over my limbs, I'd get started on that karate chopping part when I caught him off guard.

As I waited, more memories of the evening flitted into my mind. I finished my shift at the hospital and had almost made it to my car in the parking lot. I wasn't paying attention to anyone else because I couldn't wait to start my vacation. A solid week to sit around in pajama pants and watch television. They weren't super exciting plans, but getting kidnapped was not how I wanted to spend the first day I'd had off in years.

I'd just reached my car—visions of Lifetime Channel binges swimming in my head—when I beeped to unlock the doors at the same time a tall built man stepped out from the shadows.

His body blocked half the light from an overhead fixture. I tried not to judge him from his size and he smiled. So he seemed friendly enough. I smiled back and continued for my car.

“Are you a nurse?” he'd asked.

A warning bell rang but not loudly enough. I hadn't binged those Lifetime movies yet to be properly worried.

“Yes,” I said, doing a quick glance at my dark blue scrubs.

In the next second, he stood beside me and the two years of self-defense I took in college completely flew out of my

head. Then a poke in my neck and pain from where he inserted a needle too far. And that's it.

I had no other memories. Whatever he injected me with acted fast. As I lay there unmoving, I noticed more parts of my body getting tingly. I had to be regaining movements even though I was still too worried about the man pearl to move anything and experiment.

As pieces of me came back online, I didn't feel different. Still heavy and groggy, but it seemed I had on clothes. I didn't have any horrible pains coming from anywhere in particular. I didn't seem violated —besides the kidnapping.

What did me being a nurse have to do with anything? He didn't ask my name. Only my profession.

Nurses were always getting crapped on.

If I survived, I'd leave the nursing field and become a secretary. No one from the first-floor secretary pool got kidnapped.

My toes wiggled for the first time and I had another silent celebration, making sure this time I moved nothing else. The arms that earlier held me released my upper body, but his heat warmed my back so I knew he hadn't left me. The air lost the fishy residue smell and instead I noticed hints of a male's cologne. It would have smelled great if a thick layer of grease didn't coat the air and block out most of the scent.

Also, I'd enjoy the cologne more if I hadn't been biding my time to attack the good-smelling man.

My neck jerked. Or it felt like a jerk. I couldn't be one hundred percent sure because I refused to move it, but my limbs were definitely coming back under my control. Fingers, presumably from the person who had my head resting in their lap, ran their fingers through my hair, pulling it away from my face with gentle movements.

Did they kidnap me for the sex trade? I watched Dateline and heard the stories.

No, at twenty-six and definitely not a virgin, I didn't know what use I'd be to them. Besides, North Carolina didn't

seem like a hot spot for kidnapping. Those things only happened to women on vacation and Lifetime movies.

Plus, I wasn't even that pretty. I had the girl next door thing going for me, but I was not supermodel pretty by any means. I was only fifty percent sure I was even using makeup correctly when I wore it.

My eyes opened of their own accord and I blinked a few times to bring them into focus. As expected, a knee clad in dark jeans hovered beside my face on top of a dark concrete floor. I didn't dare move my head and look elsewhere.

"I know you're awake," the man's voice said.

Shit. It was now or never on the karate chop. I put my energy into moving every muscle in my body at one time. In my head, I imagined I'd jump out of his lap, turn gracefully in the air, and land with one foot on the ground and the other in a kneeling position. Much like a superhero right before the big fight scene.

That did not happen.

I only had control of about twenty-five percent of my limbs, so I didn't jump off of his lap gracefully but more rolled and flopped around resembling the dead fish I'd compared myself to earlier.

I worked hard to scramble as far away from him as possible, dragging one leg behind me, but it quickly became obvious I couldn't get far. The kidnappers had us both in a cage.

A legit cage.

He froze in the middle of the large crate, what looked to be a shipping container with bars on one side, watching me with weary eyes. "Easy. I won't hurt you."

It was dark. Only a small bit of light seeped through the bars but enough for me to make out the prominent features of his face like his firm jaw and deep-set eyes. He smiled at me as if that might bring down my defenses and I realized he was actually weirdly cute.

And definitely not the man who approached me in the parking garage. He wasn't even dressed like a kidnapper although his dark-colored jeans had oily spots on them. I refused to consider what liquid caused them. He wore a light-blue polo shirt with dirt on the sleeves, but his hair was immaculate, flipped over to one side and tussled. It looked like he'd dressed that morning in dirty clothes, but took the time to do his mane.

"Where—" I tried to speak, but my dry and scratchy throat sounded like I hadn't used it in a year.

I rubbed at it as he looked at me with sympathy. "They dragged you in about..." He took a moment to check his watch, a big bulky silver thing that took up most of his wrist. "Ten hours ago. You looked cold crumpled in a heap on the floor, and I didn't want you to wake up alone."

It sounded nice, but the man could've been anyone. Maybe he brought me into the container and now wanted to win me over to his side. This was his attempt at trying to make me like him before he did whatever he kidnapped a nurse for. Some weird foreplay. If you abducted someone out of a hospital, you weren't above trying to pretend to be another captive.

I settled against the far wall, the metal cold against my back, and shivered. My eyes slowly acclimated to the darkness, and I looked around, but there was nothing to see. Past our bars, a bunch of other shipping crates sat lined up in a row, but only the sides were visible in dark greens and oranges. Our floor swayed back and forth.

"Where are we?" I asked, my voice crackly and dry but now working.

The man shrugged and rubbed a spot right above his eyebrow. "A ship, I think."

I swallowed and my scratchy throat hurt. "How did you get here?"

Was he kidnapped from a hospital as well? Do they want a nurse and maybe a doctor? Were we being sold not for sex

but a makeshift doctor's office?

He laughed, the sound choked off at the end by a cough. "Shopping. I took a day trip to the mall in Portland for a little adventure. They jumped me in the parking lot."

Portland? I had to assume Maine, not Oregon, if we really were on a ship. If he wasn't a doctor, why was he selected?

"Why kidnap you?"

He smiled as if he was laughing again, but this time, no sound came out. "Well, considering they kept calling me Corbin, I assume they think I'm my brother. Which means this will eventually end very badly."

He didn't elaborate on Corbin, or why these men would want him. "Why do they think you're Corbin?" The more I spoke, the easier it became.

He smirked that time for real, making me realize he forced the others. It was obvious because when he did it for real, it lit up his face, making him gorgeous even as we sat in a dirty container with decaying fish. "Twins."

Ah. It was a simple answer but explained everything. "What's your name then?"

"Cyrus Kensington, and you? Where did they pick you up from? I've been on the boat for at least two days, so I have to assume we're out of Maine and maybe even New York."

"Imogen... Not Jen or Jenny," I threw in just to make sure we got off on the right foot. I didn't want to be kidnapped *and* annoyed if he insisted on giving me a nickname.

He rubbed the spot above his eyebrow again and smiled. "Got it, not Jen. So what are you in for?"

The way he said it made it resemble a prison sentence, like we were hanging out together in the common areas. "I don't know."

It had something to do with me being a nurse. That was the only thing that made sense, but what? I gave him the quick recap of what I remembered from the parking lot. Cyrus grew

quiet until I mentioned the North Carolina part and then he tensed.

“That far south?” he asked, more to himself than me, so I ignored it.

More of my story fell out at my feet around me as I talked to him. I didn’t understand why, but he calmed me even while chaos surrounded us. I didn’t know if I’d survive what came next, and part of me wanted to crawl back into his arms. He’d been my warm and safe spot for a little while.

“Who did this to me?” I asked because if he’d figured out we were on a boat and now had an idea where the boat was floating, he’d be better able to figure out our final destination and why.

Or he was more involved than I realized, which then anything I said didn’t matter anyway.

None of the situation made sense. I didn’t owe anyone money. No secret life. I didn’t get involved in crime. I considered myself a good person.

Mostly.

I mean, sure, I shared my Netflix login with my mother, but she didn’t count. Did she?

Another memory hit me. Damn it.

What about Mandy?

Did I really act bitchy one time and fate decided I deserve to be kidnapped? Yes, I told my coworker Mandy Shafter that her new haircut gave her giraffe neck. It was mean. Rude. Nasty.

But well-deserved.

She walked around for three whole years calling people fat or reminding them how horrible they looked if they came to work tired or with eye bags. You can’t always help eye bags. We were nurses! I’d been tired for years. She didn’t need to remind me how horrible I looked every morning before I had my coffee.

But really? A kidnapping? That seemed harsh.

“Imogen?” Cyrus said my name softly and ripped my thoughts back to the present kidnapping. “I...”

“Who did this to us, Cyrus?”

He stared at me for a second, as if he needed the time to gather his thoughts and decide what to tell me. “I can’t be certain, but have you heard of The Grandmaster?”

I shook my head. “Who?”

“He’s a mob boss in Chicago. Are you sure you’ve never heard of him?” he asked so casually it sounded as if he talked about mob bosses every day.

Another head shake. The only mobsters I recognized were the ones from the Godfather movies and Al Capone.

“I didn’t think so,” he said. “He claims one of his employees has gone rogue. I’m assuming he wants my brother to do side work for him, but I have no idea why they’d take a nurse from North Carolina.”

His words rang with truth but didn’t bring the relief I expected. They left me wondering how long I’d survive.

“What are we going to do?” I asked, hoping he’d have an amazing plan of escape already prepared, and we were just waiting for me to wake up before putting it into action.

CHAPTER 2

CYRUS

“We wait.”

I spotted the expectation in her eyes as soon as she asked the question. A splash of hopefulness.

As if she expected me to break out a package of dental floss from my back pocket and guide us out of our situation.

We were in a shipping crate and I was the face of my operation with my twin Corbin, not the brains. Plus, dental floss never worked against metal. And our jail cell wouldn't crack easily. Someone modified the shipping crate in a sick design created to keep us inside but without the fear of running out of air. One whole side of the crate had a hole cut into it. Thick metal bars stuck so close together my finger barely fit through the holes created our literal cell wall. Someone aced welding in shop class.

I wasn't Superman or MacGyver, so we were screwed.

Before they dropped Imogen with her pile of black hair and beautiful eyes into the shipping crate, I had two days to consider what they normally hauled in this specially designed prison. It wasn't Amazon packages.

Just as I noticed the hopefulness in her question, I also recognized the minute she realized I didn't have a plan and freaked.

“Wait?” she asked, her voice getting high. If it wasn't so dry, it would've probably been a screech.

I wished I had something for her—water for her to drink or food to snack on. No one had been to check on her since they threw her on the cold, hard floor. I'd already finished drinking the Glacier Bay water bottle they chucked in the cell the day before. I crushed the plastic bottle in my boredom and shoved it through the bars.

If I'd known I'd have a beautiful cellmate joining me, then I would have saved the water for her.

Now we were both out of water, and if we didn't eat or drink soon, we'd only continue to grow weaker.

I scooted to the other side of the shipping container and placed my back up against the wall. The container wasn't large, and if we both stuck our feet out, we'd only have a foot or so between us. Earlier I made myself uncomfortable by sitting in the middle of the floor with Imogen's head in my lap. But I couldn't imagine leaving her lying on the cold ground and I didn't want to drag her to the corner.

I was almost positive we were in the bowels of a ship, which meant we were close to the engines and warm, but a coldness seeped around everything in this area.

"We wait because I haven't figured out where we are, where we're headed, or what we would find if we tried to escape. My brother will figure out I'm missing and then he'll come."

Corbin would search heaven and hell before he gave up looking for me. I only had to keep the Grandmaster's rogue employee, Bernard, from figuring out I wasn't Corbin long enough for him to mount a rescue. If he found out I wasn't my hacker twin, he'd probably kill me on the spot.

Bernard turned against the Grandmaster, and rogue henchmen never responded the way you expected. They made wild and crazy unpredictable moves.

"What about me?" Imogen asked, her eyes full of sadness.

She didn't need to worry. I shrugged, trying to show her confidence so she didn't. "You're with me now."

And the moment the words passed my lips, I realized how much I meant them. She was so tiny when I held her it felt like nothing was in my arms at all, but the way she rolled out of my grasp, she had a fierceness to her. She wanted to fight, even when it was obvious she didn't have full control over her movements.

The woman woke up in a stranger's arms but didn't cry or scream.

Imogen fought.

She looked at me terrified and her body shook from the cold, the shock, and whatever else, but she held her form. Tough didn't do enough to describe her. Most woman would have huddled into a ball in the corner to cry, but she looked ready to make a break for it.

I wanted to do everything possible to protect her, but I didn't know how. Corbin had always been the smart twin. He had confidence in everything he did while I just looked the part and talked a big game.

I stared at her big round eyes as fear washed over them. There wasn't a blanket or pillow in our cell and her dark blue scrubs cut high on her arms, exposing skin. The material covered her legs, but it had to be thin.

She shivered, and I balled my fists.

Dammit.

I didn't want Corbin to be the one to find us. Today wasn't the day for my twin to conduct a rescue. This time, I'd be the savior. To have Imogen look at me as her hero. For her eyes to fall on me and me only.

I'd never had anyone but my brother to take care of until right then. In that moment, I needed Imogen to cherish. To protect. For her to be just mine. Something for no one else but me.

Her body shook hard, a tremor controlling her muscles as the drug worked through her system.

"If you come back over here, I can help keep you warm." Corbin and I had taken survival classes and a gun safety class. Sharing of warmth was Body Heat 101.

She tried to stand, but her legs wobbled and she didn't get higher than her knees. I stood ready to help, but then she crawled over and I sat back, resuming my cross-legged position. As I expected, she was tough and determined to do things on her own. Admitting she needed help now meant her chill had seeped in more than I realized. I cursed myself for letting her get so cold.

I was already a shit savior.

The shock was probably making her system spasm. I hoped she'd crawl into my lap, but she stopped at the edge of my legs, not nearly close enough.

Imogen gazed up at me with a hard-set expression. "This means nothing."

I lifted an eyebrow, trying to read between the lines of her comment.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "This is not an invitation to touch my body."

Oh, that. Like I said, tough.

I grinned. "Beautiful, I've never touched a woman who didn't beg for it, and I don't plan to start now."

Satisfied with my answer, she slowly crawled into my arms, getting comfortable in my lap. She snuggled in, allowing me to wrap my arms around her torso and hold her close.

Minutes passed as she shook, but slowly it came to a stop, the tremors hitting later and later. She rested her head on my shoulder and I rocked her back and forth, rubbing my hands up and down her arm, trying to help warm her up as quickly as possible.

A full three minutes passed with no shaking, and I worried she fell asleep and left me in silence again. I didn't want to be alone.

"You have family in North Carolina? Kids? Boyfriend?" I tried to pass them off as simple questions to keep the conversation going, but I think we both guessed it was more.

She peeked up at me from underneath her eyelashes. "No, not really. And I just took a week off work, so no one is even going to miss me until next week."

She appeared to miss the actual reasons behind my questions, and I was glad to have my privacy intact.

I squeezed her hard again, bringing her right up against my chest. "Vacationing somewhere fun?"

She huffed, and her body relaxed the last few millimeters against my hold. If I had a better imagination, I'd pretend we were out in the grass beside a lake, spending a sunny afternoon together rather than prisoners on our way to what would probably be death for at least one of us.

"No vacation. I had too much unused vacation time, and if I didn't start using it, I'd lose it at the end of the year. That didn't mean I bought a plane ticket to somewhere. I had big plans to clean my kitchen and catch up on the last season of Supernatural."

I laughed. She'd been ready to watch TV, and I was looking for a pair of designer jeans. "Life just got a lot more interesting, huh?"

"Truthfully? I preferred the mundane."

"Well, hopefully you get back to it as quickly as possible because I just decided we're about to escape."

She jerked, repositioning herself to stare at me as we talked. "What? You said we had to wait for your brother."

I cringed. "I was slightly optimistic," I lied.

Corbin would come for us, but by the time my brother made it here, we'd already be gone. I'd make sure of it. Besides, it might take Corbin days to find me and then rally Ridge's troops for a rescue.

By then Bernard might have already determined I wasn't the twin he wanted. He might use me for ransom, but who knew what his plans were for Imogen? The man was sick and twisted, and he was deeply involved in the sex trade. Even the Grandmaster didn't want to claim him any longer. That said more about Bernard than anything else.

I refused to take any risk with her safety. The moment Imogen crawled into my arms, she became my responsibility. Honestly, it may have happened earlier.

This wasn't my brother's time to shine. It was mine. I'd save the day and the girl along with it.

CHAPTER 3

IMOGEN

Cyrus leaned up against the thin bars separating us from freedom. He turned his head from side to side, glancing in every direction and trying to survey the larger room where they stashed us. No one had been by since I woke up.

“I definitely think the boat is smaller than I first assumed,” he said when he turned from his lookout point.

I nodded, but inside I didn’t feel as enthusiastic. What did it matter if we were on a big boat or a small boat? We were on a boat with no idea where we were.

At least a full day had passed since Cyrus originally said we’d escape, but it seemed so much longer.

Time stretched out and then fell in on itself when there was nothing to do, no food to eat, and sleep came haphazardly. We had no blankets or pillows to rest on, and even when I tried to catch a few minutes here or there, I always woke up in a panic. Turned out it was difficult to fall asleep when you were worried you’d be dead at any minute.

Life as a nurse meant I faced death daily, but never my own. It was a completely different heart-pounding experience when my head rested on the chopping block. If I made it out of this alive, I’d never again begrudge anyone who spent their stay in the hospital complaining. They were safe, surrounded by medical staff, and comfortable enough to complain. It was a privilege.

Cyrus and I didn’t talk about escape often since his initial comment. Instead, we discussed everything else. Our childhoods, schools, life dreams, even stories of our first kisses. The striking man had quite a history, if his tales were to be believed.

In the time we spent getting to know one another, no one brought us food or water. The more my stomach growled, the more positive of our escape Cyrus grew, but it didn’t do any good. I had too much medical training to ignore the facts. I’d

slept two times since the last time I peed or even had the urge. It happened in the corner of our little prison as Cyrus turned his back and faced the other direction.

The conditions were disgusting, and it was one of the most embarrassing things I'd ever had to do in my life. Funny how you forget the fact you're kidnapped when you had to pee next to a man you found attractive.

But it was also concerning because while it'd been quite a few hours since I'd had the urge to use the bathroom, Cyrus hadn't at all. He didn't mention the last time they brought him any liquids, and I didn't want to ask and learn the true severity of our situation.

We could survive without food for a while, but we needed water. Soon.

Cyrus returned to his position at the bars, and because I'd spent so much time secluded with him, I noticed the moment he froze.

"See anything good?" I asked, lacking the strength or concern to get up and check for myself.

He turned to face me fully, his expression so radiant I actually smiled without meaning to. "Our escape."

That forced me to stand. "What?"

He slid backward on his feet, trying to not make a noise, and stopped me before I looked out the bars for what had him so excited. "The boat has been slowing for the last hour, and now it's stopped."

"How do you know?" Nothing seemed different to me.

He lifted a finger over his lips, telling me to be quiet.

"Listen," he whispered. "There's no hum of the engine and our movements aren't as pronounced."

I stopped breathing so it wouldn't interfere with the noises around me and listened hard. "Oh."

The engine had become a part of the background noise, and I'd apparently learned to block out the sounds. Cyrus was

right. It was now quiet.

That didn't solve our biggest problem, though. We're still locked together in a cage with a dried puddle of pee in the corner. I did not know how that got us any closer to escape, but Cyrus practically vibrated with energy at the new development.

"Don't you understand? We have to be near land. They can't kill m... us," he said, correcting his words and including me in his safety net. I wasn't so sure they didn't plan to kill me or something worse.

I wanted to ask him about his change in the sentence, but sometimes a girl needed a little positivity after being kidnapped, so I didn't.

We both froze as a noise came from the other end of the large space at the boat's bottom. With no other noises from the boat, we easily heard the far door opening. With one hand, Cyrus pushed me back, putting his body in front of mine as he walked up to the bars.

"Trust me, okay?" he said, glancing back at me quickly.

He pled with his eyes, but it was difficult to agree. In ways, I did trust him. With everything. He was the only person I could even possibly consider trusting. But even as much as we talked the last two days, I'd learned nothing significant about Cyrus. Was it part of this plan? Did he bring me here to win me over for whatever purposes he had?

To make me a willing victim.

But his lips were as dry and chapped as mine. His eyes were baggy and tired. His hair was no longer perfect on his head. If he was part of whoever took me, he definitely played the role well. Too well.

"Yes, okay," I said, and he released a breath.

A large man, the width of his shoulders twice the size of any regular person, stepped up to the opening and pressed his face against the bars.

“Hey, darlin’. It’s time to get to work,” he said, looking directly at me and ignored Cyrus.

I took three steps back to put myself in the farthest corner away from him as possible. He didn’t clarify what work they wanted me to do, but it wasn’t hard to figure out. I had two particular skill sets they might be interested in: nursing or the simple fact I was a woman. I didn’t want to use either of them.

I huddled in the back, not making a sound. It was a long shot, but a part of me hoped he’d give up and go away.

No such luck.

Instead, the man got right up against the bars, his face pushed up against the metal as the bars pulled his skin in weird directions. He resembled the father from *The Shinning* right before he broke through the door. This man looked at me as if I was a caged animal and he planned to take me out to play.

Probably because that was exactly what he wanted.

“Don’t make me come in there,” he said, shoving the end of his gun through the small gap between the metal bars.

Cyrus hesitated, staring down the large man as if he alone could make him run and hide, but Cyrus didn’t have a gun. At the last second, right when I thought they would have a showdown, Cyrus turned and looked at me with the same pleading expression I used earlier. “It’s okay, Imogen. Trust me.”

What?

It wasn’t okay. Nothing about the situation was okay. My breath came in short pants and my heart thundered in my chest as if I’d finished running a race even though I hadn’t moved. I’d never been so scared in my life.

Cyrus asked me to trust him, but did I? Was he the world’s worst liar, or did he really have a plan? If I walked out of this cage, would I ever see him again?

The gun tapped back and forth between two bars, which stopped it from coming further into the cage. “Come on, darlin’. We’ve got a gunshot injury you need to patch up.”

So it was the nursing skills. Better than the other but still unwanted. They left me in this sickening cage to rot and now wanted me to heal someone? How long did they wait? Who knew the shape of the person they expected me to fix?

What if I couldn't do anything for him?

What if he died on my watch?

Would I be the next person they put a bullet in?

Cyrus held on to the bars with one hand and waved me closer with his other. He widened his eyes, giving me a look that definitely conveyed I needed to hurry and get my ass closer to the end of our cell. I inched forward, never taking my gaze from Cyrus and hoping he'd silently communicate with me and reassure me once again that because they couldn't kill him meant they wouldn't kill me.

I didn't believe it earlier, but now I desperately wanted to.

The shipping container seemed to shrink with my steps, and before I realized it, I reached the metal bars separating us from freedom, a gun, and a bunch of people who probably wanted to toss me into the ocean. I actually wanted to stay in the tiny prison rather than face my fate.

When I walked close enough to the edge, the man removed his gun and unlocked the shipping container. Half of the metal bars swung open and his body filled the space.

I took a deep breath. As soon as I crossed over to the other side, my future would be out of Cyrus's hands, and I only had my quick thinking to get me through. Maybe if I saved this guy's friend from the gunshot wound, he'd let me go.

I put one foot near the edge, trying to wear a brave face. Cyrus bumped up against me, grabbed the door and ripped it closed before swinging it forward as hard as possible. He caught everyone off guard and the heavy metal door swung into the beast, knocking him to the floor.

In the commotion, I froze and Cyrus pushed me out of the way as he jumped from the container and flew onto the man as he struggled to stand and regain his footing.

The two of them hit the ground hard. Cyrus fell on top of our captor. I didn't have time to waste. Cyrus had muscle, but he hadn't had a drink in the least two days, and the man was twice the size of him and carrying a gun. I jumped out of the container and scanned the area, finding exactly what I needed leaning against the bright red shipping container only a few feet from us. I darted for it without time to think of my actions.

I ran at it as fast as my hungry stomach allowed and grabbed the metal beam. It was heavy in my arms, but we had no time to give up now. Cyrus struggled, but still had the upper hand. The massive beast raised his head, and Cyrus used an elbow to push it back into the concrete. It hit so loudly I swore the floor vibrated at our feet, but the man only blinked twice and then continued to rise.

Cyrus rolled to the side, stuck out a hand and gained control of the gun, which our kidnapper lost in the struggle. The two men stood with Cyrus aiming the weapon at him but not shooting. We understood what happened if a gunshot went off the bottom of the boat. It would alert everyone in the area.

The time for planning ended. We were at a deadlock. I pulled back and with every ounce of strength I had left in me, swung the metal beam at the man. He was taller than I expected and the beam hit him at the bottom of his head, but in the next second, he crumpled. His knees hit the ground, and then he fell face first against the concrete. This second thud hit smoother, like he'd simply fallen asleep.

I cringed. No way he got out of this with only a broken nose and not something worse. I'd vowed to never take a life or cause injury, but nursing school didn't prepare me for a kidnapping. These circumstances required drastic measures.

Cyrus and I both stood quietly until he walked over and, with his boot, rolled our captor to his back. As I expected, blood poured out of his nose as Cyrus looked down and shook his head. "Impressive."

My hands shook, and I dropped the metal beam, the sound echoing through the boat.

CHAPTER 4

CYRUS

Imogen's whole body shook from the exertion. I wanted to congratulate her on the amazing hit, ask if she played baseball, and make a joke, but we didn't have time. I needed to get us off the ship while she still had enough adrenaline in her system to keep her going. We didn't have a second to waste. I grabbed on to her hand and tugged her toward the door where the asshole had entered.

We didn't know what we would walk into or if we'd even survive on our way out, but I certainly wouldn't stay there and wait to see what happened.

I opened the door slowly, the click on the metal lock causing us both to freeze. I peeked through the doorway first and found a set of metal stairs. We paused at the base as I prepared to walk up them without knowing who waited for us.

The ship we were on had to be more than the standard fun yacht I had any experience with, but in the world of freight shippers, it was quite small. I didn't take time to scan the entire area, but I was pretty sure I could see from one end to the other. Plus, most shipping freighters didn't store their containers under the ship. That's where people slept and ate as well as where the mechanicals were housed. The fact there were three of them meant they used the vessel for nefarious purposes. More than likely, Imogen and I weren't the first people to be kept in these containers.

I practically pulled Imogen up the steps, keeping her as close to me as possible and trying to make my footfalls quiet even though I wanted to run to get us out into the open. If anyone caught us in the stairwell, we were as good as dead.

As we reached the top of the staircase, artificial light streamed down and I squinted my eyes, not used to the brightness after so long under the ship. I covered my eyes and peeked my head over to the upper deck of the ship and saw of the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen in my entire life.

Land.

In my excitement, I forgot to look behind us. Only when a shout grabbed my attention and Imogen's head had already cleared the boat's floor did I realize my mistake. A bullet flew at us, pinging off the railing of the ship.

We couldn't go back down the staircase. That meant certain destruction. Someone on the ship yelled, probably calling reinforcements. Without thinking, I took aim and fired further down the ship toward a door at the bow where the shot came from. We didn't have time for me to stop and see how many bullets I had left in the gun, so I couldn't afford to waste any more.

I tugged on Imogen's hand, pulling her the last few steps up in one movement and hoping I didn't scrape her skin against the metal flooring. Another bullet pinged close.

Too close.

She screamed and the two of us lurched behind a large rusted-out barrel. It was barely enough to cover both of our bodies, but it did its job as a bullet whizzed past. I put myself closest to the barrel, so we sat in a straight line. If a bullet cut through, it'd hit me and not Imogen.

She huffed for breath, her eyes wide and looking in every direction. We were so close to freedom. So close to what I promised her. We couldn't give up now. I'd get us off the ship.

Long docks stretched out over the water a hundred feet away from us. The crew had obviously been pulling into a port or marina as we escaped. It meant we were close enough to swim it if we had the strength and got off the boat without either of us taking a bullet.

I held on to Imogen's hand and leaned to the side, not wanting to leave our position too much and blow our cover. They saw our general direction, but I couldn't tell how many people were shooting at us from the different directions the bullets came from. At least more than one person heard our escape. I fired randomly in the direction I thought most were from but had no idea if my bullet hit its target.

It was a stupid move to make—a decision made in the heat of the moment—because my next two clicks on the trigger resulted in nothing. I'd picked up a gun with a half empty clip.

“Can you swim?” I asked Imogen, trying my hardest not to let panic fill my voice. It was my responsibility to get us out of there, and I didn't plan to fail.

She pursed her lips and nodded. “Um, sure.”

It was good enough for me. I'd carry her on my back if that's what it took. “Okay, we're going to jump.”

“What?” she screeched.

It was too late to come up with another plan, so I stood, still clutching her hand as hard as possible, and took her with me as I made a running break for the side of the boat. We reached the railing and didn't have time to climb over it, so I squeezed Imogen through the opening and pushed her into the water, falling in right behind her.

Her head bobbed above the waves and she sputtered out ocean water. I had no time to apologize. We had to use the adrenaline flowing through us to make the last leg to safety.

“Swim toward the docks. Stay with me,” I yelled, pointing in the direction we wanted to go.

If we got far enough away from the boats before they had time to figure out our direction, we might make it. “Keep your head underwater as much as possible.” It was the only advice I had to give.

The water was fucking cold. It was impossible to determine how far south the boat had gone, but we were south enough in the Atlantic I hadn't expected the chilly waters. It wasn't a good sign. Either I'd been wrong about our location or I was experiencing more fatigue than I realized.

A bullet zipped into the water next to me, cutting through the waves and barely missing my arm. We had to get further away. I expected lights on the beach, some form of civilization, but as we swam closer, we met nothing but darkness.

Imogen slowed beside me until she was so far back I turned around and floated in the water watching her.

“Come on, beautiful. We’re almost there.” I held my hand out for her and she took it limply. Our time was running out, and we had to get to safety fast.

As soon as we reached the first wooden pole of the dock, I swam behind Imogen to give her cover and watched as we made our way to shore underneath the dark expanse of beach. The water receded slowly until I touched the ground and walked on the sandy bottom. My shoes were heavy and weighed me down, but they kept my feet safe against anything jagged in the sand.

Imogen threw herself on the sandy beaches, but panic was still thick in my system. We were not safe yet. Not until we were a lot farther away. I couldn’t leave her out here all alone, so we had to keep going.

I gave her a moment to catch her breath and then helped her stand before walking farther up the beach, away from the waters as quickly as possible. Our feet dragged, and I did my best to help her wring out her clothes, ridding us of some excess water. The night air was cool against her skin and I worried about hypothermia.

I worried about a lot of things.

“Can we flag down a car?” she asked as we reached the end of the beach, which opened up into an empty parking lot and, beyond that, a four-lane highway.

A pair of headlights drove down the expanse of the road and I pushed her behind me, standing next to a tree and hoping it acted as cover. “No, we have no idea the reach of these men and no idea who to trust.”

It was safe to say this all somehow connected to Bernard and the Grandmaster, but how deep did the treachery go? What if the Grandmaster lied and Bernard hadn’t actually gone rogue after all, but still worked for him? If they were a team, we were screwed.

“What do we do?” she asked as I waited until the car’s taillights were far in the distance before we crossed the road. It was weird to have four lanes so empty. What time of night was it?

“I’ll feel safer about our options once we’re farther away. Then we can call Ridge and my brother.”

Farther down the stretch of road, a set of lights that weren’t moving lit up a portion of the ground in front of them. I pointed in that direction and waited until Imogen followed my movement and saw them as well.

“Can you make it that far?” I asked, hoping she would say yes. Otherwise, I’d have to carry her. We were sitting ducks this close to the docks with no one nearby.

She nodded and took a deep breath. “Yeah.” I heard the steel in her words. She hadn’t faltered, screamed, or given up. Imogen and I were going to make it.

We kept to the ditch in case more cars drove past us. From the looks of it, this area was almost in a deserted part of the countryside. I saw no indicators of where we were. No road signs or billboards, just an open lonely stretch of road with tall palm trees on the other side and vines hanging off of them as if they were trying to eat the trees one leaf at a time.

The shape of the building came into view the closer we approached the lights, and I spent a few minutes reviewing our options. What if it ended up being the home of someone who owned the docks, and they profited from the illegal activity going on at them? Would it be safe for us to knock?

Did we risk it?

Once we were close enough, it was simple to see that wouldn’t be a problem. The structure wasn’t a home but an old service center—one that was clearly not currently open. It was one extensive building with two bay doors cut out on the far side. There were no gas pumps, and around back a tall chain-link fence cordoned off two rows of vehicles.

Imogen paused as we came to a small walkway into the service center’s gravel driveway, but I took her hand and

tugged her forward. There might be a phone, food, water, a magnitude of things we needed. And a place to hide.

We came to the side door unable to reach the back because of the chain-link fence, and I twisted the knob to a door, which led into the first garage bay. Locked.

“What do we do?” Imogen asked, her beauty hidden by the dark night and only her scared expression lit up from the overcast lights of the station.

I couldn't fail her now. It was my job to get us to safety, and I didn't survive swimming away from a boat to flop this close to rescue. I searched the ground, using my feet to help when the light became too dim to see. Finally, my foot struck a big enough rock.

The old rundown service station didn't look like a place that invested in a top-of-the-line security system. I threw the rock through the window of the side door, and didn't worry about what might happen. Worst-case scenario, there was an alarm, and it called the police. I would gladly face a breaking-and-entering charge over being murdered.

Imogen covered her ears for the breaking glass and I reached my hand into the space of the broken window, unlocking the door, and then opening it to let us walk in. Two cars already sat in the work bays, but I sped past them as quickly as possible, headed for the service station. They had to have a phone and other things we needed.

Imogen followed close behind, and as soon as I stepped into the air condition part of the garage my eyes found a cooler sitting on top of the counter. It had a clear glass side and was full of water and two kinds of soda.

I reached for the first and held the door open, passing a water to Imogen and making sure she got hers open before I took my first sip. It'd been at least two days since I'd had any liquid, and I drank the water too fast. It hit my empty stomach and pain had my muscles clenching. But I didn't stop. I needed water more than anything, and even if I puked it up back later, I didn't care.

“Little sips,” Imogen said, but even she struggled to follow her own advice.

I needed to search for a phone, but I sat down right there on the floor with Imogen beside me as I enjoyed my first drink.

“Cyrus, I feel bad,” she said when our frantic guzzling slowed.

I rested my head against the counter. “Why?” We just survived being kidnapped. If I had the strength, I’d celebrate. Did she get hit by a bullet? I studied her frantically.

“Because I’ve never stolen anything,” she said, looking at her second bottle of water.

I smiled. Only a sweet, honest person too good for this world would be upset they stole water after a time like this.

“I’ll send them a check.” A nice big fat check they could retire on. “A big one.”

“And a thank you note,” she said, and the two of us chuckled. We were almost safe.

It cut off quickly when two headlights swept across the large open window of the service station. We were half covered by the counter, but I leaned to the side to watch as the car pulled into the empty parking lot.

Not good.

“Shit,” I said and forced Imogen to her feet. She grabbed as many water bottles as she could carry and we snuck out through a door on the other end of the open space into the back lot.

The one surrounded by a tall chain-link fence. Shit. Now the two of us were even more sitting ducks than we were on the ship.

We hovered beside the door as I tried to think of a way to get us out of the situation this time. Two car doors opened and closed quickly. Men talked to each other, but they were too far away to make out their words.

“What if they’re good people?” Imogen whispered as she stood beside me next to the door.

I leaned over, peeking through the window, able to see straight through the service center of the large window from the front. The men who exited the car turned to the trunk, and both reached in to grab something.

“Do good people carry shotguns?” I asked.

I moved to the side, letting Imogen peek through the window, and she gasped when she saw the two men walking closer to the front of the building with guns across their chests.

Either there had been an alarm, and the owner came down to secure his business himself, or we didn’t get far enough away from the docks for safety.

“Do you think they’re looking for us?” she asked.

I nodded and started walking toward the row of cars parked in the back.

Even if they weren’t, we couldn’t risk it. I didn’t know who’d come in the middle of the night carrying shotguns, but I was positive they were looking for us. We barely had five minutes inside the building. We hadn’t even had the proper time to look for a phone and call for help. Now we were on the run again.

I snuck around each of the cars, lifting the handles, trying to find one unlocked. After the first three, my spirits sank. If they figured out we were back here, there’d be nowhere for us to escape. With each handled I tried, we also took our chances I’d set off a car alarm. Not only would it leave sitting ducks but broadcast our location.

CHAPTER 5

IMOGEN

Cyrus yanked at another door handle. I opened my mouth to speak but closed it. He oozed determination. I didn't want to ruin his quest, but our lives were on the line, and he was trying the wrong door handle. I had to step in.

I learned the old trick from my mechanic grandfather. Leave the passenger side unlocked when they're in the lot for easy access when you need it. That way, you didn't need to search for keys in the shop. As Cyrus jiggled the driver's door handle of an old Toyota, I swept up to the passenger side of a black Jeep Commander.

Fingers crossed these mechanics trusted their tall fence to use the same time-saving tricks.

The door opened immediately, just as I expected, and I jumped into the vehicle, leaning across the way and unlocking the driver's side door in time for Cyrus to reach it.

He did not waste another second and slid into the driver's seat. "You found one unlocked."

"Yeah," I said, my panic heightening again. With our new position, we couldn't tell how close the two men had gotten to us. Were they already inside the building searching?

"Check under the mat," I said, hoping the owner of this service station was as trusting as my grandfather.

Cyrus looked at me as his hands dug at the underparts of the steering wheel as if he planned to rip the casing off and hot-wire the vehicle, but it probably wouldn't be that hard.

"No, it can't be so simple," he said as he dropped his hand and ran it over the bottom mat under his feet.

My shirt had mostly dried on our long walk. The little water I had left seeped into the fabric of the vehicle, leaving sand everywhere. "My grandfather used to run a place similar to this. They figure the cars are safe because of the fence."

Right at the end of my sentence, Cyrus's hand shot up, dangling one key from a black ring. He smiled brightly even in our dire circumstance and jabbed the key into the ignition, starting the vehicle. With a quick turn to the right, he darted out past the other row of cars and then hit the gas, headed straight for the gates in the middle of the fence.

I closed my eyes and held on to the safety handle as he hit the structure, going at least thirty miles an hour. The car didn't even slow as metal clanged. Thankfully, we ended up in a monster of a vehicle. The chain-link gates flew open, swinging from their hinges as we barreled through. Cyrus clutched the wheel, and we skidded onto the road, the back tire falling off the edge into the side gravel before he righted it and we went on our way.

A shotgun blast rang out through the night air and I screamed, clutching the "oh shit" handle until my knuckles were white, but none of the spray of bullets hit our vehicle.

Cyrus's driving eventually evened out, and I turned around, checking behind us to make sure we weren't being followed. Twenty minutes later, I gave up and faced the front of the vehicle after his third warning to buckle my seat belt. Our road was deserted, and we didn't know which direction we were headed, but he sounded confident in his ability to get us somewhere.

At least out of the state of Florida if the road signs with the penis shaped state were an indicator of where we ended up.

The last time I visited Florida, it was spring break during my senior year of high school when a carload of us drove down together. I didn't pay attention to the roadways. Not that I'd remember, anyway.

The night stretched out before us and Cyrus stared straight ahead, driving like an old man going the speed limit. Occasionally, his gaze fluttered to the rearview mirror and sent me into a panic, but we didn't see anyone. No men in cars with shotguns.

Signs for different towns zoomed ahead of us as we drove. Keystone Heights, the next one, coming up quickly. I

tried to stay awake, but the adrenaline I used to keep me going faded fast.

I hadn't had enough water or any food, and my body was shutting down. "What's your plan?" I asked once Cyrus's posture relaxed slightly while he drove us toward freedom.

He glanced at me and I almost warned him to keep his eyes on the road. "As soon as we reach the Florida line, I'll feel better and we can call my brother."

It sounded like a perfectly reasonable plan.

If we were a couple on vacation.

But we just escaped a boat, stole a car, and narrowly avoided being shot. Surely we had better options available to us. "What about the police?"

Cyrus returned to white knuckling the steering wheel. "Didn't you trust me when I said I didn't want to call the police?"

Wow, it was pitch black outside, but red flags raised on flagpoles everywhere inside my brain. They covered the roadways. Sirens rang out around me and lights flashed in the car. If someone could see inside my head they'd think I was suffering from a neurological event.

Cyrus appeared so handsome and cute and friendly when we met. He rescued me from whatever awaited me on the boat, but apparently I'd gotten in a car with a murderer. Anyone who survived a kidnapping and then immediately didn't tell the police had something to hide. And it wasn't something good.

"No," I said, trying to remain calm even though a second dose of adrenaline had just hit my body, preparing me to throw myself out of the moving vehicle.

The police helped people. That was their job. Taxpayers' dollars paid for them to do it. If we went to them and told our story, they would help us.

Cyrus slid his gaze back onto the road. "Okay, you're right. Next turn off, we go to the police. I drove inland to get

off Highway One, and hopefully we lost the assholes from the service station. It should be enough.”

I found comfort in his words for about two seconds. Something about his tone made me question if he believed his own promise. The police were good. Right?

An exit came less than half a mile later and Cyrus turned off the highway. Except we saw no signs leading us to anything. Not even a McDonald’s. We drove further down the offramp and the reason grew obvious. We were in the backwoods.

Like alligator eat your leg off territory.

Trees were the only thing waiting for us when we reached the stop sign at the end of the off ramp. Cyrus shrugged and turned on the right blinker. We drove through a town, which was really more one stop sign with four corners and two stores for each side of the street.

“Do they even have a police station?” I asked as I checked through all the windows of the Jeep. Every town had a station, right?

I didn’t even see a gas station, town library, or a pizza place. On the left, a tiny bar had its lights shuttered. It might be the only place to get food in the small town, but it wasn’t currently serving.

Cyrus turned down a side street and found an empty parking lot where he stopped the car. “I want to conserve gas,” he said, and I leaned over to check the gauge.

We were hovering right at empty. “Do you think we’re safe here?” I asked, scanning the empty parking lot, fearful someone might jump out and attack us at any moment.

“It’s dark,” he said nodding and letting his gaze follow the same path I did at the darkened streets. “Let’s park the car and rest. I swear in the morning we’ll find the police station, but I need a quick break before I pass out.”

We were both crashing hard from days of no water and lack of sleep.

In his promise, I found my missing trust. Cyrus agreed to find a police station, and it wasn't his fault the road we turned off led us to the smallest town in America. There was no way for him to know, so I trusted he didn't plan to lead me into the next Dateline special.

We'd be safe here.

"Okay," I said, unbuckling my seatbelt.

Cyrus beat me to it as he jumped out of the car, getting into the back seat and then fighting with the seats until both of the back rows lay flat, creating a wide surface.

"It won't be comfortable," he said, digging through a car emergency kit and pulling out a shiny gray emergency blanket. "But you can stretch out."

"What about you?" I asked as he returned to the driver's seat.

I crawled over the console and sat in the middle of the back space. Cyrus had already begun rummaging through the glove box so I barely heard his answer. "I'll sleep in the driver's seat."

Then like he was a magician, or an angel dropped from heaven above, his hand returned from the glove box and in it was a bar wrapped in crinkly paper. A granola bar. One of those cheap ones full of sugar that parents bought their kids to shut them up in the mornings.

"It expired a year ago," Cyrus said, pulling back the wrapper to read the date.

"I do not care." If we weren't so close to escape, civilization, and proper food, I'd be out rooting the wilderness for weeds. I didn't have enough knowledge about berries to keep myself alive, but I'd lick an oak tree if that's what it took to survive.

He passed the granola bar back to me without a second thought and I hastily unwrapped it. I was getting ready to take a bite before I remembered if I was as hungry, Cyrus was hungrier. I hadn't eaten in the two days they held me on the boat, but Cyrus was there longer than me.

“Let’s split it,” I offered, breaking the bar apart and giving him the slightly larger half.

He shook his head. “No, you eat it.”

Now was not the time to be a martyr. If he died, I’d be all alone. I held out the piece of granola bar and wiggled it in his face, hoping to entice him.

“Eat your half and don’t be stubborn when there’s food right in front of us.”

Cyrus laughed but eventually he took his half of the bar and shoved it in his mouth, eating it in two bites and three chews. “Once we get to the police station in the morning, you can call your mother, too,” Cyrus said when he finished chewing.

One bottle of water made it into the truck with us and I unscrewed the top, taking a drink before passing it to him. This wasn’t the time for my usual anxieties about sharing a glass with someone. I still wore the same scrubs I went to work in days earlier, and Cyrus watched me pee in a corner. We were beyond germs. I had bigger issues in life than backwash.

“My mom probably doesn’t even realize I’m missing.” Calling my mother might make things worse and cause her stress.

My mother knew I planned to relax for the week. She said she’d be hanging out with her friends. How guilty would she feel if she learned her daughter was kidnapped, rescued, and then shot at while she was out playing a few games of bridge?

Of course I’d have to tell her eventually, but a part of me thought it’d be better if she never found out. I put my mother through enough stress as a child, so she might not handle this one before she had the mental breakdown she’d always threatened me with as a teenager.

“What about your family? Do you think your brother is looking for you now?”

Cyrus chuckled. “Oh, Corbin is definitely looking for me. He’s probably currently telling off half of the security staff and demanding helicopter access. If he hasn’t already hacked all the speed cameras in America trying to run my face profile against them.”

“Your brother can do that?” He mentioned his twin was a supersmart computer guy, but that was CSI level.

Cyrus nodded. “He’s a genius. Always has been. We formed a company together in college and took on quite a few lucrative military contracts, but Corbin always keeps the good stuff for himself. He doesn’t believe the government should have too much power, you know?”

I nodded. But I wasn’t sure Corbin should have that much power, either. What if one day he used it for something bad?

I lay down in the back of the Jeep as the exhaustion hit me hard. “I want to meet him sometime,” I said, half asleep.

He yawned. “I think I’d enjoy that,” Cyrus agreed as he moved the driver’s seat back a smidge, but it quickly hit the folded seats.

I sighed and readjusted my position so we’d have more room. “Would you stop being stubborn and come back here with me?”

Cyrus peeked around the side of his chair and shook his head. “The other thing my brother and I do in our spare time is help women who are fleeing dangerous situations. Normally bad boyfriends, not kidnappings, but it’s close. Corbin sets them up with new identities and paperwork while I find them a new place to live. And you, my dear, are a woman in a precarious situation. It’s my time to be chivalrous.”

What?

Did he only see me as a damsel in distress? I’d kicked ass the last few hours. We had the Jeep Commander because of me. I scowled at Cyrus, but he didn’t notice.

Maybe it was the seaweed in my hair and the fact he watched me pee in the corner. I’d definitely never live that down, even if he promised to not judge me. “You have to

because I'd feel safer if you lay beside me, and since you're trying to be a knight in shining armor, you have to do it now."

"Beautiful, I'm not sure that's how knighthood works," Cyrus said, but he had a smile on his face and he popped his chair back into the upright position.

"It is in America. I don't remember the last time I saw a knight anyway."

We had no pillows, but I lifted the emergency heat blanket, letting Cyrus slide under it. One minute he stared at me as we lay on our sides facing one another and in the next exhaustion hit me and I fell asleep staring into his beautiful eyes.

CHAPTER 6

CYRUS

The summer sun beat at the windows of the Jeep Commander. Sunrise came early. Too early. The first second my brain came into consciousness, I felt peace. I drew in a deep breath and even smiled. The next second, everything came back to me in a rush like a wave crashing onto the beach during a tsunami.

I did a quick scan of my surroundings, my memories hit me—the kidnaping, the escape, and the shotguns.

The horribleness of our situation set in.

I panicked, remembering we were still on the run and now almost out of gas in a crap town in Florida, but then none of that mattered because next I realized that in the night Imogen moved from her position on the other side of the open space to one in between my arms. Calm found me again. She was safe.

There wasn't time to panic after that. I found solace lying there, letting the sun warm us with her head tucked on top of my arm as she snuggled close. We hadn't eaten or showered in days, but none of that mattered right then. Only the touch of her body against mine was important.

For some reason, the woman kept me calm in a moment of disaster. No one in my life had ever calmed my anxious nerves except my brother.

I shifted, trying to move my arm into a better position, and Imogen groaned. She froze and then scuttled back, putting distance between us.

“Morning,” I said with a smile.

She pushed her hair from her eyes and cringed as her fingers stuck between the strands. “Morning.”

I turned my attention to outside the Jeep's windows. The sun had risen, but the streets were quiet. The parking lot we stopped in only had one other parked car, leaving it mostly

empty. I waited for Imogen to finish running her fingers through her hair as I settled into the driver's side of the vehicle.

In that time, only a single car drove past us on the road next to the lot.

"Buckle up," I said when Imogen sat in the passenger seat and got comfortable but didn't move for her seatbelt.

"Right," she said, as if she'd been lost in thought and had forgotten about it.

I put the key back in the ignition and turned. The engine revved and then made a slow, dying sound before petering out and stalling. I tried again to the same effect. By the third, nothing happened at all except clicking noises coming from the ignition.

"Shit. Either we're too low on gas or whatever reason they had the Jeep in the lot they hadn't gotten around to fixing it yet."

Getting our car working now became step one of my new plan. I couldn't fail now.

"What are we going to do?" she asked, keeping her voice steady, but it held notes of panic.

I couldn't let her fall apart. I glanced at Imogen for a moment and I swore I saw our future. We weren't sitting together in a stolen vehicle in an unknown town in the middle of Florida but getting ready to go on a family trip packed full of summer fun. She looked at me from the passenger seat and smiled, knowing we were on another adventure.

Or the lack of food made me slightly delusional.

Regardless if I wanted there to be a future for either of us, I had to do a better job of taking care of her. So far, I'd failed spectacularly.

It was time to skip step one and move right on to step two. "Let's find the police station and get ourselves food." I had no way of paying for food, and it wasn't like I'd let

Imogen eat out of a dumpster, but I had faith I'd form a plan as we walked.

We left the car behind, with the key sitting on the driver's seat, and trudged through the little parking lot toward the small pub we'd passed the previous night. At the end of the short street, which connected to the main four-way, signs pointed in various directions as if we were searching for the way to the Emerald City.

"I don't see a sign for the police station," Imogen said, scanning the signs again to be sure, but she was correct.

"Let's go toward the diner," I said, pointing at the bottom arrow which pointed to our right and said food. We'd find food and help in the little pub.

Together we turned to the right and headed in the direction the sign pointed. I tried not to think about how we probably resembled bums. We were dirty and tired even after our night of sleep. Good thing the streets were deserted at such an early morning because they might have run us out of town.

"Can I ask a favor?" I asked when the diner came into sight a block away.

Her steps didn't even falter. We were getting into a pleasant rhythm. I supposed when life thrust you into a life-or-death situation and you somehow escaped, it created a bond.

"What?" she asked, keeping her gaze straight ahead.

I wasn't ready to admit it to Imogen, or myself, but some of my fear of going to the police wasn't all about the reach the Grandmaster had, but what it meant might happen to her. She'd go back home and then what? Not only would she be out of my life, but I wouldn't be there to keep her safe anymore, in case she needed it. I wouldn't be the man who saved her. She'd have the Florida police to thank for returning her home.

"After we finish with the police, will you come back with me to Pelican Bay until we get the whole situation figured out and they capture the people who took us?"

“Who are these people? How worried should I be, Cyrus?”

She didn't say yes, but she didn't say no either, so I saw it as a good thing. The hard part was I didn't know how to answer her question. From Imogen's story of her kidnapping, it didn't sound like they had their sights set on any one person in particular. They wanted an occupation, not a particular body.

But I didn't want to take any chances with her life. She might still be in danger.

She knew too much about the men and saw their faces. We had no guarantee they wouldn't search her out later and try to shut her up once she was home. Especially if we talked to the police.

“It's a long story, and frankly, I only learned the parts that pertain to me. How much do you know about the Chicago mob?”

She looked at me as if I'd gone absolutely crazy. It was probably fair, considering she was a nurse from North Carolina. “You already asked this, and I told you. Al Capone. And they shot people on Valentine's Day.”

“Yeah, they don't do that as much anymore. It's a lot of behind-the-scenes things. They're not even as family oriented as they used to be as more players have come into the game.”

“But why is someone from the Chicago mob kidnapping nurses from North Carolina?”

“That's where it gets fishy,” I said, our steps slowing because we'd reach the diner too quickly for the length of the story. “The Grandmaster is much more about cybercrime and white-collar stuff behind the scenes. They are not shooting people at their favorite restaurants on Valentine's Day, yet it appears one of his top players became wrapped up in a sex trafficking ring and now he's breaking all the rules.”

She scoffed and cut me off. “How do you become wrapped up in sex trafficking?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea.”

Seriously, how did people find the fucked-up things in our world? I had a general clue, but crazy shit went on behind closed doors. Rich people had been making weird deals for lifetimes.

“My brother’s new girlfriend worked in a financial department of a bank, and she somehow ended up with a thumb drive of evidence implicating a bunch of rich people doing scary and sick shit in Maine. His crimes now have reach.”

“What happened?” she asked, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“That’s her and my brother’s story to tell. But it was a lot of drama, and apparently we got sucked into it. I’m not sure how involved the Grandmaster is. He says he doesn’t sell women, but you can’t trust the mob. His story is his top guy, Bernard, went rogue. But you don’t leave the mob with your life, and since Bernard is still breathing, I don’t trust it.”

Only the future would tell us what really happened.

“It’s still doesn’t make sense. Why?”

I couldn’t answer that question either. “They took me because they thought I’m my twin, Corbin. They need him to erase the evidence he sent to the FBI, but they don’t understand. It’s too late for that, and I’m not my brother.”

We weren’t dealing with the most sophisticated high-class criminals, leaving me to believe the Grandmaster wasn’t involved. From the stories we heard, he’d never let things get this out of control. None of it made sense.

“As for you, I really don’t know, Imogen. I think it was a case of the wrong place at the wrong time.”

She nodded. “That sounds like my kind of luck.”

I held the bar door open for Imogen, letting her walk inside with me right behind her.

The smell of greasy eggs hit my stomach hard, and I grumbled. The two of us took a seat at a small round table in the corner. I never felt like a bigger failure in my entire life

than sitting across from Imogen and realizing I couldn't get her a plate piled high with food. I'd never been unable to provide for someone before, and it made me worthless.

A waitress who reminded me of my grandmother with her stern look and white hair back in a low ponytail approached us. "Can I get you two anything?"

Imogen looked at me, and it was the hardest thing to do, but I shook my head no. I had no money. They took my phone and my wallet before they threw me on the boat.

"Just water for the two of us, please?" At least we'd hydrate. "A pitcher if you have it."

The older woman looked down and shook her head at me. "No offense, but it looks like the two of you have had a rough night. Are you sure you want nothing else?"

"We have no money," Imogen said so softly I barely heard it, yet it still cracked my heart in two.

The older woman scoffed at me and placed a hand on Imogen's shoulder, giving me a nasty glare. "Honey, today the eggs are on me, but you need to find yourself a new man before this one runs you into the ground."

For a few seconds, I considered arguing. I'd done the best possible with the crappy situation, and I was the right man to keep Imogen safe and happy.

Yet.

The waitress had a point. Things weren't going as planned. I was a piece of shit. At least with her kindness, Imogen would have food. That was the most important thing.

"You have a phone I can use?" I asked before the older woman walked away.

She shook her head and her lips fell into an even deeper pinched scowl. "Behind the counter."

An older gentleman who looked like he'd been married to the woman for so long they were morphing into the same person handed me a cordless phone when I approached.

I dialed Corbin's phone number but only heard a dial tone.

"Does this phone work?" I asked, turning the phone off and then back on again.

"There's no long distance on that line," the older man said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Are you trying to call out of state on my phone?" He ran his fingers through his long, crinkled beard and I handed the phone back.

I'd do many things for Imogen's safety and her honor, but I didn't have the strength to get into a brawl with the man behind the bar. "Can you call the police, please?"

I was out of options and the best way to keep Imogen safe at that point was to get us to the police station. I crossed my fingers they were better than the small-town police in Pelican Bay.

When I returned to the table, two plates of eggs sat on the dirty piece of wood. Imogen grabbed hers and took a bite before I had my butt on the bench.

"She said you have to pay for your eggs, but mine are free," Imogen said with a smile before she shoveled more food in her mouth.

I pushed my plate close to hers. "I'm not hungry," I said, hoping she would take the food and eat her fill.

Instead of grabbing my plate with two runny eggs on the top, she looked at me with concern. "Not being hungry is a bad sign, Cyrus. You need to eat."

A mini plate on the side of our table had four pieces of toast. I grabbed the top one and nibbled on the edge, but it tasted like stale dry bread and not the delicious first bite like I expected.

Imogen finished her plate of eggs, and I pushed mine closer to her while I finished my piece of toast. I picked up the second when a police car pulled up and parked in front of the bar. The toast crunched between my teeth and I breathed a sigh of relief, blowing crumbs onto the table.

Finally, we had time to tell our story, contact my brother, and get back to Maine.

CHAPTER 7

IMOGEN

The cop banged his coffee cup against the table and I jerked.

I'd never been scared of the police before, but seeing the lights on the police car as it parked in front of the bar made my stomach fall. The lights weren't even on, and my stomach was full of eggs. But something wasn't right. I pushed off the fear by blaming Cyrus's worries for making me nervous. Police were our friends.

Still, Cyrus and I tracked the uniformed officer as he walked in the restaurant, and I couldn't shake the feeling my doom walked through the door with him.

I should have paid attention to my gut.

After an hour in their interrogation room, I learned the police were not the saviors I'd expected.

"Are you sure you and Mr. Kensington didn't decide to add excitement to your relationship by stealing a car and going on a joyride after a night of drinking and drugs?" the officer asked as he leaned across the metal table separating us.

What was everyone's obsession with drugs in Florida? Did people come from all over to do drugs in the state? The officer said I wasn't under arrest, but it sure sounded that way.

I'd told him my story twice already, but he didn't listen. Not a single word. He stared at me as if what I'd said was the plot of an action movie, and I'd confused my facts from my drug-induced haze.

I leaned across the table too, not to get closer to him but because I couldn't keep my body upright any longer. "I told you. We didn't steal the car for fun but to escape the men who kidnapped us."

He promised he had an officer looking into our story, but he never left the room to tell them my story. How could they be looking into it if they didn't know it? He just kept asking

me the same questions and waiting for me to trip up on the facts.

And even with me telling the truth, with each time I had to recount the story, I'd eventually get something wrong. My brain grew fuzzy. The eggs made me slightly sick from eating too quickly. It's not like I'd used a notebook and written down what happened as we did everything.

The officer's face grew red, and he leaned forward so far that the metal table scratched on the floor as he pushed it against me. "And I told you there is no marina where you say you swam from a ship."

He was going slightly bald on the top of his head, and his face was not a friendly one. This wasn't a guy walking the beach in a children's neighborhood. He'd done hard time in law enforcement. And he also seemed to assume I was someone he needed to put behind bars.

I didn't know what he wanted me to tell him. He'd heard the truth twice now. I couldn't get any more truthy.

The angry man stood up unexpectedly, and I flinched as if he might hit me, but all that happened was his chair scraping against the concrete floor and causing ripples of a headache in my brain. "I am just about done with you out-of-towners who come for a bit of fun and then get too wild. You're stealing cars and giving the great state of Florida grief."

I was tired, too tired, so I didn't expect to get angry, but the pissy police officer must've shared some of his pissyness with me because I couldn't stop from yelling back. "I'm not giving Florida grief!"

If anything, Florida had given me grief.

I didn't ask to be here, and I wanted to go home.

Who did this guy think he was? I never asked to be kidnapped and dropped here. Who wanted to steal a car and make a run for their lives? It was not my idea of a good time. Someone shot at us. I had to pee in a corner.

We didn't ask for any of this. I didn't consider any of this fun.

Hell, I didn't even like Florida. After the way they behaved, I'd never set foot back in the state ever again. I wouldn't go farther south than Georgia for the rest of my life. Florida could shove their tourist dollars where the sun didn't shine.

"Don't you raise your voice at me, young lady. What drugs did you and your boyfriend take?" He stood from his chair but leaned over the table into my space.

His last question set me off. How did you show up at the police station and tell them you'd been kidnapped, barely survived with your life during your escape, and the officer demanded you tell him what drugs you took?

If the police didn't believe us, who would?

I swallowed hard, trying to hold back the tears, but it didn't work. When I answered, I had to snuffle before I got the words out. "We didn't take any drugs."

The officer pounded his fist on the table, shaking the entire thing as the sound ricocheted off the tiny walls in the interrogation room. I jumped. The noise reminded me of shots from the gunfire.

Why did they have me in an interrogation room in the first place? Shouldn't I have been out in a chair with a blanket and maybe a cup of hot chocolate? From the moment he picked us up, we'd been treated like common criminals. Who took drugs wearing scrubs?

"I can't take any more of your lies. You sat here in my police station and lied to us. Made up crazy stories to accuse the residents of Florida of shooting at you? You disgust me. You and everyone like you."

The tears fell freely. No one had ever told me I disgusted them. Especially not when I'd been the one kidnapped. In fact, the officer was so sure I was the scum of the earth that he made me question myself. Did I use my vacation to come to Florida, meet a hot guy at the beach, and take drugs? Had my memories become distorted by a substance so I didn't remember what happened properly?

No, I was a nurse. I helped people and saw the effects of drugs. I barely took a Tylenol unless I absolutely needed it.

“You sit here and think about what you’ve done. When you’re ready to tell the truth, you can lean your head out of the room and holler for someone in the hall.”

I expected him to say something else. To lob a threat my way or accuse me of lying again, but the officer gave me one last repulsed look and then left, letting the door slam behind him.

Alone, cold, and scared, I didn’t know what we were going to do. How much jail time did you get for a stolen car? My mother might kill me and then have her meltdown.

I rested my arms on the table and then laid my head on top of them. I’d been fighting a headache from the bright lights since around the first time I ended the retelling of our story.

It was impossible to know how much time had passed, but eventually the door opening pulled me from my thoughts of prison life. Cyrus’s face peeked around the corner and then he stepped into the room.

He didn’t look nearly as upset as I did, but he still had the same clothes on, so they hadn’t given him any special treatment either. “Come on. We are leaving,” he said, waving me toward the door, which he held open with his foot.

I shook my head. We couldn’t walk out of a police station. “We can’t leave.”

It wasn’t the principal’s office. You didn’t leave until they said you were free to go.

Cyrus scowled at me but his look wasn’t anywhere near as unpleasant as the officer who vacated the room. “Did they read you your rights and put you under arrest?”

It had been a few long days, so I took a full thirty seconds to consider what he’d asked. I reviewed every interaction I had with the officer and then another few seconds to check my memories once more. Thirty seconds when you’re really thinking hard is a lifetime.

But I spoke the truth when I answered, “No.”

The officer never told me I was under arrest. They didn’t read me any Miranda Rights. And when I thought about it, he never even told me I couldn’t leave.

Cyrus shrugged as if he figured that’s what I’d say. “Then you, beautiful, are free to go.”

I stood from the chair for the first time in over an hour and my legs ached with the sudden movement. We had food and water, but not nearly enough to replenish what we lost during our time in captivity. A visit to the hospital to receive a bag of IV fluids would do us both wonders.

“Where are we going to go?” I asked, meeting him at the room’s doorway. With no vehicle or money, how would we get out of Florida? I wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

“They won’t let me call Corbin, which is suspicious. Something fishing is going on in this police station. We’re leaving right now and I’ll figure out the rest later.”

We both peeked out into the hallway, which appeared empty, but Cyrus took the first step into the space to test our assumption. I was a full step or two behind him. “What about the car owner?”

Cyrus turned, completely stopped walking, and looked at me as if I’d lost my mind. He opened his mouth once, closed it, and his head shook a little. Cyrus might not care about the man or woman we stole a vehicle from, but I didn’t want that on my conscience for the rest of my life.

He turned, began walking again, and answered me halfway down the long corridor. “Once we’re safe, I’ll find the owner and send him a check so big he’ll be able to buy a brand-new car.”

I wasn’t sure how Cyrus planned to figure out the owner of the vehicle, but it didn’t seem the time to ask any more questions. I’d already held us up long enough.

The end of the hallway split off into two new hallways, and Cyrus peeked around the corner of both of them before

deciding to continue straight. Ahead of us was a door to the outside, and it appeared he planned to lead us right out of it.

Closed doors lined either side of the hallway. Probably more interrogation rooms, and as we walked closer to the end, Cyrus's steps increased.

"If we're free to go, then why are we sneaking out?" I asked right before he pushed through the door.

Cyrus turned back to me with his hands resting on the door rail. "Better safe than arrested," he said, using his back to hold open the door and push me out into the warm Florida afternoon.

CHAPTER 8

CYRUS

The door opened at the back of the police station and I put my body in front of Imogen so if a hail of bullets met us as we escaped, they'd hit me first. Thankfully, the only thing on the other side of the building was blinding Florida sunshine and July heat.

At least for the first few seconds. After that, everything rolled downhill.

“We need to find a road out of town. Maybe we can hitchhike, and if we get far enough away from the station, I'll call my brother and find a meeting point,” I said to Imogen as we walked through the parking lot, looking for the best direction to escape.

Bushes surrounded the space and grew so thick together you couldn't run through them. A quick scan showed there were two ways out of the lot—one entrance and one exit. We were closer to the exit to our left, so I grabbed Imogen's hand and directed her that way at the exact time a familiar car turned into the lot.

Imogen jerked, stopping our movements. “Cyrus, isn't it the car from last night?” she asked, but I'd already determined it was.

There weren't too many nineties Buicks still on the road and the coincidence of us seeing the same-colored vehicle two nights in a row was hard to ignore. “Shit, beautiful, it is.”

She darted, tugging me back, but I turned and the two of us walked as calmly as possible toward the police station. I didn't know if the police would help us, but I felt safe enough that the men in the car wouldn't shoot us in broad daylight at the back of a police station.

I hoped the cops put our names through the system. If they had, they'd pop up and hit the search my brother was undoubtedly doing to locate me. He'd be here to rescue us in no time.

Once we were in the system, we were practically safe. By that point, even if these cops were working for someone else, we'd be too public for them to do anything to shut us up.

There was nowhere for us to go and I tugged on the door, trying to get back into the police station, but it didn't budge. Tall shrubs lined the outside of the brick building and I dragged Imogen behind the closest one with me.

We huddled together, each of us breathing shallowly to not make extra noise. The bush had small holes without foliage, allowing me to see out the middle of it. It wasn't a magnificent view of the parking lot, but enough to watch what happened.

"Cyrus, those are the guys from last night," Imogen said, her nails biting deep into my flesh with worry.

I didn't want to scare her more, but our situation just got a lot worse. "I knew something weird was going on at the station."

Which police department picked up two people, refused them drinks or phone calls, and then threatened them with jail time? Even if they didn't believe our story, they should have at least pretended longer. The lack of any fake compassion was startling.

"How did they get here so fast?" she whispered directly into my ear.

Now wasn't the time to contemplate the spectacular way that made me feel.

I readjusted my feet, so it was easier to crouch as we watched the two men get out of the car. "I have no idea, and I don't plan to ask."

She nodded in agreement and I put my hand over the top of hers to comfort us both.

"We'll wait until they go into the building and then make a run for it." It was the only plan I had.

Since the back door was locked, they'd have to circle around to the front of the building to gain entrance to the

station. As soon as they cleared the side, we'd hightail it out of the lot. We wouldn't have time or enough luck to find a car with a set of keys dangling from the ignition and a "steal me" sign propped to the top. We had to run for the exit and hope we made it a few blocks away before anyone realized we were missing. Then we'd blend in until we found a ride out of here.

Once I got Imogen away from the police, we'd look for a highway or other large stretch of road and then hitchhike the rest of the way out of town. My trust of the everyday man shrank considerably with each passing second, but I'd put my faith in a random driver more than any of these cops.

It was a crappy situation with a crappy solution, but we had to take our chances.

The assholes took their time, each of them waiting by the side of the car to finish their cigarettes before tossing them on the ground with a quick stomp. After the second one's body cleared the building, I counted to three and then nodded to Imogen, getting her to stand.

We walked with cautious steps out of the parking lot, but once we cleared the road bushes, Imogen tried to pick up her pace and run.

I held her back. "Running might draw too much attention."

"Right," she said, pulling her pace to walk beside me but not dropping my hand. I didn't let go of hers either. Having her close enough to touch worked as a constant reminder I had her with me.

We needed to get as far away from them as fast as possible. But one guy wearing a dirty pair of jeans and a woman in a scuffed pair of scrubs both looking like they hadn't showered in days would draw too much attention in the small town. We'd be back in police custody in no time.

The walk was quick, but the twenty minutes seemed like an eternity until we reached the outskirts of town and a two-lane highway headed north. It was risky, but I didn't see any

other options, and as Imogen and I stepped from the tree line to the side of the road, I stuck out my thumb.

“What?” she asked when I chuckled to myself.

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

How did I explain to her I had more than enough money to buy the entire town and all the people in it, but here I was standing on the road with my thumb out, trying to hitch a ride? Money really wasn't the answer to all problems. Life did a number on you sometimes. Two months ago, I'd been planning our next trip to Europe and now I just wanted to get out of the state of Florida. Alive.

A few cars passed before one finally slowed—a big semi that crunched up the gravel as it pulled to the side of the road. The driver jumped out unexpectedly, making his way to the other side of his cab and did something to a back tire.

When he finished kicking the tire, he stood back to stare at it, shaking his head until he finally spoke. “Figured this was a good time to check on Baby's tire. You two need a ride?”

“Yes,” Imogen answered for me.

The trucker looked to her and then at me, and his eyebrows rose. “Where are you two headed?”

“Anywhere that's far from here,” I said, taking a step closer.

The trucker shrugged and then held out his hand to shake mine. “Name's Bird.”

“Cyrus and this is Imogen,” I said, using my head to point toward her.

He nodded once and then pointed to his cab. “Make yourself comfortable in Baby. We're headed north.”

I waited until he crossed over to the other side of his truck, getting in before I opened the door and helped Imogen into the tall rig. There wasn't enough strength in the State of Florida to ask why he named his semi Baby.

Behind the two front seats, he had a bed with the comforter thrown about it. I asked Bird and then took a seat on the edge of the bed between the driver and passenger seats.

“Don’t forget your seatbelt,” I said, even though Imogen had already reached for the buckle.

We’d have many things to joke about from this trip from hell, but thinking back to her buckling her seatbelt in a stolen vehicle would always make me smile. I couldn’t do many things to keep her safe, but at least she had that in case of an accident.

The ride was tense for the first few minutes. I hated not being able to see anything good from my position in the middle of the truck, and I sat tensely waiting for sirens and the sounds of the police to come charging after us. Eventually we were far enough out of town, I relaxed and started a conversation.

“Where are you headed?” I asked as a sign for northbound interstate passed by the window.

The driver turned for a fraction of a second to look at me. “I’m stopping at the state line in about an hour and a half. I filled up my log sheet. You’ll either need to find another ride or sleep somewhere else until I’m good to drive again. Damn regulations.”

“Sounds good. How long before you’re back on the road?”

“I’ll be driving again after a short ten-hour mandated break,” he said with a laugh.

By ten hours, I hoped we’d both be well on our way back to Pelican Bay. With a nice mattress underneath us and a shower. “We really appreciate this ride.”

Bird nodded. “My wife says picking up hitchers will get me in trouble one day, but I can’t pass up someone in need of help.”

Imogen smiled at the old man as he ran his fingers through his short beard. My stubble was getting long enough

to almost be a start of a beard. “That’s very sweet of you. Few people help others these days,” she said.

“No, the world’s gone mad. My daughter tried to hitchhike her way from Arizona all the way to New York when she was eighteen. Met this loser of a guy online and decided they had to be together. I like to think I’m doing my part to help people when they need a helping hand like my daughter did once.”

“Did it work out for your daughter?” Imogen asked.

He shook his head and his voice turned gruff. “No, he turned out to be an even bigger loser than I realized. She got knocked up and three months later, he left her. I had to buy her a bus ticket to get her home. It’s why I consider it my duty to warn women away from men who get them into trouble.”

That time he turned around completely in his chair, took his eyes off the road and scowled at me.

I frowned right back. What was it with people and assuming I somehow got us into this mess? Sure, Imogen and I were in the same situation, but I got myself in trouble on my own and she found her way here by accident. If anything, I was her savior, and I was sick and tired of not being appreciated by random strangers.

Fine, he had a point.

I sucked.

I had almost a billion dollars in the bank and enough family connections to do whatever I wanted in life, but I couldn’t rescue us from this mess fast enough.

It was time to call in reinforcements. “You have a phone?” I grated out the question between clenched teeth, but it needed to be done. I had to get a hold of Corbin.

Bird handed back a smart phone with a picture of his daughter, holding a baby who had to be his grandchild as the screen saver. I punched in the code he told me and found the keypad. I had exactly one phone number memorized.

My brother’s.

I did it because I never knew when I'd find myself in a shitty situation and would need his number. I'd laughed at Corbin's insistence we memorize numbers originally, but now I wanted to thank him. From here on out, I'd never call his preparations overkill.

The phone rang once and then he answered. "Who the fuck is this?" His gravelly voice sounded like he had a few shit days too. I grinned, and bit my bottom lip. I loved my asshole brother.

"Corbin?" I asked because it sounded so unlike him I didn't recognize my twin's voice. We drove past a farm along the highway and the smell of fresh animal dung made me crinkle my nose as it invaded the cab.

"Cyrus!" he screamed so loudly I pulled the phone away from my ear but then had to put it back quickly because he started talking and asking a hundred questions at once.

I didn't have enough strength, sleep, or food to deal with giving him the entire story now. He'd end up asking me to repeat it anyway, so I'd rather wait until we were in person.

"Listen, Corbin, there's no time right now. We're going to be at a truck stop in Valdosta. It's on the state line of Georgia and Florida. Can you meet us there?"

He didn't hesitate in his answer. "Fuck yes. I'm texting the pilot now."

A pilot. The words soothed my soul. It was a reminder of our money and ease of escape when we had it available, two of which I'd have my hands on soon. I tried not to be materialistic, but damn, it was nice to have a pilot on hand when you needed one.

"After about an hour and a half, I won't be available at this number, but we'll stay at the truck stop."

"What happened to your cell phone? I was trying to track it but it said you were still in Portland. We found it in the trunk of a car that's been driving in circles for the last four days."

I forgot about the trunk. "Look, it's a long story. Can you meet us at the station?"

“Of course. Ridge and I will be there together. Does this involve Bernard?”

“Pretty sure it does. Also, can you bring clothing for two?” My brother wanted to know what went on, but I only wanted to make sure Imogen was safe.

“What the fuck went on with you?” he asked one last time, sounding exacerbated by my lack of answers, but sitting on the bed in the back of the eighteen-wheeler was not the time to fill Corbin in on everything that happened the last few days. We’d get ourselves promptly kicked out of our cushy ride.

“You have no idea. Just meet us there as fast as possible.”

I wanted to stay on the phone and talk to my brother until we reached the truck stop. His voice brought me comfort and the realization we were safe. The only other person who’d been able to do that was Imogen, and now I’d do my part to keep her safe.

As much as I needed to speak with him, I had more important duties, like keeping Imogen safe and an eye on the road. We hung up quickly, and I passed the cell phone back to the trucker with a thank you.

CHAPTER 9

IMOGEN

I went through most of my life never suspicious of people, but right then everyone looked shady. I didn't know if I'd ever regain my trust in society.

And I hated it.

Before all this, I'd been a nice person. Even one of those annoying positive morning people. Companies made rude cups about people like me. I didn't care. In fact, I considered it one of my finer points. There were worse things in life than being a morning person. Like drug dealers and corrupt cops.

You had two options in life—go through it and see everything negatively or find a new opportunity.

I tried to find the opportunity as much as possible. Unfortunately, it was pretty damn hard to find one in our current situation.

Deep in my soul, I believed people were inherently good.

But lately, I'd been surrounded by a bunch of assholes.

Maybe most of the assholes in America hung out in Florida. I had a lot of questions swirling through my thoughts as I sat in the comfortable passenger chair of the semi and we rambled down the road.

Being lost in my thoughts didn't make me very talkative, but I did my best.

“And that's why her and my grandson now live in Georgia,” Bird said with a slight smile on his lips as he spoke of his family.

“Your daughter sounds like she has a good head on her shoulders.”

His smile grew. “She does. I only find her taste in men lacking. It seems to be a problem for smart women,” he said, not hiding the way he glanced at the man currently sitting between our two seats.

I bit my bottom lip, not sure what to say. Cyrus's frown deepened.

Hey, I said I wasn't feeling talkative, but I didn't stay silent the entire drive. If Bird wanted to tell me about his family, I always had a good listening ear. It was the right thing to do.

Besides, driving around in his big truck all the time had to be lonely. He was probably excited to have someone to talk with. As long as he was the one telling stories and not asking many questions about why we were smelly and hitchhiking through Florida, I'd handle the conversation.

From the lack of words coming from Cyrus, he didn't necessarily feel the same way.

"Sometimes it takes the ladies a bit to find the good ones," I said, sending Cyrus a wink. He scowled more. "You need to tell your wife that she deserves that vacation, but you should go with her. Make it a family excursion and visit the grandbaby."

Bird's wife wanted him to take time off and visit their daughter in Georgia, but he didn't think it was the right season to do it. Men were often wrong. You had to make time for fun and family.

After surviving my kidnapping but not yet quite being out of the woods, I started valuing time with family while you had them. I'd never again have too many vacation days saved.

The older man rubbed his chin. "Maybe I could consider it an adventure. Life always needs a few more of those."

Ugh. My life definitely did not need any more adventures. In fact, I hoped to never have another adventure ever again. After Cyrus and I returned to safety, I planned to settle down and never leave my house.

Bird used his turn signal and left the freeway at the next exit as we made a large curve, which wrapped around and deposited us at the end of the street. A huge rest stop sprawled out ahead. Except it wasn't only a rest stop. It was a huge truck stop like he'd said. A row of big rigs parked two deep sat

to the left of the parking lot, and on the right sprawled a large building with more neon signs than Vegas.

The most exciting one had a faucet dripping drops of water and the word showers blinking on and off. Man, I wanted a shower.

I needed a shower.

It took being stolen from my hospital parking garage and peed on a ship, not sure if I'd live or die, to make me appreciate things like hot water.

Showers.

Cold water.

Ice cubes.

Man, I missed ice cubes.

I couldn't take my eye off the flashing sign as we said thank you to Bird. Cyrus asked for his information so he could send him something as a thank you when he made it back to Maine. I imagined it was a big fat check, like he promised everyone else.

Bird refused, but eventually Cyrus got him to hand over a small business card. We gave him one last goodbye, and I leaned in for a quick hug, promising that we didn't need any more rides.

When we left this truck stop, it would be for the safety of Maine. I hadn't planned to go with Cyrus that far north, but frankly, this entire thing was way over my head. Cyrus explained the situation to me, but I still didn't understand how a rogue employee of a Chicago mobster had a cargo ship outside North Carolina. Who were these people?

I was not a good person to have as a heroine in an action flick because the plot lines were too twisted and thick for me to follow. After this experience, I was going to have more sympathy for female main characters. If I lived in an action movie, I'd run around screaming all the time.

If we weren't fighting for our lives every second, I'd be currently screaming. Actually, as soon as we were safe, I

might let out a scream or two. For good measure.

We didn't have time to draw attention to ourselves at the moment, however, so the screaming had to wait until later.

A shriek broke through the sounds of idling trucks. I twisted around.

Was that me?

No.

Pretty sure it wasn't. I'd thought about it, but hadn't acted on it. Cyrus glanced at me and then back to where I thought the sound came from. Whew. Definitely not me then.

Whoever it was, unaware of the attention screaming would get you, let out another roar.

It sounded like a man and a scream of anger, not fear.

My brain finally caught up, and I panicked, darting behind Cyrus and holding on to the back of his shirt as I tried to push him forward. I hated to sacrifice him, but he had a better chance of surviving.

Look, it wasn't one of my finer moments, but I'd made it all the way from Florida and didn't plan to die at a truck stop in Georgia. Like I said, not a good heroine.

And Cyrus didn't seem to mind the way I huddled behind him or even that I pushed him forward, so I figured he wouldn't hold it against me. He laughed and turned around, bringing me into his arms, where I went willingly. I'd barely known the man for a few days, but it didn't seem to matter. We bonded during our time together and as long as he was okay with me holding on to him like a lifeline, I didn't plan to let go.

The scream cut off, and I peeked out from underneath Cyrus's shoulder to see where he watched. Two big dudes. And seriously, I mean big dudes. They might have been wrestlers if they'd had on tights and Speedos.

They circled around each other with arms up and fist held high. An argument happened as we watched. Both of their

mouths moved, but we were too far away to hear the words over the rumbles of the trucks.

“Should we do something?” I asked Cyrus, my attention focused fully on the argument happening in front of us.

He shook his head. “I don’t plan to get in the middle. We have enough trouble. Let’s not invite more.”

He had a point, and I maintained my position beside him, waiting to see what happened next. The two men continued to step around one another, and then, like if the one was a snake, the shorter of the two struck and lashed out with his fist, hitting the bigger one square in the face. The other guy, who had to be six feet tall, blinked once, twisted on his feet, and then fell flat on his face like a tree.

My instincts kicked in and I ran over to the man lying dazed on the ground while the other walked away without another word. Cyrus followed behind me and caught up an inch or two away from the hurt giant.

“What the hell, beautiful?” he asked, trying to get in my way.

I leaned back and disentangled myself from Cyrus. “He needs help.”

Duh. I became a nurse to help people. Even if I was in a crap load of trouble myself, I didn’t plan to let the poor guy bleed out or something. Not that the punch probably caused significant damage, but you never knew and he might have a concussion.

I got down to my knees, the concrete biting my skin through the thin fabric of my scrubs. The man sat up, shaking his head and looking confused. I grabbed his wrist and checked his pulse, staring into his eyes to check the dilation of his pupils.

“Do you know where you are?” I asked.

He glanced at me with his lips pursed and his eyebrows pinched together. It seemed like he was looking past me rather than at me. Finally, his eyes widened, and he shook his wrist free of my hold.

“Of course I know where I am. And next time I won’t let that lobster boy get the better of me.”

I leaned back on my haunches. “Lobster boy?”

He grunted. “Yeah, that’s what I call him. Caught him sleeping with my daughter three weeks ago. He told me he was her lobster. I don’t know what the fuck that means, but I’m not letting him do weird shit with my offspring. Next time I see him, I’m going to take his ass down.”

I bit my bottom lip to stop myself from laughing. How in the world did I explain to him what being someone’s lobster meant without regurgitating the entire relationship between Ross and Rachel on the show *Friends*?

Cyrus grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet at the same time the man stood up as well. I just worked out what I wanted to say to explain the situation as best as possible, but the man stomped off, waving his hand and protesting he was fine.

“Men,” I said, shaking my head.

“Are you sure you didn’t volunteer to get on that ship in North Carolina?” Cyrus asked as he twisted his fingers with mine and started walking toward the truck stop.

I stopped, and the tension ended his movement as well. “What? You think I’m crazy?”

He shrugged but had a smile on his face. “I’m just saying, are you positive they didn’t have a bunch of puppies in a van?” He cocked his head to the side, and his smile deepened.

I scowled. “No!” Even if they did, I was a cat person.

Cyrus laughed. “Too soon?”

I wanted to stay angry, but I couldn’t when he looked at me that way. “Much,” I said around a laugh. “I got into medicine to help people. No one can take that from me.” Not even assholes from Chicago.

His lips pressed together with an indescribable expression. “I admire that about you.”

Okay. Weird. I considered asking for more details. To take his answer and pick it apart word by word to figure out what he meant, but Cyrus continued toward the shop's door.

CHAPTER 10

CYRUS

I didn't mean to drag Imogen in behind me, but it became imperative to get her away from all the truckers. Who knew how long before another fight broke out? The woman had a savior complex and I couldn't be sure she wouldn't run at it and get herself hurt in the process. I'd only half been joking about my comment with the puppies.

Even though I was clearly leading the way, she kept pace with me. I pushed through the truck stop doors and passed a souped-up convenient station. They had candy, chips, sandwiches, and even a few racks of clothing. Everything you might need for a long drive.

Attached to that was a restaurant on the far side of the building with a large open arch, letting us gain entry. I tapped the top of an empty booth, hoping Imogen would take a cue and sit down, but she continued to follow right behind me as I approached the main food counter.

"Do you have any messages for Cyrus Kensington?" I asked the woman who stood behind a long bar where men with trucker hats ate sandwiches and huge helpings of French fries.

The woman looked at me for a moment with her arms over her chest, as if she wasn't sure she should answer. "You're Cyrus?"

My senses were already on high alert, but her lackluster greeting had them heightening. "Yes. Why?"

The woman shrugged and dropped her hands. "I expected someone else... A mullet," she mumbled under her breath.

The woman definitely did not look old enough to be making a Billy Ray Cyrus joke, and I didn't have the energy to quibble back when it was possible she held so much of my future at stake. "Messages?"

She nodded, as if remembering why I asked in the first place. "Right. Your friend said to stay here, and he prepaid an

eight-thousand-dollar tab. I'm not sure what you plan to do with thousands in this joint, but we run a clean establishment. No drugs," she said, staring right into my eyes and looking like an angry mother, even though there was no way she was old enough to have children.

"Of course not," Imogen promised, pushing past me and putting herself into the conversation. "Can we use this money on food?"

I'd order Imogen every item on the menu. And then double dessert.

The woman of no discriminant age nodded from her place behind the counter. "Yes, and anything from the shop. We're on the same account book."

What the woman said shocked Imogen so much she side stepped, hitting me with her body. "Showers?"

Her question sounded so hopeful that if the woman replied no, I'd have purchased the entire shower facility so she could take as many as she wanted.

Imogen leaned over the counter, getting as close to the woman as possible before she took a step back. Her smile was bright, and it looked as if her body almost shook with anticipation. I loved to see her happy, even if it was over something as simple as a shower.

The woman who helped us didn't seem as enthralled by Imogen's response. In fact, she might have found her a little crazy. She took another step back, putting at least a few feet between them as if she expected Imogen to jump across the counter and shake her if she said no.

Actually, it wasn't a horrible idea to put a little space between us.

"Yes, but there are two shower facilities. Separate showers," she said, looking at me.

Why did everyone look to me as if I was the bad guy in the situation? Did someone write on my forehead?

I didn't have time to ask because Imogen turned around with newly found energy and this time she clasped my hand, dragging us toward the shop where all the miscellaneous items were for sale.

I worried we'd to plow right through the place and end up to the other doors, but she stopped next to one of the large circular racks of random clothing. "Can we use your money to buy fresh clothes?"

Eight thousand dollars would probably buy every piece of clothing the store had for sale. "Beautiful," I said, squeezing her fingers and making sure she didn't let go. "You can get whatever you want. If I need more cash, I'll call Corbin."

Imogen dropped my hand to use both of hers to rifle through the racks of clothing. Most of the colors were bright neon, and I cringed every time she pulled one out from the circular rack and stared at it before putting it back in.

"Ohhh, Cyrus," she said, and I guessed from the sound of her voice I wouldn't like what she had to say. "This will look so good on you." She emphasized *so good* and I almost closed my eyes when she flipped the shirt around to show me, but I didn't want to take my eyes off her smile.

I should have.

My mouth fell open and my eyes squinted, trying to make sure I saw it properly. The shirt wasn't offensive from the back because it was plain white, but the front had a printed fake tux, complete with muscle shadows.

I stepped forward and touched the fabric of the shirt to check we were still in reality and I wasn't passed out dead somewhere after landing in hell. "Oh wow, these are real?"

I thought they only made them for ironic scenes in movies. Were people in America really walking around in fake tux shirts?

"I don't know what you're talking about," Imogen said, clearly enjoying this more than she should. "You'd look hot in this."

"Hot, huh?"

She nodded enthusiastically, but her smirk told the actual story.

How did this woman who'd been kidnapped days ago and was still technically on the run for her life find such pleasure out of a crappy shirt? If me walking around in a fake tux brought this kind of smile to her face, I would do it easily.

But I wanted something out of it in return. A Kensington didn't make a deal without first making sure they got their fair share.

"Fine, I'll wear the fake tux if you wear this shirt," I said, pointing to a rack of shirts hanging off one of the store walls. It was a complementary design to mine, if you were having a beach wedding and the woman wanted to be married in her bathing suit rather than a wedding dress.

The shirt was white all around the edges, but in the middle was a set of large fake boobs barely covered in the teeny tiny bikini. Imogen didn't need the fake assets to make hers great, but I wanted a fair trade.

Rather than get mad, she only laughed harder and grabbed the shirt from the wall, getting it at least two sizes too big. "I'll do it if you do it."

I said nothing out loud, but for her I'd do pretty much anything. Plus, I couldn't wait to see the shock on Corbin's face when he came to pick us up and saw me wearing the truck stop gear. Between Imogen smiling and Corbin's reaction when he saw me, it would be totally worth it.

On a rack beside the shirts were small bags of various items we'd need for a shower. Some kits were small with shampoo and conditioner, while others got bigger with washcloths and towels. I grabbed two of the largest options and then found Imogen looking at shorts.

She selected two pairs, one for each of us, and thankfully bypassed all the bright neon-colored ones with words on the back for two simple black mesh pairs. We were definitely going to look like a matching couple.

I gathered up all of our items and laid them on the counter back at the restaurant to have our purchases taken off the tab.

“Did you want coins for showers?” The woman answered. “You get seven minutes for every coin that you put into the machine outside the stall.”

We needed many coins. All the shower coins.

“Give us two of each,” I said, not sure I’d ever showered in only seven minutes in my life.

Imogen leaned forward, looking back at me once quickly before she spoke. “Make it three.”

She glanced at me as if I’d tell the woman no, but if she wanted a twenty-one-minute shower, she could have it. I’d buy her a forty-two-minute shower if she asked. If she wanted to stay under the water until my brother made it here to pick us up, I’d buy her as many shower coins as she needed.

“Okay, that took \$157.25 off of your eight-thousand-dollar credit,” the woman said, raising her eyebrow at me with unspoken sarcasm.

I didn’t take any offense and gathered up our items, leading Imogen back to the showers. I planned to scrub for the full twenty-one minutes.

Getting clean consumed my thoughts, but when we reached the space and had to break apart to enter the men’s and women’s shower area, I suffered a slight panic. The woman hadn’t been out of my eyesight besides sleeping for days. Now I’d let her walk into a bathroom by herself?

Some might call me crazy possessive, but they didn’t survive a kidnapping and flee a ship only to be chased down to a police station in Florida. If we survived this, I’d put GPS on both of us.

She took a step past the opening for the women’s bathroom and I reached out, stopping her. “Beautiful, wait.”

“Is something wrong?” she asked, panic in her words as she searched the area for anything weird.

“No, but if you’re in there and anything seems fishy, run into the men’s room. I don’t care what anyone says. And after your shower, stay here if you’re done first.”

One side of Imogen’s lips tipped up into a slight smile and she patted my arm. “I promise.”

I took a deep breath, but it didn’t help as I watched her turn around and then lost sight of her in the women’s restroom area. A new fear settled deep in my bones. I waited a few seconds to be sure I didn’t hear screaming and then left for my own facilities.

Except in my bathroom, men occupied both showers of stalls, forcing me to lean up against the wall, waiting for someone to finish. The seconds ticked by as a spray of the water echoed in the tiled room.

Finally, the water shut off becoming only a trickle and then the curtain was thrown back and a man, completely nude with all his bits hanging out, strutted from the shower area sans towel until he reached the locker on the far side of the space.

I averted my eyes as quickly as possible and then slipped into the shower area waiting to undress until I had the curtain closed. I pumped in my three coins, knowing I needed to shower quicker to not leave Imogen waiting.

The first drops of water to hit my head felt like the most amazing thing to happen in my entire life. The dirt tracked off my skin and I kicked my jeans into the corner, letting them get wet because I would not bring them with me when I left. So I didn’t care what happened to them.

Imogen and I were almost safe. We were so close to the finish line and getting back to Pelican Bay where Ridge, his men, my brother, and I’d keep her safe. We already planned to go after Bernard, but now we’d stop at nothing to get our vengeance. You didn’t kidnap a Kensington and random women from their workplaces without facing revenge.

We’d burn everything to the end of the earth to guarantee the police put Bernard behind bars. And then if the evidence

supported it, I'd go after the Grandmaster next.

I toweled off in the shower space and dressed quickly, dumping all my leftovers in the trashcan on the way out. Excited to see what Imogen looked like, I smiled but quickly frowned when I found the space outside of the women's restroom empty.

I peeked my head into the space on the female side to see into the restroom because of the curve and yelled her name. "Imogen!"

There was no response.

I walked down two aisles in the gas station section of the rest stop and scanned all the corners to see if she decided to shop more while she waited.

People turned to look at me in my frantic state as my gaze darted back and forth searching for her, but none of the people on this side of the restaurant were Imogen.

I stopped, putting my hands on my knees, leaning over to get my breath as the panic of losing her stole the oxygen from my lungs.

CHAPTER 11

IMOGEN

“Do you have straws?” I asked the waitress right before she walked away.

She turned back and smiled at me, patting my hand on the table. “Sure thing, honey. If there’s anything else you need, just let me know.”

I nodded and then my attention quickly fell back to the array of deliciousness she left for me. I wanted to dive in and eat as quickly as possible, but that was the fastest way to make myself sick. Even though my stomach growled in hunger, I needed to eat slowly and pace myself.

I adjusted one glass and then ripped off the straw wrapper when the server brought back a handful of them and left them all for me.

The soda glass sat to my far left. My system needed the sugar. A tall glass of orange juice rested in the eleven o’clock position and I shoved the straw into it, swirling around the orange color. There was a reason nurses made you suck down an orange juice after donating blood, and I figured I needed some of that as well.

In front of me, a glass of water sparkled, and I dislodged the ice by shoving in another straw. But then, a little to the right, I had a glass of apple juice. I’d get most of the nutrients I needed from the orange juice and the soda and the water, but I figured it wouldn’t kill to hedge my bets and get a little sugar juice in me as well. And on the far right a steaming mug of hot chocolate.

Yes, sure, it’s technically the middle of summer in the South, but my bones were cold. Even though I turned the shower as warm as I could, the water barely seemed warm to me. Plus, I wasn’t the type of woman who turned down hot chocolate. It was a year-round treat. From here on out, I vowed to never turn away a beverage again.

Beyond the drinks, I had a plethora of food all lined up for my choosing. I picked up the plate with waffles and poured syrup over them, the pool running to the plate below. With them covered, I relished the smell of maple syrup.

I gazed lovingly at the warm food in front of me and used my fork and knife to cut off a big bite.

“Imogen!” The sound of my voice being hollered jerked me from my feast.

Cyrus stood at the opening of the restaurant in the shopping area, his head darting back and forth between the spaces. I raised my hand and waved to him, gathering his attention, and then waited as he stormed over to the table looking like he’d take out anyone who got in his way.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, setting down my knife but keeping the fork. If we had to run again, I’d take the plate of waffles with me.

I tensed at the end of the booth, preparing to slide out and head for the back door. Cyrus doubled over on the other side with his hands on his knees. When he stood up again, he had a hand over his heart like he was trying to stop it from beating out of his chest. His sandy brown hair fell over his eyes and he took another big breath before he met my gaze.

“Cyrus, what’s wrong?”

He waved a hand in front of him. “Nothing.”

Cyrus slid into the booth, his features returning to their nonchalant expression he often wore. But I wasn’t ready to let it die.

“It didn’t look like nothing.” That was definitely something. Had he gotten bad news?

But Cyrus ignored me completely as his eyes darted around at the different plates of food. “Did you order for me?” he asked, his gaze stopping on a big juicy burger atop a pile of fries.

It was second up on my “to eat” list, but the way he stared longingly at the plate, I quickly realized I’d order

another.

“Yeah. I sure did.”

“The burger is mine?” he asked for clarification.

No, it most definitely wasn't his, but I'd share. “Yup. I picked up a few things to taste test. We can always order more.” About seven thousand dollars more.

At least six plates of food were strewn about the table, but if he commented when I ordered desserts, we were going to have problems.

I'd share a little of my things, but not the waffles and most certainly not the chocolate cake I saw on the menu before placing my order.

Cyrus took his first bite of the burger and my tongue snuck out and licked my top lip. I didn't eat a ton of red meat under normal circumstances, but post-kidnapping was most definitely not normal occasion. Plus, that burger had Swiss cheese and mushrooms piled on top. Cyrus squeezed the bun and cheese oozed off the side.

It looked so good.

I cut into my waffles and shoved a bite in my mouth, moaning around the sweet taste. Fine, I'd let him have the burger, but he was not getting my waffles. Even if he was possibly the hottest guy I'd ever talked to. Only a stupid person ignored the fact I found myself attracted to Cyrus, but not maple syrup covered waffle attracted.

He looked up at me as I chewed, and then his gaze fell to the waffles. I slipped the plate closer to my side of the table, just to stop him from getting any ideas. He was not waffle pretty. Even Chris Evans wasn't post-kidnapping waffle pretty.

We ate in silence for a few moments, and my stomach gurgled with the addition of food. When it felt like I need to take a slight break before I continued, I slathered a piece of waffle in the pooled syrup and then asked my question before popping the piece into my mouth.

“What happens now?”

Cyrus sucked in a deep breath and then squirted half the bottle of ketchup right on top of his fries. His hand zigzagged over the pile of them, decorating them in the red stuff.

I smiled as I watched him. There was no way he could eat the free fries and not get ketchup all over his fingers, but the action was cute. Even though I hadn't known Cyrus for long, I could tell it was totally a Cyrus thing to do.

"We'll talk to Ridge when he gets here. I'm sure he'll have a plan."

"Who is this Ridge?" Cyrus talked about him like he was the second coming of Jesus, but he never explained why we had to put our faith in the man.

"Oh, that's right. You're not from Pelican Bay," he said, almost as if he'd forgotten the fact. I suppose I couldn't blame him. We'd both been through a lot. "Ridge is a former Navy SEAL. He opened a security firm in Pelican Bay, and he provides security and other life-saving operations when needed. Blah, blah, blah. This kind of thing is his specialty."

Kidnapping was a person's specialty? What were the blah, blah, blah parts?

Ridge sounded expensive. "But I'm a no one. I can't pay him." Why would he come all the way to Georgia to help me? And why did they need his specialty in Maine?

Would he even help me once he got here and saw I was a regular nurse from North Carolina? I couldn't pay whatever amount he charged. At least not in with anything more than the fifty-seven dollars I had in my checking account.

I finished the last bite of my waffles and let my stomach rest before I went for course two. A side salad waited at the far end of the table, but this was not the time for leafy greens. Instead, I reached for a bucket of cheesy chili fries and swapped it out with my plate of breakfast food.

Cyrus was still eating his fries. He picked at them with precision, finding one not covered in ketchup.

"Maybe when Ridge gets here, you can drop me off of the bus station," I said, hoping Cyrus wouldn't make a big deal

about it.

His head shot up and his eyes widened.

There went my no big deal thing.

“Excuse me?”

The way he said it sounded as if he thought I had the audacity to consider something so horrible.

I shrugged, like he had a few minutes earlier. “You’ve really done enough. You saved me way more than you needed and I appreciate it. I should probably get out of your way at this point.” Let’s not forget that Cyrus was a kidnap victim like me. He didn’t owe me anything extra.

I only wanted to get home and then call my mother. Not that I had any plans to tell her what happened. But I only had one parent who cared about me, and I didn’t want to send her to an early grave. Even if she knew I survived, finding out someone held her only daughter captive on a ship and then she had to flee across state lines by hitchhiking would be enough to put her in the hospital. She’d never recover.

“That’s a horrible idea,” Cyrus countered. The way he looked at me, you’d think I suggested we rob the cash register and make a run for it.

“What?” I stuck a chili cheese fry in my mouth and then searched the plate for another one, using Cyrus’s method of finding a small piece of uncovered fry. It was easier than making eye contact with him.

Because leaving him and going on my own made my heart extra thumpy. It clip-clapped, like an engine that missed a rotation. It pattered out once, flung back, and then started up again. Pieces of me did not want Cyrus to leave my side, but that wasn’t fair to him. He had a life to get back to as well.

“You need me to tell you the reasons it’s a horrible idea we separate?” Cyrus asked enunciating each word. When I didn’t answer, he continued. “This is the worst idea you’ve ever had, Imogen.”

The fry I chewed almost fell out of my mouth. “Wait a second,” I said, cutting him off. “This is like my only idea I’ve ever had.” He hadn’t known me long enough to judge my ideas and their badness.

He shook his head. “I’m holding you personally responsible for going to the police.”

Oh.

If he counted those things, I suppose he had a point.

Possibly.

I guess.

“Continue on,” I said, going back to my cheese fries.

“There are a million reasons, but the most important one is that these men know who you are and you know who they are. It’s very possible they’ll look for you. You’re a loose end they’ll want to tie up.”

“And how do they tie up loose ends?” I asked, even though I was pretty sure I knew how. The Al Capone knowledge was coming in too handy.

Cyrus tipped his head to the side and gave me a sad expression before swiping his thumb across his neck.

“That’s what I thought, but I’m still not your responsibility, Cyrus.”

He looked at me with sadness in his expression. “You might not consider yourself my responsibility, but I do. We talked about my brother and me, but I never told you about the women who inspired us to help others,” he said and I heard such sadness in his voice I stopped eating to pay attention.

“The women?” If this was the point where he admitted he was trying to make up from a woman he hurt by saving me, I was definitely finding an alternate ride home.

“It started in college by accident. We had this favorite waitress. She found herself in a terrible relationship and came into work one day black and blue. We used my brother’s

forging skills to help her relocate, gave her a new identity, and provided her with enough money to get started.”

Definitely not what I expected him to say. I stared at Cyrus, quietly urging him to continue. His brother was a hacker and forger?

“After that, there were others. I’m not hundred percent sure how the original few found us, but we helped everyone who asked. New identities and seed money for a new life. Men who take advantage of women are the lowest scum on the earth. I want to help every woman who needs it. The ones that we have been able to help let me know we’re using our money and status for good in the world. People like Bernard who use women belong in jail.”

I wanted to reach across the table and grab Cyrus’s hand to give it a squeeze, but too many drinks and plates stood in the way. Instead, I nodded solemnly at him.

“But, Cyrus, don’t you see? I’m not one of those women you helped in the past. Things will be okay. I will be okay.” I hoped I sounded surer of it than I really was. In my attempt to make him feel better, my heart broke. I didn’t want Cyrus helping me because he found me weak. I thought we shared something more.

Didn’t he see I was kickass?

He shook his head. “It’s not that. Imogen, when I look at you, I don’t see a woman in need of help. You have to be one of the strongest people I’ve ever met. Look at what you have survived already. Most people would be in a corner crying, but you’re here picking through a plate of cheese fries, which is absolutely disgusting after eating sugary waffles, by the way.”

I dropped my gaze and shrugged. It wasn’t the time to judge someone for their food choices.

“Of all the women I’ve helped, you are the only one I want to see again tomorrow.”

I really wish he’d stop using words like “all the women” so often.

His words were like a balm to my soul, but a few of them continued to rattle. “You really have to stop saying of all the women.”

Cyrus laughed. “I’ve always been the fun, carefree twin, but you’ve shown me how much I’m missing in life. Living the life of grandeur doesn’t seem enough anymore.”

Kidnapping did that to a man, but I still wanted clarification. “What does that mean?” What wasn’t enough anymore? Did he want to join the service and become a missionary to help more people? Or was he talking about something else?

Cyrus stared at me as our gazes locked on one another. My breathing slowed, but my heart rate picked up as I met his gaze.

One side of his lips tipped up, and he shook his head a fraction. “I’m not sure.”

Oh no.

My eyes went wide as he finished his sentence, but not for the reasons he probably assumed. My hands shook as I held it high and pointed toward the parking lot at the car pulling into the front parking spot, taking up a handicap space. “Cyrus, look,” I said, my words shaky as he spun around to look at the lot as well. “Isn’t that the men?”

But I didn’t need his confirmation. They were the same ones who followed us from Florida.

How?

Cyrus dropped the pickle spear he’d been eating. “Shit.”

CHAPTER 12

CYRUS

Shit.

Shit.

“Shit. Shit,” I mumbled to myself, but from the look on Imogen’s face, she heard.

How in the hell did they find us so soon? Considering we escaped from Florida, it wasn’t a stretch to guess we’d head north, but stopping at the same place as us barely three hours later was too much coincidence. Did the trucker who brought us here tell? But how did they know who to tell and why? None of it made logical sense. I considered myself a fairly decent judge of character. Bird sounded honest.

But if not him, why couldn’t we shake these assholes?

We didn’t have time to waste for me to sit around and figure out who betrayed our trust. Every second we hesitated was a second closer to our recapture. The same two men we’d seen before loitered next to their vehicle. Their gaze searching every which direction as if they contemplated where to search for us first. It was a good sign, meaning they didn’t know our exact location.

I slid from the booth and held my hand out for Imogen, intertwining our fingers tightly. We came this far, and I couldn’t allow us to fail now. I promised her safety, and I’d deliver.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said when she stopped beside me, looking back at our table of food like I asked her to leave a puppy on the side of the road.

She reached out and grabbed one last cheese fry. “We need to pay.”

“We have a tab. Remember?” And even if we didn’t, I wouldn’t wait for someone to find us. We’d send a check later. It was more important to get Imogen to safety. She was the

only thing that mattered. If it came to it, I'd lay my life on the line for her.

"Oh yeah," she said before shoving the cheese fry in her mouth and letting me lead her through the restaurant.

She came so willingly and followed me without a second thought that if we hadn't been on the run for our lives, I would've sported a hard-on. Imogen was one of the sweetest, most caring people I'd ever met, and I'd only known her for a few days. Her giving nature did not make her weak but strong. She had a definite fierceness underneath her top layers. The strength she used to survive our situation helped me realize she'd have the strength to carry on once this was done.

That didn't mean I planned to let her go.

It was too early to make decisions that would affect the rest of our lives, but my head told me something my heart had screamed for the last day. I wanted Imogen as mine. Forever.

Also, I wasn't as sweet and kind as the woman I'd fallen for. I wouldn't take her against her will, but I planned to pull out all the stops to make sure she became mine.

But first we had to survive.

A large neon-lit restroom sign blinked at the back of the restaurant, and I led us in that direction, grateful to find an exit door at the end of the hall.

"How did they find us?" Imogen asked as we stood on the pavement behind the rest stop. Large trucks lined up this way in two rows with their engines idling. Nothing else was around us except the highway.

I shook my head to answer her question. "I don't know. The truck stop is full of people. Did someone call?" But that brought up the same questions as before. How did they know who we were or who to call? And how did they have enough time to get here? We didn't have wanted posters with our mug shots hanging up somewhere. Did we?

Nothing added up.

The Grandmaster had connections all around the world, but we were only dealing with one of his enforcers. Unless the Grandmaster lied and was really behind the attacks and the kidnapping. How big was their legal ring of connections?

It just made little sense. If Corbin were here, he'd put all the players into a spreadsheet, run the math, and pull the strings. But I didn't have my smart brother or his computer. I'd always been the one with more street smarts to save us both.

I had to protect Imogen at all costs. She was too beautiful, inside and out, for the world to lose. I also didn't think my heart would survive the loss. It wasn't only my life on the line.

I stared into her eyes and grabbed her face, laying my palm against her chin and bringing her close. It wasn't a good time, and we had more pressing issues at hand, but I needed to let her know the way she made me feel. I never planned to let her go. "Imogen..."

How did I sum up the depth of my feelings for her with only words?

She stepped closer. "Yes?"

I moved my feet, trying to get as near to her as possible, and the sole of my sneakers scuffed against hers. Wait.

Our sneakers.

We wore all our old clothing to the rest stop. It might have led them right to us. Stupid, Cyrus.

Our old sneakers might continue to lead them wherever we ran next. I'd turned down flip-flops when Imogen pointed them out because I remembered Corbin running through the Pelican Bay woods in a pair of pink flip-flops and wanted to save my dignity, but none of that mattered now.

We left our old clothes in the showers, but now we needed to ditch the shoes.

The pieces connected in my brain even without Corbin's computer to lay the trail. "We kept our shoes."

Imogen looked at me, waiting for something more, but my brain was still working out all the implications. Modern

technology had grown leaps and bounds in the last decade. They made cameras the size of a pea for easy hiding in your home. You could most definitely have a GPS tracker you slipped into someone's pocket.

“Yeah, we did. So what?” Imogen asked, staring at me like she expected me to explode at any moment. “What are you talking about?”

I lowered my hands to her shoulders and squeezed tightly, trying not to shake her but freaking out over the discovery. We couldn't stop them tracking us here, but we could put them off our trail in the future.

“What if they're able to track our clothing?” I asked. “It could've been in a pocket, on our shirts, or even our shoes. Hurry and take off your shoes.”

It all made sense now. The way they'd been able to stay on us. To know our every move and to show up the places we stopped. How did I miss it? I put both of us in danger because I hadn't taken the time to think of all the possibilities.

I dropped Imogen's shoulders and leaned over, kicking off my shoes and throwing them in a blush.

She didn't move. “Seriously?”

The woman had been kidnapped from a parking garage outside her job, thrown onto a boat and set sail for Florida, only to escape and be on the run for the last day and a half, but she questioned whether these men would put a tracker on her?

“We don't have time,” I said, reaching down. She lifted one of her feet slowly, allowing me to slip her shoe off. I tossed it behind us with mine in the bushes.

Imogen paused before lifting her other foot, leaving me to tug on the laces. “Cyrus, it's a truck stop parking lot.”

“So?”

“I'm a nurse. This is worse than an egg salad sandwich from a truck stop vending machine.”

I chuckled, tossing her second shoe behind me and hearing it bounce off the building to fall into the bushes. There

was no time for laughter. “Save the *Futurama* jokes until after I save you.”

If I wasn't already falling for the woman, hearing her make a classic cartoon joke sealed the deal on us. Once we survived this, I was definitely finding time for a *Futurama* marathon with Imogen in my arms. Corbin hated the show.

“Are you sure?” she asked, gazing back at her shoes longingly.

“We have to leave the shoes. It's the only clothing we have left.” I couldn't allow myself to overlook such details in the future, but I could at least correct it now.

We took off to our left, getting ready to head around to the other side of the building where trucks were filling up with gas and hopefully on their way out of town. If we found another trucker to catch a ride with this time, we might lose them. Hopefully, for good.

We reached the corner, and I finally allowed my hopes to rise. We'd make it out of this situation. I'd even smiled, but it didn't last long because Bernard stepped into our path. From the look on his face, he was as surprised to see us as we were to see him. When the hell had he gotten directly involved?

Unfortunately, he was blocking our way to the gas pumps and recovered from the shock quickly. I stepped in front of Imogen but she was too far ahead of me, so before I made it, Bernard grabbed her. He spun her into his chest and held a long knife at her throat.

The clean metal caught a ray of sunshine and cast off a glint of light on the ground between my feet.

All of us stood frozen. We were in the middle of an open parking lot full of people in broad daylight and the man had a knife to my woman's throat, but no one even glanced in our direction. Truckers.

“Come on, Corbin. If you come with me nicely, I'll make sure she lives.”

Hearing him call me Corbin brought a fraction of relief. As long as they continued to think I was my twin, he was safe.

But not Imogen. She struggled in the man's arms. This wasn't the time to argue or to find some way to negotiate.

At that moment, I had one option. I lunged at him without thinking of a long-term plan. The only thought was one of making sure Imogen stayed safe. Only she mattered.

The move surprised him and he threw her to the side seconds before I reached the two of them and barreled into his chest, knocking us both to the ground. Pain unlike anything I'd experienced before sank into my upper arm. The skin tore and my mouth opened in a silent scream. I didn't have time to be injured or hurt, not when Imogen's life was on the line.

Bernard and I rolled on the ground as Imogen stood to the side and hollered my name. Her screams finally drew attention, but people left us to our own devices. I still had the upper hand with Bernard under me, but it wouldn't last long. He was twice my size and quickly overpowering me, which only left me with one recourse. I ran my fingers through his hair, grabbed his scalp as hard as possible, and slammed his head into the ground.

The giant shook his head, his eyes blinking quickly, and his arms went limp. It was enough time for me to roll off his body, stand, grab Imogen's hand, and make a run for it. We sprinted to the front of the rest stop where trucks waited to pull out and reenter the highway. The hot asphalt burned the soles of my bare feet, but it was a better option than waiting to find out what happened if we didn't.

Imogen waved her hand, trying to get someone's attention, but we passed three trucks and none of them looked in our direction. Finally, at the front of the line, a truck about to pull out into the street rolled down his window.

"You two looking for a ride?"

"Yes, anywhere," Imogen said, sounding out of breath.

"Jump in. I'm headed north. Call me Dennis.

The truck behind him honked as he held up the line, so we ran in front of his rig and climbed into the passenger seat telling him our names as we did

Imogen let me get in first but pulled me back a moment before I launched myself into the truck with effort. “Use my towel to stop the bleeding,” she said, looking at my arm where a small pool of blood trickled down my skin.

I nodded and took the towel from her, giving a silent thanks. With my last bit of strength, I heaved myself into the semi-truck.

CHAPTER 13

IMOGEN

The truck carried us down the road for two hours to what I hoped was safety, but I didn't want to get too excited. At one point in my life, I thought I was safe walking from to my car in the parking garage and look how that turned out for me.

My stomach rumbled. I'd eaten too much food and the worry we wouldn't get away fast enough caused my insides to tumble. The semi glided down the road, but we weren't going fast enough. This trip was decidedly quieter than the one that brought us to the truck stop, and I cast my attention out the side window as much as possible trying to see if a car followed us.

So far I saw nothing concerning, but I also wasn't trained in the art of tailing someone. Had we gotten away quickly enough or did the two men chase after us if they saw which truck picked us up?

The last car behind us passed, and the road was clear as far back as visible. Air-conditioning spewed from the vents in the truck to keep out the hot Southern day, but my bare feet chilled as we rode along and I tried to tuck them against one another for warmth.

"You two have a final destination?" the trucker asked after another ten minutes of silence passed.

Our conversation had been slow and stunted for the ride. Cyrus answered fewer questions as time passed, causing my worry to grow.

I shook my head, not wanting to give too many details away. I'd never trust anyone again after this experience. "North." It wasn't a lie, and it wasn't too much information, hopefully.

He nodded, not taking his eyes off the road. "Taking this load up to Michigan so I can get you pretty far north."

Michigan was north, but we needed to get off before then in order to make it to Maine. “We really appreciate it. At least Ohio,” I said, trying to recalculate where the states were in the Midwest and at which point we had to find a different spot to meet Corbin.

Cyrus made it sound as if that was our best chance of survival, and through all of this, and right now, he was the only person I trusted.

I peeked back at the man in question and found him pale as he leaned a little to his left with his eyes half closed, giving him the appearance he was ready to pass out.

My nerves picked up again with another stomach roll. I unhooked my seatbelt and leaned back into the other portion of the cab, where he had a neatly made bed as if the trucker had woken up that morning and tidied up. It was a stark contrast to Baby.

Cyrus smiled at me and tried to move to his side, but he only lifted the top portion of his body, too weak to move the rest. I’d given him my towel from my shower, which he wrapped around his arm, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, but the red color seeping through would draw attention.

I pushed back the fabric to look at his arm and pulled air through my teeth. The knife had gone deep and left a large gash in his arm. He needed stitches and quickly. Blood trickled from the wound again and I pressed the towel against the skin, drawing a groan from Cyrus.

He didn’t look good. I needed to get Cyrus help as quickly as possible, but I didn’t know who to trust. My entire world had been thrown upside down on the last day. Were hospitals safe? How wide was Bernard’s reach?

I laid my hand on Cyrus’s leg and squeezed it gently. “It’s going to be okay,” I whispered.

The truck swerved, and I caught Dennis’s eyes in his review mirror as he watched me use the edge of the towel to

wipe up the blood trickle from Cyrus's arm. "Are you two in trouble?"

"No," I said with as much conviction as possible, even though neither of us believed it.

Cyrus lulled his head to the side as he leaned up against me for support. He definitely wasn't portraying everything in fine vibes.

"Listen, I'm not an unfeeling asshole, but I can't have him dying in my truck. I'd lose my job."

My eyes widened, and for a moment, I considered hitting the driver. I wanted to just reach out and deck him in the arm. I'd never had the urge to cause violence to anyone in my life, but did he really consider Cyrus bleeding in the back of his truck less important than him losing his job? Did he just suggest Cyrus would die?

I took a deep breath and counted to ten so I wouldn't scream. "He's not going to die," I said, louder and more forcefully than I meant.

But it was the truth. I would not let Cyrus die on my watch. He kept me alive the entire time. He saved me on multiple occasions. Without him, I'd still be on a boat somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. Or worse, swimming with the fishes. It was now my turn to save him.

The cut on his arm wouldn't kill him right away, but there was always a chance he'd go into shock or the wound might get infected. Eventually, he'd run out of blood. We needed to get help.

Quickly.

The truck slowed and Dennis twisted the wheel to the right, headed for an exit ramp.

"What are you doing?" He couldn't be ready to stop so soon. We were on the road for less than two hours since leaving the truck stop in Georgia. We weren't even out of the state yet.

He couldn't stop now. I'd only been in charge a few minutes and already I was failing.

"I'm dropping you off," he said at the end of the offramp before making a right.

"You can't leave us, please." What did I do in Georgia with no money, no help, no shoes, and a bleeding Cyrus?

Dennis pointed out the window of his truck at a blue sign with a big H on it. "I'm not the devil. I'll get you to an ER and then you are on your own. And I would much appreciate if you leave my name out of it."

"Of course," I said, doing my best to move Cyrus without causing him pain. There was no point in arguing. The truck came to a slow stop, the wheels and brakes halting in front of a tall brick hospital in the middle of what looked to be a busy town, but I never caught a sign with the name.

Cyrus leaned against me, and I used one hand to help him out of the truck. I stepped out before him and then he practically fell into my arms as he moved out from the tall seat. Sweat beaded down his forehead even though we hadn't been out in the street for more than a second. He had to have a fever. Cyrus nodded once at the trucker and I slammed the door, flipping him the bird quietly behind my back as he drove out of sight and left us behind.

"He's not getting a big check," Cyrus said in a hoarse whisper.

"No, he is not."

I had no idea where we were or who to trust. We had no way to get ahold of Cyrus's brother or the man, Ridge, who was supposed to help us. Cyrus and I were on our own and I had to save the day this time. The summer sun beat down on both of us and Cyrus shook. So far, I wasn't doing great.

Cars stopped in front of the emergency room entrance and people unloaded themselves from the vehicles. We sat on a small bench by the door together as I figured out what to do, thankful no one ran at us asking why I was holding a bleeding

man. Six days earlier I would've walked him into the ER and taken solace in knowing nurses were there to keep him safe.

That's what nurses did.

Now I worried about the safety of the building. What if they put his name and information in the computer system and then the people who were after us tracked us right to our location? Plus, it wasn't like I had a good reason for Cyrus to have a knife wound in his arm. The hospital would definitely report an injury like his to the local police.

And then what happened?

We'd be screwed if we took one step into the hospital. With Cyrus out of commission, we didn't have a ton of options. I had no experience running from the police or kidnappers. I didn't even like most action movies because I found them to create anxiety. Sure, the good guy survived, but what about all the costars? I had no way to guarantee both Cyrus and I survived the afternoon or the next day. I wouldn't put our safety in anyone else's hands. Not anymore.

Next to the hospital was a medium-size park with only a small alley separating the hospital parking lot from the green space. I shuffled to my feet, getting Cyrus heading in that direction and let him rest his body against mine. I held up most of his weight on the walk. Tall trees with big green leaves provided shade and grassy spaces in the park, so he'd draw less attention there.

"Come on, Cyrus, you can do it. Just a few more feet," I coaxed him as we hit the grass. He stumbled down beside me, but I ended up getting him next to a tree and propping him up against the tough bark, hoping he'd be okay alone. At least he was in the shade.

I kneeled down beside him, staring into his eyes, trying to read his condition. It wasn't good.

"I'll be okay," Cyrus tried to say, but it came out a series of grunts more than anything else.

I placed my hand on his other shoulder and squeezed, adjusting the towel over the cut. "You are. I'm going to make

sure of it.”

Someone needed to disinfect the wound and stitch it up. “Cyrus, are you allergic to penicillin?” I asked, shaking his shoulders a bit when his eyes closed.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Drink?”

“I’ll go in and get something. I’ll be right back. Stay here?” It wasn’t like I expected him to get up and walk back on his own, but as I turned and left him, the ache in my chest grew.

What if something happened to Cyrus? I’d be all alone in the world.

Hospitals were good at one thing. Well, actually quite a few things, but mostly they tried to instilling employees and patients with a sense of security. Sadly, it was also the thing they sucked the most at. Hospitals had people in and out of them all day. Nurses and doctors looked like everyone else when they weren’t wearing their special uniforms, and that made it hard to police everyone, especially when you knew their weak points like I did.

It’s why it was ridiculously easy for me to slip into the hospital and prepare to commit my crime. I walked through the front doors acting as if I was there to visit someone, but then used my knowledge of hospital layouts—they were all similar—to find a break room on the first floor. The door was unlocked, and I glided in, nodding to someone sitting at one of the large round tables.

“Forgot my jacket,” I said to the woman, smiling as if everything was fine as I plucked a white lab coat from a hook on the wall.

Doctors were the worst about leaving their things lying around. They were the most absent-minded people. You could always find a spare lab coat and sometimes, if you were lucky, an ID. I slipped the lab coat over my horrible bikini shirt and frowned at the lack of ID clipped to the pocket. But maybe that meant the doctor wouldn’t notice it missing for a while.

The woman at the table laughed as I slipped back out to the door and followed the signs to supplies. This part would be trickier.

Gaining admittance to a hospital was quite easy, pretending to be a doctor rather breezy, getting supplies from an under-funded facility extremely difficult. Those doors they kept locked. I walked past the row of rooms and grabbed a clipboard from one of the outside holders, pretending to study it diligently as I walked to the supply cabinet.

The door would absolutely be locked and wouldn't have any of the good meds, but enough to get us by for stitches. I stopped beside the door and waited with my head down so as not look suspicious. Less than a minute later, the door swung open and I breathed a sigh of relief as a nurse in bright blue scrubs pushed a cart out of the space.

"It's a freaking disaster in there," she said, pointing back to the room as if she was personally appalled by the condition.

I shook my head, agreeing with her, and tapped my finger on the clipboard. "It always is. Right?"

She tsked as if truer words were never spoken because they were a disaster. The main supply rooms were always a jumbled mess because no one was actually responsible for them. No one had time for more job duties.

I held the door open for her, pretending to be a helpful employee as she pushed the cart down the hallway and I slipped into the room behind her.

Wow, she didn't lie. Boxes were everywhere, the different labels half coming off. Nothing was organized by use and they had a pile of empty boxes thrown into the corner of the room.

I walked through the steps of what I needed for Cyrus and then grabbed each item. A bottle of Celine water, a needle and thread kit for stitches, and four antiseptic wipes.

It wasn't everything I wanted, and there was no way to get penicillin if they locked their stock in the pharmacy. But it was enough to get started, at least until I found a better solution.

I slipped out of the room, shoving supplies in my lab coat pockets. A doctor approached from down the hallway, so I reached for my clipboard and swore when I realized I'd left it back in the storage room. Fingers crossed he didn't pay attention to anyone but himself. I flipped the antiseptic white package back and forth in my hand as if studying the directions hard enough to pass a first-year medical school test, and the doctor passed by me without lifting his head in my direction.

I held my breath until I finished walking right out the front door of the hospital with my head held high. Looking as if I did this every day, and it was absolutely normal. Confidence was everything if you needed to make a quick escape.

I didn't take a full breath again until I stripped out of the lab coat and stepped over into the grassy area, finding Cyrus leaning up against the trunk of the tree.

We had no time to waste, but I took a moment to congratulate myself on my newfound criminal enterprise. I mean, I'd done nothing bad in my life. Never even smoked a cigarette, but look at me now.

When all the other girls in my grade were stealing Chapstick from the drugstore, I said no. I never took anything that didn't belong to me, not once. Now I snuck into a hospital, impersonated a doctor, and stole medical supplies—all offenses I'd get jail time for if they caught me.

But it was worth it.

And I hoped Cyrus wouldn't let me sit in a jail cell, especially when I did it to save him.

CHAPTER 14

CYRUS

I raised my bowling ball a head higher, trying to get it stationary on top of my neck as it followed gravity and continued to drop. The black spots were cloudy as my vision slowly dissipated, and I blinked, helping the gorgeous face in front of me to come into focus.

Imogen wore a tight frown as she watched me warily. A second passed and then another and then a third before she nodded once and lifted a small water bottle to my lips.

“Take sips of this if you can,” she said, trying to tip the bottle back to make it easier.

My head tumbled like I tried to hit a split at the bowling alley.

“Whoa, don’t go too fast,” she said, sounding like she was talking to a child. Memories of her cleaning my wound and then using a long needle to stitch it closed resurfaced.

I groaned, taking the water from her, but rather than using it to drink, I rolled it across my forehead for coolness. Except the water wasn’t cold. It was barely room temperature, and the surrounding air was muggy and humid. “Did I pass out?” I asked, my throat sick and dry.

She pinched her lips together, and I saw my answer, but it didn’t make the words any less embarrassing. “Yes, right at the end as I was tying up the last suture, but only for like twenty seconds.”

I groaned again, but this one sounded more like a moan as a deep headache set in. Probably from the bowling pins crashing together every time a car drove by where we were sat in the park.

She motioned to the water bottle, and I managed the hand-eye coordination to bring the bottle to my lips and slowly pushed it back so a few drops of warm water hit my tongue. They were the most glorious warm water I’d ever drunk, and if

I had better control of my muscles, I would've finished the bottle.

“Well, that’s embarrassing,” I said as soon as I moved the bottle from my lips. “I swear stitches have never made me pass out before.” I never had stitches at any point in my life, but I wasn’t a wimp ass, so it was safe to say that if I had, I would never have passed out.

No way would I be able to look Imogen in the eyes again.

Rather than laugh, she splayed her hand on my knee and then tipped the bottle closer, reminding to take another drink. “Cyrus, you’re dehydrated and have had significant blood loss. You’re excused for this one incident.”

Fire burned my arm, and I ignored the shooting pain as I adjusted to get a look at the work Imogen did. There were so many stitches I didn’t stop to count them, but they all lined up in a neat row. When I finish looking, she rubbed a cream over top and slapped a bandage as gently as possible against the three-inch line.

“You did a great job. These have to be the best stitches I’ve ever had,” I said, which was not a lie since they were the only stitches I’d ever had.

“I guess it’s one of those things where God prepares you for what you need in life. I wouldn’t have known how to do them if I hadn’t spent my first year out of nursing school volunteering at the free clinic in town. You have to learn fast and are required to have more skills than you typically need in this profession.” She took the empty bottle from me and screwed the cap on. “I haven’t been asked to do stitches at the hospital, but turns out the skill is like riding a bike.”

I repositioned myself up against a tree and scanned the crowd past Imogen. It was just as full of people as it had been when she dropped me off. Except no children were playing because there was no equipment. The park was really just a large block of the city left undeveloped for grass to grow and big tall oak trees.

In the middle of the space, a sidewalk circled a fountain with fresh blue flowing water. Metal benches lined the walkway. The people who loitered in the space were friendly with one another as they carried on conversations while they walked by, but the state of their dress and the number of possessions they carried on them held clues to the true nature of these gatherings.

I leaned back, getting as comfortable as possible against a tree trunk, and tried to calm my racing thoughts to form a new plan to save the two of us. A man wearing a dingy gray shirt and a baseball cap, which used to be green but had since faded by the sun and darkened by long periods of wear, approached.

Imogen followed my gaze as I tracked him getting closer, and she spun, greeting him with a smile. He pulled his baseball cap low on his head, his curly hair sticking out underneath the brim.

He stopped a few feet from Imogen and I braced nervously, knowing if he did something I wouldn't be able to protect her, but he only held out the bottle of water he carried along with him. "Do you two need help? It looks a little rough over here," he said and somehow pulled it off perfectly without sounding judgmental in the least.

Imogen raised a hand and shook her head. "Thank you, but we can't take it from you," she said.

He held the bottle out for her and took another step closer, his gaze on my arm. "It looks like you two need it more than me."

She lowered her hand and accepted his gift. "Thank you."

"I got a blanket back at my station if you need it, but none of us have shoes. Those are gold around here," he said, looking at my bare feet and then Imogen's, which she'd covered with blue hospital booties. Her face turned a slight shade of pink and she slipped out of them exposing her light purple painted toes.

When the man ran his fingers through his long beard and scratched at his skin, I did the same, the growth becoming

itchy. Shaving hadn't been a priority. Birds chirped in the tree above me, and I looked up at them for a moment to get my emotions under control.

Here was a man who obviously had so little, but his generosity in a time of need couldn't be compared. I didn't know how to respond. I'd never been in a position where I contemplated taking a blanket from a homeless man—a blanket that might be his one and only that he needed. But he'd offered it to me instead. A tickle in my throat turned heavy, and I swallowed hard to push it down, searching for something to say as a thank you.

My response came out as a joke. "It has to be a hundred degrees out here and humid. If you get me a blanket, she'll use it to kill me when I overheat," I said, laying on a heavy laugh at the end so they both realized I joked.

"Naw, it's barely ninety-five today. It's a cold snap. Once the sun sets, it'll be downright chilly. You'll be wishing you had a blanket then," he responded.

I didn't want to be anywhere near this place come sundown. As if she sensed my internal desire to get up and leave as quickly as possible, Imogen used a finger to lower the skin around my eye and stared at them before putting my wrist in her hand. I had to assume she was checking my vitals with no equipment since it resembled what she'd done to the man at the truck stop.

"I probably should've taken you in," she said, glancing back at the hospital.

I shook my head even though it made my eyeballs ready to dislodge and roll around like two marbles. "No, this was the right call. I feel better already." It was only a half lie. I had to be better than I was a moment before I passed out, but my arm was tender, my head hurt, and in some ways, it felt like maybe Imogen pushed me from a moving car and let them run over me. Twice.

"He's right," the homeless man said. "That hospital is stingy. All those doctors driving those fancy cars think they're

better than us, but really, they worry about how close they are to this side of the parking lot.”

“So true,” I said, meeting the man’s gaze. How many people who ran in my circles lived their lives in massive amounts of debt? They were always waiting for the next deal to pay off one expenditure before opening another. They were one missed opportunity away from destruction. “I’m Cyrus and this is Imogen.”

He held out his hand, and I shook it. “Hugh. Spelled the same and just as handsome as Hugh Grant, but without the mansion,” he said, making his own joke.

Imogen laughed. “It’s nice to meet you, Hugh.”

“All we need now is a cell phone to call my brother.” Sitting in the park with my arms stitched up, one last bottle of water and no shoes, it sounded like a Herculean task, but that was only because I underestimated the genuine spirit of community the people fostered.

“Shoot, Carl has one. The government gave it to him, so he always lets everybody use it until he runs out of time. Let me go see if I can find him.”

Before I said thank you or told him it was okay, which it really wasn’t, since we actually needed Carl’s cell phone, Hugh was up and walking toward the fountain at the center of the park.

Imogen twisted around and sat beside me, crossing her legs. “That might be the nicest man ever. How can we repay him?” she asked.

Something deep inside me lit up at the fact that she used the word we, as in the two of us, doing something together. It was ridiculous considering we’d only known one another for days, but I enjoyed being a part of a “we” with Imogen.

I watched the older man walk away although in reality I didn’t think he was too much older than my father. Life had just been harder on him. “I’ll send him a check.”

Imogen laughed and leaned up against me, her shoulder against my good one. “Another big Cyrus check saves the

day.”

She fell silent, and I turned my head in her direction, taking in the curve of her face. How even after days of trouble, she gave me stitches in a homeless park somewhere in Georgia and still found a way to smile and make a joke. I could spend the rest of my life just looking at her and be happy if she always had the same positive outlook.

“Imogen, beautiful, you saved my life.”

Her smile deepened, and then she turned to look at me as well. Everything about the woman radiated goodness. “You saved mine first.”

My arm ached as I leaned in, but in that moment, nothing could stop me. As if she understood what I planned and was totally on board, Imogen met me halfway. Our lips connected in a soft, sweet kiss. There was only the slightest bit of pressure, but it changed my life.

I breathed in deeply. My heart stopped, wanting to do everything I could to remember the fine details of the moment. Because in that exact second, I realized what I felt for Imogen was love. Possibly what I’d been feeling for days, but I wasn’t ready to recognize it until right then.

One day, our future children would ask when I realized I loved their mother, and I’d have to answer that we were sitting underneath the tree in a park where she had just stitched up a knife wound. Basically, I’d be the coolest father in existence.

We pulled apart, each of us trying to work out what our kiss meant and me trying to decide how to tell Imogen she was the love of my life when Hugh broke up the moment between us by returning.

He handed Imogen a tiny black flip phone, which she then handed to me. “I told Carl you were decent folks, but he’s said I had to stand here and watch while you use it, just so you don’t run off.”

“I appreciate it,” I said, flipping up the top of the phone and dialing Corbin’s number.

“Hello,” the rough voice of my brother had me choking up again.

I open my mouth to respond, but no sound came out, only a labored breath. It felt so good to hear his voice again and know that we were close to safety, but I didn't know what to say.

“Corbin, it's me.” I spat out even though the words were hard and desperate sounding.

I wiped water away from my eye and blamed it on the blood loss like Imogen said.

CHAPTER 15

IMOGEN

“Is there anything else I can get you, Miss Ruthford?” The man with too many muscles asked. His arms looked like they wanted to attack the sleeves of his polo shirt and win their freedom from the too tight fabric. I repositioned the blanket over my shoulders and shook the weird thoughts from my head.

Hugh hadn't lied about there being the chill in the air once the sun set. How could it be so hot in the day and get cold in the evening when we weren't in the desert? And how was it cold when the air was trying to suffocate me with humidity? I missed air-conditioning and my place by the water.

North Carolina could be hot, but the cool breeze off the ocean helped, and I rarely considered mother nature was actually trying to drown me with the water.

“I think I'm okay, Bennett. Thank you.” I turned around to get a better view of the park and the complete mayhem that had descended on it within the last hour.

“If you need anything, let me know.” he said, his smile scary because it was so big.

“You're not going to leave my side. Are you?” I asked when I finally realized what had been happening as the beast of a man tailed me for the last thirty minutes. He got me drinks of water, food, and then the blanket at the first sign of a shiver.

He shook his head and I swear he had a gleam in his eyes of excitement that I finally figured it out. “Cyrus gave me strict instructions to make sure your every need is met and to not let you out of my sight.”

“I promise I'm not going anywhere,” I said, trying to find Cyrus in the crowd of people to give him a good scowl. What did he think I'd just get up and walk away?

Bennett chuckled once. “I have experience with women who say they’re not going to go anywhere but magically end up in trouble.”

“How can I get in trouble in a park surrounded by people?” What did they expect me to do all by myself?

He chuckled again, and this time it turned into a full out laugh. “You got kidnapped and then followed from the state of Florida by a crazed criminal who is on his last few steps before we catch up to him and make sure he receives the punishment he deserves.”

When he put it that way... “I guess you have a point.” I had exceptionally bad luck the last few days.

Unless you considered the fact someone kidnapped me with Cyrus, which ended up being good luck. Then, in a way, I was having a great week.

Another big white van pulled up into the corner of the park, and three men in black polo shirts matching Bennett’s jumped out. Just when I thought they couldn’t fit any more people or supplies into the park, new people showed up.

The three men began unloading cases of water from the back of the van and stacking them next to the sidewalk. Nobody even turned and looked in their direction because it was the second shipment of water to be delivered and most people had already stacked up in what they needed and moved on to more fun conveniences.

Across the park, someone set up spotlights. Underneath, a group of homeless men and women lined up to be the next to try on pairs of sneakers. A group of volunteers who came from somewhere, I hadn’t had time to ask, met with each person and fit them for a pair of shoes, giving them an extra pair to take with them. Where did the sneakers come from? Nobody told me.

Every once in a while, one man in a black polo would stand back and shake his head while resting his finger on his chin and scowling. Then he’d call someone on a cell phone, and minutes later, more shoes arrived.

In fact, I'd never seen a group of people pull together a response site this quickly or this well-staffed. They even had a triage center going and after they finished giving Cyrus a full check-through, they opened the area up to the people in the park who needed medical assistance.

When Cyrus told his brother to bring everything, I didn't realize he literally meant everything. There were stations of water, a man passing out small pup tents, food stations where they were serving a warm meal and also providing food for people to take with them in their backpacks. They even gave people new backpacks—the good professional style backpackers took with them on long trips. It allowed the people to carry more items.

Before I became a nurse, I would've said why not just take all these people to a hotel and give them jobs, but the two years I spent working at the free clinic taught me that most homeless people were proud. Doing this would be more impactful and last longer for the people in this park than giving them one or two warm nights in a motel. From his actions, Cyrus and his brother knew it too.

I swallowed back a tear and rubbed at my eye, watching as Carl spoke into the phone Cyrus used to organize all of this less than six hours earlier. Carl had been on the phone all afternoon as he walked from station to station. Every time he finished up a phone call, a few minutes later, more homeless would show up and get in line. It made me laugh and question the hierarchy they had going on in the city—a true communication network.

Bennett took two steps away from me, giving me the most space since he introduced himself earlier, and I glanced back, giving him a look and trying to figure out why. Then I didn't need to ask because Corbin came into view.

I knew it was Corbin Kensington and not Cyrus from afar. They walked exactly the same but no longer were identical twins. Cyrus now had an injury on his arm where I gave him stitches. Even without the wound I'd be able to tell them apart. Corbin lacked the carefree, beautiful smile Cyrus

wore most of the day. He was much too stiff to be mistaken for Cyrus even if they were twins.

He walked right up to me, his lips pinched together, and rather than stop in front of me, he pulled me into a tight hug and rubbed my back like we were long-lost friends being reunited. "Thank you for taking care of my brother."

Oh no. He hugged me tighter, and I shook in his arms to do whatever I could not to cry. When he stepped back, he nodded once. I hoped the gesture was his way of saying he didn't want to talk about it anymore.

"Don't touch my girl," Cyrus said, walking up behind me and standing in front of his brother with me at his side.

Corbin laughed. "I had to thank her for keeping your dumb ass alive," he said, and then the two brothers embraced.

Cyrus couldn't move his arm much and Corbin was careful of it when he hugged his brother, but it didn't stop him from squeezing hard once he had his arms wrapped around his middle. They were quiet for a moment, each of them grateful as they hugged one another. It was so obvious the twins had a close bond. It was as if brotherly love radiated from the two of them. The last few days had to be hell for Corbin.

When they each stepped back, Cyrus's eyes glistened, but I didn't comment because if he didn't like the fact he barely passed out for twenty seconds, he wouldn't want anyone knowing the way he reacted to seeing his brother again. Even if I thought it was a normal reaction and made my heart appreciate him even more.

My mother always told me if you found a man who showed emotion during a difficult time, he was one to lock down.

"Dammit, Cyrus. I thought I lost you," Corbin said, rubbing his eye with the back of his hand.

Cyrus laughed. "Not yet. I see you met Imogen. Beautiful, meet my brother."

I grinned, still happy with their display. "Yeah, it was kind of easy to figure that out."

“Everyone says I’m the more handsome of the two of us,” Cyrus said, and while I agreed completely, I kept my mouth closed.

“Only because he offers them money,” Corbin chimed back, falling into a brotherly banter. “Do you like the sandals?” he asked when his gaze fell to my feet.

I wiggle my toes in them. “I do. Thank you.” You don’t realize how much you need shoes or miss them until you have to walk around barefoot. A good pair of shoes could change your life and outlook on everything. I hadn’t heard Cyrus tell his brother we needed shoes, but it was one of the first things Bennett brought for me. That and a light jacket to put over my bikini shirt.

Somewhere along the line, Cyrus lost his tux shirt, and even though it was stained with blood and so unlike him, I missed it.

He no longer looked like a hungover man on the run, wearing his truck stop T-shirt and the gym workout shorts. He’d returned to when I first met him but cleaner. A nice pair of dark-washed jeans and the baby blue polo shirt with one side sleeve raised higher so it didn’t rub against his cut made it look as if he was ready to board a ship. Cyrus could be an Abercrombie and Fitch model. He fit the carefree vibe so well they would’ve put him on one of their large in-store banners.

The two brothers were chatting adamantly, and I only started paying attention when I heard the word Pelican Bay mentioned.

“I have a setup in a secure hotel nearby and we have more medical staff on hand so we can get you extra fluids.”

The two brothers turned as if they were walking away, and at first I panicked, but then Cyrus leaned back and grabbed my hand in his, bringing me with them.

We only made it two steps before he stopped. “No, I don’t want to stay here tonight. Let’s get back to Maine as quickly as possible. I want both of us out of here.”

He didn't expound on why, but I knew. We didn't know where Bernard or his men were. How close they were to us or what they might do to get Cyrus, who they thought was Corbin, back. If they were willing to kidnap him from a mall in Maine, what stopped them from trying to attack us here? We weren't safe yet.

Corbin turned and looked to the both of us, but his gaze fell on me more than his brother. "Can he fly?"

I looked at Cyrus. His face was no longer pale and while his eyes were tired, they were taking in the surrounding area with an alert gaze. He could fly.

As I nodded at Cyrus's questions. "Did you bring the chopper?"

"Hell yes," Corbin said, frowning at his brother.

Shoes, clothes, food for the homeless, and now a chopper? At that moment, the events of the last three days settled hard in my system. We'd gone from one dramatic situation right into a coordinated rescue event, and I hadn't had a moment to gather my wits. Everything was overwhelming.

"You own a helicopter?" I asked. Cyrus mentioned he had money, and by his stories he didn't grow up in a brick ranch in the middle-class suburb like I did, but I hadn't realized how out of my league I was until we started talking about helicopters.

"No, we share it with a company that provides private flights. It's cheaper than taking on the tax ramifications of having multiple choppers in different countries."

"Oh yes, of course. Why didn't I think of that?" I said, nodding right along like I talked about choppers and the tax incentives of not owning multiples every day.

Cyrus grinned and the handsomeness of his expression relieved some of my worry. At least for that moment. I didn't know what happened to us once we got to Pelican Bay, but I trusted Cyrus explicitly to get me there.

“I’ll put us on the chopper tonight as long as you both promise to get an IV.”

Cyrus rolled his eyes, a sign he felt better. “I don’t need an IV.”

“Yes, you do,” I said, and Corbin gave me a fist bump. Not what I expected from the more straightlaced of the twins.

“We can hook up an IV in the helicopter and get them both at the same time,” Corbin said and began walking again to a van idling on the side of the sidewalk with its doors open. Hugh waved goodbye as he sat on a bench eating a thick sandwich.

Cyrus laughed and squeezed my fingers. “I do know how you love efficiency, Corbin.”

I had no idea what waited for us in Pelican Bay or what happened next, but I squeezed Cyrus’s fingers back and followed his brother to the van waiting to take me to my future.

CHAPTER 16

CYRUS

The door to the airplane cracked open with a hiss and when the outside air rushed in, it wasn't as muggy as the state we left. Imogen lifted her head from my shoulder and blinked, her eyes peering into the space.

"I'm sorry we couldn't take the chopper all the way to Maine," I said, unbuckling my seatbelt and waiting for her to do the same.

She stood from her seat, stretched, and then pulled her hair back, re-affixing her ponytail. I'd woken up to her already more than once, but as she gently snored beside me while her head rested on my shoulder, I noticed a contentment unlike anything I had in life.

"Cyrus, it's fine," she said, slipping out from the short row of seats into the middle aisle.

I followed right behind her, not wanting her to get too far ahead of me. We weren't in immediate danger, but I didn't think I'd ever be safe. "It would just cause too many refuels in a chopper."

Imogen, Drake, and Corbin, and I had taken the chopper to an airport in Georgia and then boarded the private plane, which brought us to Maine. Imogen watched the entire experience with her eyes wide, but I still felt like I was letting her down by not flying the chopper all the way up the coast. We'd scheduled a flight for another day to take her out over the ocean.

"Seriously, Cyrus. The private plane was amazing."

I stepped off the little stack of stairs before her and then held out my hand to help her off. "Your first time?" I asked, spotting the big black SUV waiting for us a little way off into the makeshift airport Pelican Bay created outside of town. It was basically just a long patch of farmland they didn't plant corn in for the year accompanied by a dirt parking lot, but it sufficed for what most people needed.

Imogen laughed and grabbed my hand as she jumped down the last step. “Yes.”

Her happy answer radiated. She was still smiling after everything we’d been through. “Good. I like being your first.”

From that point on, I wanted to be all of them forever.

I didn’t miss the look my brother gave me as he too stepped off the plane and checked the surrounding area. We didn’t communicate in a secret twin language. Everything we had to say to one another could be done with expressions. The one he gave me right then said he thought I’d lost my mind.

I walked past him, pretending I didn’t notice, and led Imogen to the SUV that had to be for us unless multiple disasters were happening at the same time. I wasn’t ready to answer any of Corbin’s questions. Eventually I’d have to give him answers, but at the present time I didn’t know what to say.

Corbin fell fast for Hazel, but would he understand when I told him in just a few short days Imogen stole my heart? Corbin might be the one to settle down eventually, but I was the twin everyone thought would be a bachelor for life. Now those ideas sounded ridiculous.

I opened the back door to the Escalade and let Imogen in the seat first. As I sat beside her, Corbin went to the front passenger with and Drake in the driver’s seat.

“Where’s Hazel?” I asked after we all closed our doors and settled in for the short drive to Pelican Bay.

Corbin turned around as he answered, his smile bright. “At the house. I wasn’t sure what condition we’d find you in and or what we’d face when we got there. I wanted her to stay behind, but she’s excited to meet Imogen.”

My face pinched together, my eyebrows furling into what anyone would call Corbin’s classic scowl. If I kept it much longer, I’d end up looking like Corbin, and then people really would confuse the two of us. “Let’s not bother her tonight. If you two are at the house, take us to the hotel,” I said, tapping Drake on the shoulder.

No way was I staying in a small house with my brother and his new girlfriend. Imogen had been through enough trauma in life. She didn't need any more. And certainly not the kind they'd provide.

Corbin grabbed his phone and tapped out a quick text message. "Okay, do you want *two* rooms?" he asked with intentional emphasis because he knew my answer.

I also didn't miss the eyebrow he lifted when he turned around to ask. Sometimes my brother really earned his asshole nickname. I no longer felt guilty about the box of condoms I left in the fridge for him to find.

"No, one room," I said with conviction. "We do better together." I peeked at Imogen as she stared out the side window of the car watching the trees go by, but not once did she give any sign she objected.

Her black hair was twisted up into a messy bun on top of her head, which exposed the back of her neck. I wanted my lips to touch every single inch of the long stretch of skin once we were alone.

I was so screwed. My feelings for Imogen were already deeper than anything I'd experienced, even the ones I had for my brother. I loved Corbin, but he no longer passed the train test against Imogen.

It was a stupid game we made up as children. You knew you'd found the love of your life when you'd be willing to toss your twin in front of a train to save her life. Never before had I found another person who could stand on the side of the track, and I'd push Corbin off instead of them. Not until Imogen.

Corbin smiled back at me as if he heard exactly where my thoughts were, and the twisted asshole found it amusing that his life was now on the line, if it ever should need to be.

Shit.

I'd have so much explaining to do when the time came, but from the way Corbin had been around Hazel before I left, I had a feeling he'd pushed me in front of the proverbial train a week ago.

Our vehicle pulled up to the stately Pelican Bay bed-and-breakfast. The old Victorian-style home had different levels and a large white wraparound porch that ran pretty much the entire expanse of the building. It was one of the oldest homes constructed in Pelican Bay and had been turned into a bed-and-breakfast years ago. Before any of us were born. My cousin Pierce purchased it last year and started renovations to bring the building up to code.

“Katy is inside to meet you. She has a few things to get you through the night, and I’ll bring your stuff tomorrow. You two try to get a good night’s sleep,” Corbin said, winking at me.

Those winks were pissing me off.

I didn’t like that Corbin had such a leg up on me and was goading me so well, just because I was a little off balance. It was my job to be the annoying brother with a good comeback. I couldn’t let my status get away, so I stared right back at him and winked as well. “Tell Hazel I’ll see her soon.”

She hadn’t said anything to me, but I got the distinct impression that Corbin’s new lady friend did not find me in the highest regard, which was absolutely crazy because I was a freaking delight. But no matter what I tried or any of the methods I used to win her over, she looked at me as if I was a bug she needed to flick off her shoulder. Right after I cemented my place in Imogen’s life, I’d get back to making her at least tolerate me.

You couldn’t marry my twin brother and want to stab me with a knife if we went to dinner.

I slipped out of the car and then held the door open and waited for Imogen to join me. We made it up the first two steps on our way to the porch when I stopped again for her to turn in my direction.

“You’re going to stay, right?” Having to ask for confirmation made me sound weak, but I couldn’t walk into that building unless she confirmed I wouldn’t wake up to an empty bed the next morning.

Imogen smiled and clasped my fingers with hers, which was quickly becoming a thing we did for one another when one of us needed the comfort. “Yes.”

Once her answer finished leaving her lips, I leaned over and kissed them. It was a quick peck of her lips against mine, but something in my soul rejoiced. We might not have said it yet, but Imogen was mine.

Other parts of my body were also excited at her answer. Which basically made me the highest asshole of assholes. I shouldn't be thinking of sex at a time like this. I tried hard to be an upstanding gentleman, and I couldn't blow it now.

Before we reached the top step to the porch, the front door to the bed-and-breakfast was thrown open, and the bright lights of the lobby cut into the darkness outside. Then a woman, at first only a silhouette where we couldn't make out her facial features, came into view. But I didn't need to see her face to know she was the scariest person to call Pelican Bay home.

If you were smart, you took one look at her and then ran in the other direction. We'd come this far, and I had nowhere else to go to be alone with Imogen, so rather than run away, we trudged on and I greeted Katy in the doorway.

“I'm so excited that you two have decided to stay with us,” Katy said. Her arms were loaded up with a set of folded pajamas and a few miscellaneous items on top. “I came all the way from home to be the one to check you in for the night.”

I took a deep breath and tried not to scream. So much was left unsaid in her remark. Of course she'd want first dibs on the gossip.

“Thank you,” I replied, even though it was difficult considering I was grinding my molars so deeply.

Katy trudged on ahead as if she didn't recognize my distress. Or maybe she did, but that made it more fun. “Pierce and I tried to give you what we thought you'd need to get through the night. I told him you might not want the pajamas, but you would definitely need the do not disturb sign,” she

said, holding up the small white door hanger and waving it gently in the air.

My Corbin look-alike scowl returned, and I grabbed the stack from Katy before snatching the key from her hand when she held that up next. “How has Pierce not fired you yet?”

Imogen let out a slight gasp next to me, but Katy only laughed. “Don’t you know my secret? I threaten to cut off his dick while he sleeps like my hero.”

We’d been around Katy the last few months, and I’d grown used to her antics, but Imogen’s eyes grew huge as saucers as she stared at the blonde woman like she was deranged. It wasn’t far from the truth. I yanked Imogen behind me, not caring if it was rude, and trudged toward the stairwell to get to our room listed on the card.

For safety, she put us on the second floor, and even though I didn’t plan to thank her for that, I appreciated the gesture.

“See you soon!” Katy yelled after us as we hit the middle of the stairwell.

Imogen turned around to wave goodbye, but I trudged forward. “No matter what happens, stay away from Katy,” I mumbled under my breath when we reached the top of the stairs. I waited until Imogen gave me a nod before I continued to our room.

Katy wasn’t getting her hands on this one.

CHAPTER 17

IMOGEN

The next morning, my eyes were heavy as I stared at them in the bathroom mirror, even though they looked normal. I'd lost the dark circles from the last two days. I thought for sure I wouldn't be able to get to sleep after taking a nap on the plane, but once we were settled comfortably in bed, I passed out and slept the entire night.

In fact, considering what I'd lived through for the last three days, I'd never felt so rejuvenated. I survived a lot of crap this week, and I hadn't even had any cookies or sugary sweets to get me through it. All in all, I was pretty damn proud of myself.

The hotel room door opened, and I peeked out from the bathroom to see who it was, my body ready to jump out the window if need be. I might have been proud of myself and my responses, but that didn't mean I wasn't worried. I'd always be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life.

Thankfully, Cyrus returned holding mismatched coffee cups, one in each hand. One was a tall iced coffee and the other regular.

My heart sailed as I looked to what was in his hand. I raced to him when he barely had the door close and ripped the iced coffee from his hand. At the moment I didn't have time to think about exactly what his deed meant. I'd mention how much I loved iced coffee during our time sitting together in the cell on the ship.

But somehow he remembered.

That revelation hit me later. Right there in the bed-and-breakfast the only thing I cared about was that I had iced coffee. I stroked the side of the cup lovingly, the condensation chilling my fingers. "Oh caffeine, how I've missed you."

"It's a mocha. You said you liked the chocolate flavor," Cyrus said. I nodded, glad he remembered, but at that point I'd have drunk anything.

I took myself and my pretty cup to the bed and sat on the mattress before bringing the straw to my lips. “Look how pretty you are.”

Cyrus waited in the open space of the room, two hands now cupping his tall take away cup of what had to be warm coffee. Eww. Who drank coffee warm?

I took my first sip of the heavenly brew and moaned when the chocolate caffeinated mess touched my tongue. I was so glad I didn’t die on that ship because I would never have gotten the joy of drinking iced coffee again. You don’t think about those things you’d miss the most.

“I’ve never been jealous of a straw,” Cyrus said, gazing at me.

I shoved the straw in deeper and then bit down with my back teeth, chewing a bit as I sucked up more coffee. “Don’t be. I like to chew on them after the first few sips.”

His face twisted into disgust. It so perfectly conveyed his every thought that I wanted to take a picture of it and uploaded it as a gif.

The ice coffee permeated my system, and slowly my thoughts returned to normal. Who was this man?

Cyrus appeared laid-back, but so much was going on in his brain. He calculated every step. He was fun and approached life like an adventure, but he and his brother had a security team “on retainer” whatever that meant.

They flew us to the airport in a helicopter and then I took a private plane to Pelican Bay. He told me stories that made me believe he was rich, but he left out how money was obviously not an issue. There was rich and then there was I’m best friends with billionaires rich.

Cyrus definitely was in the latter category.

He hadn’t done anything to make me off balance. I just couldn’t get my footing around him. The man saved me from a kidnapping. He’d heard me pee in a corner of our cage, but I didn’t know how to act around him. Everything was different now.

The only thing I was sure of was that he gave me tingles in all kinds of places I'd never been tingly before. The thought of being away from him caused me to stress even when he was only gone a few minutes to the first-floor kitchen to get coffee. I wasn't ready to admit what it meant, but I had enough 1990s romance movies in my repertoire to take a guess.

"Scalding my tongue on this large doesn't taste as good anymore," Cyrus said, taking one last sip from his tall cup of coffee and then placed it on the top of the dresser.

Someone knocked.

The man wore every emotion he felt directly on his face at the exact time he felt it, which meant when they came and knocked on the door, I knew he was annoyed. Cyrus didn't like intrusions.

Except when he opened it and found his brother and another woman, his face fell into his classic welcoming expression.

The two of them stepped into the room and I smiled at Corbin before taking a quick glance at the woman who held his hand.

"Imogen, this is my girlfriend, Hazel."

As soon as he finished our introduction, the woman's face fell into a radiant expression. "We brought you so much stuff. Shopping for other people is fun," she said, pulling away from Corbin's hand and handing me a big brown bag with twisted twine handles she carried into the room. "I hope you like what I picked out. Corbin basically only told me that you were a girl, so I didn't have a lot to go on."

"Well, I don't own anything right now, so I'm sure it's fine," I said, trying to calm her fears, but it also was the truth. I left my actual scrubs back in the truck stop and my other stuff in North Carolina. All my worldly possessions in that moment included whatever she gave me.

Hazel dumped the bag on the bed unceremoniously, and a bunch of makeup rolled out onto the floor.

“I tried to grab a little of every style just to get you by until you can go shopping for yourself,” she said, bending over to pick up the lipstick tubes and foundation before they rolled underneath the bed.

“Seriously, thank you. I’m not really picky. Normally I wear scrubs.”

She stacked the makeup items on the mattress so they wouldn’t roll away again. “Doctor, nurse, or lab tech?” she quickly listed off all the jobs, and I appreciated that she listed off doctor first. It was super annoying when people assumed I had to be a nurse since I was a woman. Sure, it was true, and I never wanted to be a doctor because they were jerks sometimes, but that didn’t mean I liked the assumption I couldn’t have been a doctor.

“Nurse.”

Hazel smiled at my answer. We glanced back at the two brothers, who were talking in their own little space on the other side of the room. “Great, so enough small talk. Let’s get to the important stuff. So... Cyrus?”

She lifted one of her eyebrows with her question, making me think there was more to it than what she was saying. “Yeah,” I replied tentatively, waiting for her next question.

A woman didn’t stare at you the way she did and not have a million questions. No way was I only getting away with one.

As expected, as soon as I answered, she started on the next one. “You don’t find him... Perky?”

Perky? Sure, Cyrus had a positive personality, which was one of the things I enjoyed about him. “Sure, I guess.”

Her expression tumbled around for a bit and then stopped on contemplative. She stared at me and then glanced at Cyrus before back at me. “Weird. So you don’t want to suffocate him with a pillow at night?”

What kind of relationship did Corbin’s girlfriend have with his twin brother? I laughed. “No.”

I wanted to do many things with Cyrus but none of them included suffocation.

Not that I'd had an opportunity to do any of them.

Mainly I just wanted to snuggle. Which was weird for me because even though that was something most women were supposed to do, I found I normally didn't. I enjoyed my personal space at night. I wanted room to roll around. Plus, when you lay next to someone, it usually got hot, nothing was worse than being hot during sleep time. I kept a fan on even in the winter.

But all of those rules flew out the window with Cyrus. Just the night before, we both lay in bed, and I'd been staring at the wall wondering if I'd ever be able to get to sleep. Something was missing. I wanted him to roll over and wrap his arms around me like how we woke up the morning in the car, but I didn't know how to ask.

Finally, after a few minutes, it seemed as if he read my thoughts and Cyrus rolled over, facing my direction. I scooted back, getting closer to him, and then his arms wrapped around my middle, and we snuggled into a peaceful sleep.

I didn't share any of that with Hazel, so all she did to my answer was shrug. "To each their own, I guess."

Hoping we were done with the questions, I rifled through the items she brought, a few pairs of shorts, a tank top, and two short sleeve shirts with different things on them, but I came back empty with the item that I really wanted most.

"I need to call my mom. Is there a phone I can use?"

I should have called my mother the night before, but I worried about what to say. A good daughter would've called her mother immediately to let her know she survived the kidnapping, but my mother didn't know I was kidnapped. How did I tell her about my situation but then reassure her I was safe or make it like it never happened and hope she didn't ask me questions?

As if he could sense my discomfort, Corbin stepped over and pulled his girlfriend close. "Regardless of what Hazel

says, Cyrus is a good guy.”

Hazel scoffed in his arms and turned around to scowl at him. “I didn’t say he wasn’t good. Just annoying.”

“I’m standing right here, you know?” Cyrus said, making his way to our small group that was now congregated at the side of the bed.

In his hands, he held a phone, and he slipped it into mine. “This is for you. It’s the same number as your old phone, so your mom won’t notice anything is amiss when you call her from an unrecognized number. And Corbin programmed her number into your contacts along with a few other important ones,” he said.

Wow.

And that was why I didn’t want to suffocate Cyrus in his sleep. He was always looking out for me. Cyrus saw my needs and fixed them before I even recognized I had any. Who didn’t want that kind of man in their life?

Except I was confused about one thing. “How did you find my phone number?” We shared a lot of things with each other over the last two days, but I definitely never gave him my phone number. We didn’t need it since neither of us had a phone.

CHAPTER 18

CYRUS

Where did anyone find anything? I couldn't believe she had to ask. "The internet."

You gave me someone's first name, last name, and the town they've lived at any point in life and I could figure out more information about them than you ever wanted to know. And I wasn't the brother with good hacking skills. It was actually scary what was on the internet and so easy for people to find.

Imogen's forehead crinkled in thought. "The internet is a scary place," she said, mimicking my thoughts from a second earlier.

"You have no idea." I had minimal ability on the regular internet, but Corbin dealt in the dark web and things downright horrifying. Thankfully, he'd been monitoring the space for Imogen's name, but it hadn't popped up anywhere. Even the deep, deep underground circles.

It meant when they kidnapped her from her work parking garage, they probably took her at random. It was both comforting and concerning. Comforting because more than likely they weren't that interested in her but concerning because we didn't know if they figured out her name and other personal information, which meant she wasn't safe until we handled this problem.

It was also terrifying people out in the world thought a great way to solve a problem, like having one of your crew members with a bullet wound, was to kidnap a nurse from a parking garage.

Imogen stared at the phone, running her thumb through the contacts and smiling when she saw mine listed with the asterisk next to it to denote me as her emergency contact. No one else would keep her as safe as me.

Corbin laughed and began to pace around the room. It was his classic move for when he was thinking, but I didn't

much care what he was considering. Ridge and his men were on the case, and I trusted them to have everyone thrown behind bars by the end of the month.

Corbin circled. Hazel and Imogen chatted. I watched it all silently.

Having both Corbin and Hazel in the tiny space annoyed me. They delivered the clothes from Pierce's home, where I'd been staying before I'd been kidnapped, and purchased a bunch of items for Imogen. Now it was time for them to go.

We needed our space.

"Drake is stationed outside today, so we're quite fine here," I said, trying to give Corbin reassurance everything would work out. He worried.

We hadn't talked about it, but me being kidnapped because I resembled him ate at him. It wasn't his fault, but he'd take the blame.

My words and comments didn't stop his pacing. "Bennett is stationed in the parking lot. Riley is supposed to be here, but he went radio silent right after Ridge returned last night."

"I still haven't met Ridge," Imogen said as she sorted through the random belongings on the bed, having given up on the phone. There weren't many contacts in it, but I did take the time to download the security app that I'd have to teach her how to use later. She'd only use it to notify Ridge if anything happened in the future.

The more troubling concern at the moment was why she wanted to meet Ridge? Did beefy testosterone-filled dudes turn her on? Did I need to start spending more time at the gym?

"What's special about Ridge?" I asked, glancing at her face to see signs. Signs of what I didn't know, but I want to be the first to see them.

She shrugged. "You guys keep talking about him like he's special. If this guy is a second Jesus or something, I should meet him."

A lot of people in Pelican Bay had Ridge to thank for things, but I wasn't about ready to compare him to a second Jesus. "He's a big dude, lots of muscle, really enjoys bossing people around, total wife stalker," Corbin said while looking at me for approval.

I gave a quick nod that no one else in the room noticed. I also appreciated him mentioning the wife thing. Ridge was very much married and yes, he did kind of stalk her, but I got the distinct impression she was okay with it. To each their own.

Imogen's gaze dropped to the phone again, and she stared at it worriedly. It was time for my woman to call her mother. "Okay, that's enough of this family reunion, meet and greet. Imogen wants to call her mom, and she doesn't need an audience," I said, trying to shoe my brother and his girlfriend to the door.

Neither of them made a move to leave, so I walked over and held it open. Drake stood right outside, and he leaned over to peek at me as I stepped out into the hallway.

"Katy stopped by. I threatened to call Pierce and tell him she was meddling, so she left." He gave the report in a monotone way, as if he was used to updating people on Katy's antics.

Corbin nodded. "Watch your windows."

I glanced back into our hotel room. "She wouldn't do that," I said. We were on the second floor and this room didn't have a balcony, so she couldn't climb over from another.

Drake lifted an eyebrow precariously high on his forehead. "At this point, I never pretend to know what Katy will or won't do. It's kept me alive... So far."

He was still mad about the bullet wound thing.

"Noted." There was so much conviction in his voice, I couldn't ignore it. I didn't think Katy would take the risk of plunging to her death or at least severe injuries from falling from a second-floor window, but he was right not to put much past her. I'd heard some stories.

Corbin and Hazel finally saw themselves out of the room, and I closed the door behind them before walking right over to the window and pulling the curtains closed. Then I peeked out one side to scan the parking lot and check the ground beneath us.

“Is everything okay?” Imogen asked with her face cast in the shadows from the closed drapes. She leaned over to turn the lamp on.

I tried to smile back encouragingly. “Totally fine.”

Even if Katy did scale to the second floor of our building, Ridge had a team of men monitoring us. No way would she be able to get through the highly trained and decorated SEALs.

“I don’t know what to say to her,” Imogen said as she repositioned one pillow behind her. She sat on the bed with her legs crossed and her back against the headboard. The phone flipped back and forth between her hands.

She’d left enough space on either side of her, so I sat down next to her left and quickly kissed her cheek. She hadn’t been fearful when we were escaping the boat or running on bare feet to find the truck to take us out of town. She didn’t even hesitate when she had to break into a hospital and steal supplies to keep me alive, but having to call her mother and explain what happened caused her to lock up.

I couldn’t wait to meet Mrs. Ruthford.

“What you need to do is just make up a good, unbelievable story. Something simple and not exciting, which doesn’t involve kidnapping and you stitching the knife wound in your new boyfriend’s arm in a Georgia Park.”

I slipped in the boyfriend word to test the waters, and she didn’t balk, so I considered that a good sign.

She did, however, bite her bottom lip as if she was thinking about what I said. Imogen always thought about what everyone said—another thing I loved about her. She was kind and sweet, tenacious, yet contemplative. Unlike me, she didn’t decide things on the spur of the moment. She thought through her options.

“Does it make me a bad person if I lie to my mother about this?”

“No.” Any time you could lie to a parent about being kidnapped, you should absolutely do so. The fact that Imogen even questioned it made her even sweeter.

I took the phone from her hands and brought up her mother’s contact. Corbin had even taken the time to find her profile on Facebook and then uploaded her mother’s picture to the contact. I found it a little creepy, but I also appreciated the effort.

“I’m pretty sure it’s impossible for you to be a shit person, beautiful. You’re too good through and through,” I said, laying my hand between her breasts and tapping over her heart.

When I dropped my hand, she went back to more lip chewing. “I don’t know. I’ve stolen a lot of stuff lately.”

“Babe, let’s think about this for a minute. Telling your mom only parts of the story will help her not stress out, right?”

She nodded aggressively. “Yes. Absolutely. And she does have a tendency to stress out. I think she was more nervous for me when I took my state licensing boards than I was. She called me three times a day to check my test scores.”

“Because she loves you. She most definitely would not want to hear that her daughter was kidnapped. Just make up a good story so she feels better. My mother doesn’t know ninety percent of the stuff Corbin and I do. She’d be up all night worried.”

She met my gaze, taking her attention from the phone. “What does your mother think you do?”

I shrugged. We always left things a little open-ended. We had enough family money that my mother knew we’d never go hungry, and she understood that some of our investments had been successful, but she didn’t know the true extent of the wealth we’d built through government contracts and Corbin’s amazing computer skills.

“Right now she thinks we’re considering moving into the real estate market, which is why we’ve been in America so long considering places. Every once in a while, she sends us a listing for an area she thinks we should invest in. It keeps her busy.”

“And there’s no guilt that you lie to her?”

“Not in the slightest. She’s blissfully unaware of what goes on around here, so she can live a happy life not burdened by any poor choices we make. It’s our way of looking out for our mother the only way we can.” She didn’t need money or guidance. What she needed was a good night’s sleep because she didn’t get very many of them when Corbin and I were young. “Does that make me a shit person?”

Imogen thought about my question longer than I wanted. “Maybe, but probably not.”

“Then do what you need to keep your mother happy.”

It was a closed-mouth, tight smile but a smile, nonetheless. “Okay, I’ll tell her I went on a spontaneous girls’ trip with ladies from work, and that’s where I met you. She’ll be so wrapped up in a man being in my life she’ll forget about anything else.”

“Perfect,” I replied, giving her another kiss on the cheek.

Not only because she agreed to my plan and admitted it was a good one, but I loved the fact she was already going to tell her mother about me. I was one step closer to worming my way into every aspect of Imogen’s life.

Did it make me a bad person that I tried to infiltrate every aspect of her world so she couldn’t get rid of me? Possibly, but I’d deal with the fallout because the reward was worth it.

Imogen pressed dial on her mother’s number and I leaned back against the headboard beside her, there for comfort if she needed it.

CHAPTER 19

IMOGEN

Later, after a lie-filled call to my mother where I met Cyrus on a sunset cruise, he smiled at me, and my heart wasn't the only thing clenching in anticipation.

Down, girl. The man just survived a kidnapping and being stabbed. I was a damn excellent nurse, but that didn't mean Cyrus was ready to do anything else besides lie in bed and watch TV.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked, setting the television remote on the nightstand.

I looked away and continued pretending the bottle of soap from the hotel shower was the most exquisite thing I'd ever seen. "Looking at you like what?" I feigned innocence.

I definitely looked at him a certain way.

Cyrus chuckled. "I can't decide if you want to stab me or do something else."

"What else?" I asked way too quickly after he finished his sentence. *Not a way to be cool, Imogen.*

What was wrong with me? We finally had a little down time when we weren't running for our lives, and all of a sudden I became a hussy? I never had hussy thoughts before. Hell, I never even had sex on the first date. I was strictly a two and a half date girl. It used to be three, but there was this one time in college... It didn't matter.

Cyrus was still healing, and he didn't need me hovering around him being a pervert thinking about sex all the time. If he'd only stop looking at me like he was also thinking about sex.

"Are you done?"

I jerked my head in his direction. "Done with what?"

Cyrus smiled, and it was megawatt. Exactly the type of expression to send my lady bits into a flutter. He really needed

to stop it. “I mean, whatever internal argument you’re having with yourself right now.”

“I’m not internally arguing with myself,” I said, strutting toward the bed and knowing that if we got into a fight, I would totally win because he was injured. Besides, no way could he know I was arguing with myself. I was an excellent closet arguer with years of experience.

He shook his head, his smile deepening at my antics. “Come sit down, beautiful,” he said, patting the side of the bed next to him.

I shook my head quickly. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Cyrus’s face fell. “Why not?”

There were so many reasons. So many, many reasons. The biggest one because all my thoughts were dirty, but I decided a lie was the best course of action here too.

“You need more time to heal. I wouldn’t want the bed to jiggle you unnecessarily.”

Cyrus snorted and I swear he saw through my bullshit reasons. “I would like nothing more than to jiggle this bed necessarily.”

He did not just say that, did he? From the large smirk on his face, yes, he most definitely did. I didn’t know how to respond to his comment, so I deflected.

“I’m sure lots of women would unnecessarily jiggle your bed.”

Cyrus nodded, not even pretending to be embarrassed about it. “Yes, many women, but there’s only one I want to jiggle the mattress with.”

I wasn’t ready to handle most of what he said, so I addressed the important part. “What did I say about you referencing many women?” That caused Cyrus to outright laugh, and he patted the bed again. “Get over here, beautiful.”

I couldn’t resist my heart any longer and I slowly slid next to him on the bed, doing my best not to jiggle the

mattress. “You really need to rest.”

“I’m not tired, but I know something that would help make me sleepy and use up all of this excess energy.”

My eyes widened, and I pushed my legs together, trying to find some relief. “You don’t mean...”

“Yes, I do.”

I wasn’t opposed to the idea. I’d been thinking about it nonstop for days, but not everything was about me. “But Cyrus, your arm?”

He shrugged, using his other arm. I didn’t miss the way he tried to move it as little as possible.

“I had an amazing nurse and actually feel much better.”

“Are you sure?” I hesitated inches from him, not sure how to proceed.

“Beautiful, I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” Cyrus said and then leaned over to kiss me softly.

The floor didn’t open and swallow me whole, but it felt like it. There was something about our kiss. His tenderness, the way Cyrus used his good arm to intertwine his fingers with mine. How many times had I held his hand over the last two days? But right then it didn’t matter what happened between us. He would always keep me safe. We had a bond forged in something deep. A connection I never felt with anyone else and probably never would.

I leaned in closer, wanting to touch Cyrus, and he hissed in pain. “I’m so sorry,” I said, pulling back and looking at his arm for signs of distress.

“It was my fault. I got too excited,” he said and then laughed, his smile bringing me comfort.

“I want this more than anything, Imogen. You’re all I think about every day from the moment we met. There’s only one problem.”

I sat back on the bed, waiting for him to continue.

“What’s that?” I asked when he didn’t.

Cyrus took a big breath and then stared into my gaze when he spoke. “If we do this, there’s no going back for me. I want this forever.”

I swallowed hard. “You can’t know that.” We’d only known one another a few days. Cyrus hadn’t learned about my tendency to eat crackers in bed while watching crap reality TV on Bravo. He had no idea what he wanted to sign up for.

He laughed. “Yeah, I do. I want you, Imogen. Every single part of you. The good and the bad. We’ll figure it out as a team and make it work.”

“Promise?” I asked with a smile.

Rather than answer, he kissed me—a soul-shattering kiss that left my toes tingling.

I straddled Cyrus, staring into his eyes, both of us panting from the kiss.

“Do you need me to walk you through it?” he asked when I didn’t make a move.

I smacked him lightly on his good shoulder. “No.” But I kind of did.

“Just in case you’re wondering, a good place to start would be taking off my shirt.”

“Are you always this bossy?”

“Yes,” he said, not denying it. Cyrus’s bossiness had gotten us through the last few days. Without him, I’d still be on a ship in the Atlantic.

I unbuttoned the top three of his buttons and ran my finger over his chest. He shuddered underneath me.

“I think you should go quicker,” he said.

This definitely wasn’t getting any quicker.

I readjusted on this torso, the hard outline of the bulge in his pants grazing my thigh.

“I don’t think you’re in a position to tell me how fast I go,” I quipped back with my head to the side as I unfastened

another button.

He used his good hand to cover my breast, and I arched my back, making it easier.

Cyrus kissed me again, his lips more forceful this time as he drew me closer and our teeth clinked against one another in a desperate attempt to get as close as possible.

“I wasn’t kidding about the as soon as possible part,” Cyrus said against my lips, not wanting to lean back and lose our connection.

I undid the rest of his shirt and pulled it open, but I didn’t push it past his shoulders. He had a darkening bruise, days old inside of his ribs and I ran my finger around the edge. “You didn’t tell me about this.”

He shrugged. “It’s old. From when they took me from the mall.” He adjusted himself on the bed and with one hand undid the button of his pants. “Now it’s time for your shirt.”

“I thought I was the one in charge,” I said but stripped my shirt over my shoulders and let it fall to the floor. With nothing on but my bra, I waited until Cyrus had his eyes positioned at my breasts. His tongue licked his lower lip and I arched back, allowing the material to fall free from my arms.

“Come closer,” he beckoned, and I propped myself up so it didn’t take as much force for him to lean up and suck one of my nipples into his mouth. I moaned and positioned myself on the bed so I didn’t accidentally jar him or his arm.

The tension in my stomach tightened, and I closed my eyes, letting myself get lost in the sensations.

“Okay, now the pants,” he said when he’d spent significant time with each nipple.

I no longer wanted to argue with him because I needed him as badly as he needed me. But as he helped me to lower his pants and his underwear, I had a moment of remembrance right as his dick slipped free of the confines of his clothing.

“What about a condom?”

Cyrus's eyes widened, and his head fell back, hitting against the wall. "Fuck."

It wasn't really his fault. A condom hadn't been on either of our minds after escaping Florida. I couldn't hold it against him.

"It's okay. I get birth control shots and I promise I'm clean," I said, climbing back up on the bed but not getting but myself on his hips just in case he wasn't okay with what I suggested.

"I just gave my brother an entire box of condoms as a joke. Fuck me. I should've known to save some out for myself, but I promise I'm good, too."

"So we're okay?" I asked, hovering over his knees in the awkward moment.

"Beautiful, if you don't get on my dick in the next twelve seconds, I'm going to combust."

I laughed at such a Cyrus thing to say and then slowly, on my knees, worked my way up his body. I hovered over his thick cock, and Cyrus used his good hand to position himself so that his tip was right at my entrance. With one hand on his good shoulder and the other propped up against the wall, our gazes met as I lowered myself slowly, inch by inch, on top of him.

My nipples tingled, wanting his mouth back on them, and my knees grew weak as Cyrus slowly filled me, stretching every piece of my core.

"Shit, beautiful," he said between gritted teeth. "You're so tight and wet I can't wait until my arm is healed and I can taste you."

My cheeks turned pink as I lowered myself the last inch until Cyrus and I were fully connected. He grabbed for me, bringing me in close, and his mouth attached over a nipple before he licked it once and then said, "Ride me, Imogen." His voice rasped like I'd never heard before.

I started slowly, not wanting to hurt him, but as Cyrus slipped in and out of me, filling me and leaving me empty, my

movements became harder.

Cyrus unlatched himself from my breast and leaned his head back against the wall as he stared up at me and watched my breasts bounce up and down inches from him. His good hand squeezed my ass, interrupting my movements and causing my body to flinch at the right time.

My shoulders dropped, and I moaned as my fingers dug into his shoulder and I lost purchase on the wall.

“I’m so close, Cyrus,” I said, allowing it to become more of a yell.

He squeezed my ass harder, rolling me up against him so my clit hit again and again. “I know, beautiful. I can feel it. Take what you need for me. I want to have your pussy squeezing my cock so hard when I come inside you.”

At his dirty words, I opened my mouth and silently screamed as the orgasm rushed out of me and I lost control of my body. Cyrus took up the movements, thrusting his hips higher and prolonging my orgasm.

“Imogen,” he said on his last thrust before he slowed as thick jets of cum filled me.

I wanted to fall over to the side, but I didn’t have the strength to do that, so I rested my body against his good side and let him wrap his arms around me.

Cyrus breathed heavily beside me and kissed the space underneath my ear. “That was magnificent, beautiful. Give me five minutes and we can go again.”

I laughed with him still hard inside of me. “I need like thirty.” Maybe an entire night of sleep.

CHAPTER 20

CYRUS

The bed-and-breakfast had been updated throughout the years, and Pierce wanted to modernize the infrastructure, but the hallways were still hot. Air conditioning from the tiny portable devices in each room didn't cool the suffocating spaces in between them.

The longer I stood listening to Drake's nonsense, the more irritated I grew. "I don't want to go to the bakery."

Did I sound like an annoying spoiled brat who wasn't getting his way? Yes, but fuck them. I had more money than everyone else, and no one told me what to do. Nothing good ever happened at the bakery, so they couldn't make me go. I refused.

Drake met my gaze and crossed his arms, matching my stance. "I'm just passing on the message. Spencer heard them talking on the main bakery camera about a midnight break-in if the two of you didn't come out soon."

Katy.

It was always Katy.

Imogen and I barely had two and a half days alone in a hotel room. I needed to suck up as much time with her as I could before Ridge caught Bernard and our lives returned to normal. It was weird considering the kidnapping and an attempt on my life a good thing, but I met Imogen, and it gave us lots of alone time. The longer it continued, the more upset about its ending I became. I wasn't ready to share her with the world.

"Why do they openly talk about their horrible plans if they know you're listening?"

Drake shrugged. "Probably an attempt to flush you out just like this, but you can't take chances. Not in this town."

I'd heard multiple stories of the women from the bakery, and it often left me questioning if they were evil geniuses or

complete morons. The jury was still out.

“No, you’re right. You can’t risk it with Katy.” And now that she was dating Pierce, she also had an unlimited budget to wreak havoc if she wanted.

And she definitely wanted.

“She has access to every room key. They upgraded to the new swipe system and gave her control of the computers. Just go over and buy a muffin or something, but don’t let Imogen out of your sight. You don’t want her to become one of them.”

The image of Imogen wearing a bright pink apron and then sneaking off after her shift to cause destruction on the town horrified me. Pelican Bay had more shootouts than the Wild West. I wasn’t worried about Imogen carrying a gun, but I had nightmares she’d run off into the middle of a gun fight trying to save one of the wounded.

The bakery girls were a band of crazy women led by Pierce’s girlfriend. I couldn’t let Imogen look too interesting. Then they’d want to adopt her, but I didn’t see how that would be avoided if I took her to the bakery and waved her around like a bacon treat.

“Never,” I said, promising myself I’d hold on to her hand the entire time.

Drake shook his head solemnly, as if he knew my chances were slim. “Stay alert. They suck them in. There’s an entire network of them now. They’re everywhere in town.”

He wasn’t making me feel any better about the outcome of this excursion, but I also wouldn’t put it past Katy to break into our room if she didn’t get proof of life soon. They’d probably bring Pearl, and since Imogen tried to help everyone, she wouldn’t let me turn the old loon away.

“Fine. We’ll go over there and do a quick stop-in to make our faces known.” And when I said quick visit, I meant super quick. Step up to the counter, order something, step away from the counter. I wanted Imogen back in our bed within fifteen minutes. No, seven minutes. It wasn’t that long of a walk.

Who knew how long we'd have together before Ridge caught Bernard? We could spend an entire year just her and me in the small room, and it still would not be enough.

I walked back into our hotel room and slammed the door shut behind me.

Imogen propped herself up against the headboard, switching through channels on the TV. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, but we have to go to the bakery," I said, trying my best to make it sound as if it was no big thing, but I heard the terror in my voice.

Imogen must have missed it because she perked up immediately at the word bakery. "Oh. Do they have cupcakes?"

I paced quickly in front of the bed standing in front of the TV, uncaring about disrupting her view. This was more important. "Yes, Imogen. They have a little of everything. And sandwiches in the afternoon." What they served for food wasn't the important part. I found the mental patients who served the food more concerning.

"Why are you frowning over cupcakes? You never frown."

Her cheerful expression fell slightly, and while I felt bad for taking the excitement from the cupcake she was clearly looking forward to, it was good to know she understood the severity of the situation. "Because I have to show you off to the town and I'm not ready." It was the quickest explanation I came up with.

The minute we stepped into that bakery, we'd be phone tree fodder for the entire town. They'd probably take our picture and have it printed on posters introducing us to people. Once we walked past those doors, we'd belong to Pelican Bay.

"Getting a cupcake will show me off?" Imogen had to ask because she hadn't been in Pelican Bay long enough. I kept her in an orgasm-induced contented state in our hotel room. But soon that would wear off.

I paced twice more as she tracked me in front of the television. “It’s a long story. There’s a phone tree and everything.” One more circle and then I had to get enough strength to go through with it. “Except now rumor is they have a Facebook group for faster reporting.”

Drake made valid points. Like an angry mob with pitchforks, they’d come for us eventually.

Everything about the situation was distressing. The problem was I couldn’t figure out a way to solve it. Normally, if things got this bad, I’d just throw money at it. Corbin and I didn’t like to toss around our cash too often, but at times it was necessary. And right now happened to be one of those times.

Except how would money fix it? Pierce planned on buying up the town as his own way of handling the problem. And now that he was dating Katy, I didn’t think she’d go away. What were we supposed to do?

Imogen leaned forward, staring at me as if I’d sprouted horns. “What are you talking about?”

I stopped mid-pace and turned toward her. “Nothing, but let’s go and get it over with.”

The walk to the bakery from the bed-and-breakfast didn’t take long on a normal day, but that afternoon it was exceptionally fast. In one breath, we were taking our first step off the porch steps and in the next, I was opening the door to the shop.

Thankfully, the place was mostly empty. We missed the morning rush and were too early for the afternoon one. But that didn’t mean the worst offenders weren’t taking up space in the den or horrors.

“Cyrus, how good of you to come and visit with us,” Katy said as she sat at the far back small round table directly across the cash register. “We’ve been waiting.”

Creepy.

A woman I didn’t know, but who had Vonnie embroidered into a bright pink apron, stood on the other side

of the counter smiling at us with an expression that said if she were a wolf, we'd be her lunch.

That wasn't the most concerning thing at the moment, however. "How can you tell us apart?" I asked, stopping with Imogen in the middle of the open space while she looked at the cupcakes from our location.

Katy stood up and walked toward us slowly like she didn't want to frighten us away. "Oh, I can't tell you apart, but I remember Imogen. Are you in the mood for cookies or cupcakes?" she asked, striding right past me and stopping at Imogen's side.

She was much too close for comfort. I grabbed Imogen's hand in mine and squeezed tightly, hoping she'd understand this was an important time and she shouldn't leave me. But Katy looped her arm through Imogen's and pulled her toward the cupcake display. Apparently, when it was a choice between me and sugar, I lost to chocolate.

"Cupcakes for sure," Imogen said, not taking her eyes off the rows and rows of sugary treats.

There was no room for me in front of the display because the two women fanned out, looking at all the options. Katy leaned up against the glass and pointed at each type of cupcake explaining what they were. Everything from chocolate and chocolate to vanilla and strawberry frosting and even a special red velvet with sprinkles.

"In a couple of weeks, we'll have the Labor Day special. It has sprinkles baked right into the cake parts and then a red and blue frosting. It's one of my favorites."

Imogen's eyes were wide when she spoke. "I definitely need to stick around long enough for one of those."

We most absolutely certainly would not be in Maine long enough to get a Labor Day cupcake. If Ridge didn't have Bernard arrested by then, we would just go into hiding in some other part of the world. Somewhere far away with palm trees, not pines. You couldn't spend too much time in Pelican Bay without getting sucked in.

“She definitely needs a red velvet,” Katy said, talking to the woman behind the counter. “It’s delicious,” she explained when she turned back to Imogen.

“Do you work here?” Imogen asked, and I hated the fact she engaged the enemy in conversation.

Katy sighed. “Not anymore. The bed-and-breakfast keeps me busy between running the place and overseeing the renovations. Vonnie picked up my hours to help. I try to stop by a few times a day to continue her training.”

Imogen glanced at Katy in an odd sort of way, but not one of fear like she should. “If you’re training, shouldn’t you be behind the counter?”

Katy laughed, and it sounded sweet and innocent, but I knew the truth. Many women had been sucked in by that noise. “Oh no, it’s not that kind of training. Vonnie is learning to be my assistant.”

The woman in question assembled the plate with four different cupcakes and then handed them over the counter to Imogen. She grabbed it like it was a newborn baby and she might drop one on the tile floor. “Your assistant for what?”

Katy led Imogen back to the table with only two chairs as I quickly whipped out my card for Vonnie to scan and pay.

I had one job coming to this bakery—not to let Imogen out of my sight and definitely not to let her get close to Katy. I was feeling tumultuous and couldn’t figure out how to get the cart attached to the horse again.

“That’s not important. What is really upsetting is the fact Vonnie and I were not included in any of the rescue work when it came to you and Cyrus. We hardly knew about it until you came to town. Nobody is talking.”

Imogen looked at me with her eyes wide. Finally, she understood the dire situation she walked into. They conned her with cupcakes and now she was too deep to see her way out.

“Can these cupcakes get a to-go box?” I asked Vonnie as she handed back my credit card.

Katy answered for her. “No, we don’t have anything small enough to hold them. Darn it. You’ll have to eat here. So sad.”

“Fine. Get me six. Add on two more and shove them in a box. I’m sure it will be fine.”

Katy shook her head. “No, no, no. There’s too much room in the box. They’ll fall over and the true artistry of Anessa’s work will be lost. Back to the story. Exactly how did the two of you find yourselves in Georgia?”

Imogen opened her mouth to answer, but I stepped over and handed her a cupcake. “I’m sure Ridge considers it a good thing you and Vonnie weren’t involved. Don’t you think?”

“Yes, well, Ridge is often incorrect in his assumptions. We’ll find out the story eventually, so you might as well give us a jumping off point.”

The only person who’d be doing any jumping would be me off the plank if I gave Katy anything to go off of, but I didn’t see another way out of our situation. They probably wouldn’t let us leaven until we gave them something to gossip about with the town.

The important part was to mitigate the damage. “We were both doing shopping in Georgia and accidentally misplaced our belongings. Ridge had to come and rescue us. You know how it is.”

Katy stared at me hard, and I swear if she had a way to attach lasers to her eyes, I would’ve been toast.

“It seems highly unlikely that a man of your... means, would find himself in Georgia with no shoes.”

“We had to leave our shoes at the truck stop because Cyrus thought they might have GPS trackers in them,” Imogen said after she finished her bite of cupcake.

I groaned and took a step back from the table, closing my eyes in frustration for a beat. Now that Katy learned pieces of what happened, she’d never give up until she figured out the entire story.

“Can you give me a large coffee, Vonnie, please?” I called, not wanting to leave Imogen’s side but knowing we were here for the long haul.

CHAPTER 21

IMOGEN

I finished giving Katy the details of our captivity and was enjoying the last of the cupcakes. The red velvet. I'd saved it as the last to enjoy it the longest. They were all delicious, but red velvet was my favorite.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I slipped it out as Katy grilled Cyrus about what he learned about Bernard. He was much less forthcoming than me.

MOM: Are you alone?

I was a weird question for my mother to ask.

IMOGEN: Yes.

I tapped out my reply and set my phone on the table. Her response came almost instantly.

MOM: Liar. You're at the town bakery shoving shit in your face like a fat cow.

What the hell? I spun in my seat, trying to look through the bakery and out the windows. My mother would not speak to me that way. I pushed my chair back, stepping away from the small table, drawing both Katy's and Cyrus's attention.

"Is everything okay?" Cyrus asked, standing with me. My freaked-out expression probably didn't exude a sense of calm.

"I need to call my mom," I said, taking a step outside the bakery and standing on the sidewalk. I hit the button on the text message to call her back and waited for it to ring.

It barely did before someone picked up the call. "Mom?"

A man's voice answered. One I didn't recognize. "Im, can I call you Im?"

"Who is this?" I asked, holding the phone tightly to my ear and then walking up and down the sidewalk looking a lot like Cyrus as he paced in our hotel room earlier in the day.

He followed right beside me as if we were marching together and kept pace at my side.

“I have to say, your mother is just as pretty as you. If you don’t listen to my directions, I’ll keep her, and that sounds okay to me.”

I stopped in my tracks at the corner of the street and scanned the road again. “What are you doing to my mom?” A scream came from somewhere far away through the phone but loudly enough it pierced my heart. “Mom!”

With Cyrus right next to me, he held out his hand, asking for the phone, but I couldn’t give it to him. This was my mother, and it was my job to protect her. I’d been so worried about keeping the truth from her about what happened to me, I’d let her fall into the bad guys’ hands. Despair like I’d never felt mixed with fear, and I wanted to sit on the sidewalk and bawl my eyes out, but I didn’t have time. Someone evil had my mom.

“What do you want? I’ll do anything, just stop torturing her,” I said as another scream died out.

The voice laughed as if he enjoyed torturing someone I loved. “You will bring Corbin to me by 9 p.m. tonight or I’ll add you mother to my stable. Some men have a taste for geriatric.”

My heart plummeted into my chest. I didn’t have to ask for clarification. It was simple enough to know he didn’t mean she was taking care of the horses.

Cyrus reached his hand out for the phone again, but I tucked it even tighter against my ear. “Bring him where?” My eye gaze locked on Cyrus, the man they’d mistaken for his twin brother once already.

His expression once angry now fell into sorrow, as if he understood exactly what they’d said on the phone. My heart broke further. I needed to save my mother, but I couldn’t trade Cyrus or Corbin for her safety.

“A warehouse outside of Portland. I’ll text you the directions. Make sure and leave Ridge at home. Any other

police involvement will not end well for your mom.”

His words sounded like parting ones and fear gripped my chest that no longer held a heart. “Wait!” I yelled, trying to get him to stay on the line longer. My mother screamed again, a bone chilling sound. “Let me talk to her.”

The madman on the phone laughed again. “No, she’s not really in a position to take a phone call right now.”

My time was running out. I didn’t know what to do. Cyrus and I both stopped pacing, and only sheer terror kept me standing. As soon as I hung up the phone, I’d drop to my knees and cry.

Without taking his attention away from me, Cyrus tapped on the large glass window at the front of the bakery and then pointed into the corner of the room and stuck his finger in the shape of a phone to his ear. I didn’t know what he was trying to say, but he seemed satisfied with the results when he lowered his hand a few seconds later.

“How am I supposed to get him to Portland?” I asked. Had they figured out they didn’t have Corbin the first time? Or did they expect me to make him show up because we’d met during our kidnapping?

“That’s not my problem, Im. You’re going to have to figure it out.”

The phone went dead, and I crumpled. Except rather than hitting the cold cement sidewalk, Cyrus captured me in his arms and ushered me back into the bakery.

The tears started at once, but somehow, I squeaked out a brief explanation. “They have my mom.”

With those simple words, everyone jumped into action. Katy and Cyrus started talking to one another as Cyrus pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped a red button on his home screen. Katy looked up to the ceiling and began talking as if she was speaking to herself, and Vonnie turned around and used the bakery phone to place a call.

Then somewhere in the midst of all the chaos that was the next few moments of my life, a cupcake magically appeared in

front of me. Another chocolate and chocolate. But there wasn't time to enjoy a treat, so I pushed it away slowly.

What would my mother do? What happened if I didn't present Corbin tonight at 9 p.m.?

My mom didn't have a Cyrus Kensington to save her. She was alone, and there was nothing in that present moment for me to do about it. Nothing but sit, worry, and eventually eat a cupcake.

* * *

TWO HOURS LATER, Cyrus led me back to our hotel room. He walked me all the way to the edge of the bed and took off my shoes, the cute strappy sandals he brought me in the Georgia park.

"Why don't you lie down for little? We've done everything we can do right now."

I shook my head. How could he think about sleeping now? "I don't think I can rest."

"You don't have to sleep or anything, but try to relax. I'm going to go wait for Ridge in the lobby. Once he gets here, I'll bring him upstairs and we can listen to his plan. I have full faith he will get your mother back."

"If you trust him, I trust him." If a kidnapper told you not to involve someone specific or the police, that's exactly who you should call.

Cyrus pulled back the comforter on the bed and tucked me in. "I've got you, beautiful."

The door clicked closed when he left, and I waited in silence. But it seemed to stretch on and on. One second turned into a minute, which turned into ten, and even though I wasn't sure exactly how much time passed, it took them too long. I pushed back the covers and stood from the bed, putting my sandals on.

Every second we waited, my mother was being tortured by a criminal somewhere on the East Coast. She was my

mother, and I had to rescue her. If not for me, she wouldn't be in the predicament. I didn't think she was in danger originally. Otherwise, I would've told her to go into hiding. I would've returned home and made her safe. Everything about this was my fault.

The hotel left little notebooks on the tables and I scribbled out a quick note telling Cyrus I'd find a way to Portland and see about rescuing my mother. I couldn't hand over Cyrus or his brother, but if I had to trade myself, I would. It was a long shot, but I couldn't allow my mother to become someone's sex worker because I hadn't taken care of her.

I opened the room door slowly, trying to make the least amount of noise as possible. For the last two days, Drake had been stationed outside, but I peeked my head out, and he wasn't in the hallway. Drake was missing from his usual perch, but I saw a recent addition to the hallway.

A body trying to climb out of a window at the end of the hall.

The room door shut behind me, and the person in question turned. The moonlight from the window highlighted her face. "Katy?"

She stepped away like it was no big deal and smiled. "I'm so sorry about your mother. But I know Ridge will get her back."

"Are you climbing out the window?" My mother was still foremost in my mind, but I had questions about why a grown woman needed to sneak out a second-story window.

Katy looked back at the window as if it was the first time she'd seen it and she didn't have half her body out of it earlier. "Maybe."

"On the second floor." What kind of drop did that require?

She tipped her head and walked back to the window. I guess she figured the jig was up so she could go about her way again. "Pretty much the whole town is on camera. There are very few dead spots, but this just happens to be one of them."

“In the whole town?”

“Pretty much,” she repeated. “I was going to meet up with Vonnie to do some investigation work, but I assume you’re looking for a ride to Portland because the guys won’t tell you their plans or let you help.”

My eyes were still rimmed in red from all the crying, but curiosity filled my features. How did she know? “Yes? I have the address.” I’d given the information to Cyrus to pass it on to Ridge, a man I’d officially met now, but they didn’t delete it from my phone. “How did you guess?”

“Girl, I pegged you from the minute you stepped into the bed-and-breakfast. You won’t let some jerk kidnap your mother or not go after her in your own rescue attempt. That’s the mark of a bakery girl. You’re one of us. You just didn’t know it yet. The guys are always running out to save the day and not including us. It’s BS and forces us to take drastic measures. They never learn.”

“What kind of drastic measures?”

She put a hand on her hip. “Driving a worried daughter to Portland.”

I didn’t understand half of what she said, but the way she said it made it sound like a compliment, so I smiled. “Would you be willing to give me a ride?”

Katy bit her bottom lip. “Do you have a plan?”

I needed a plan? I wasn’t sure how long the drive to Portland took, but I figured I’d come up with something really snazzy on the ride there. Being put on the spot threw a damper on my excitement. “I figured I would go to the port and trade myself for my mother.”

Eventually, I’d figure out the details. It was a rough estimate of a plan at that point, but I hoped Katy saw the pure genius in the underlying facts.

From the scowl she wore, she didn’t. “That’s the worst plan I’ve ever heard and trust me, I know dangerous plans.”

Okay, so she wasn't gonna go along with my genius idea, but at least I could get her to agree to not turn me in. "Are you going to tell?"

She shook her head. "No. A plan that bad needs backup. I'll call Vonnie and tell her about the change of plans. How good are you at climbing down trees?"

Katy slipped her body out of the window and in the next moment, she was gone. I leaned my head out of the opening and saw her clutching the trunk of a big maple next to the bed-and-breakfast.

"Hurry," Katy whispered from her position. "We'll have to pick up Vonnie."

The last time I climbed a tree I'd been ten going through a tomboy phase while visiting family in Kentucky, but I wasn't about to let a few leaves keep me away for my mission.

CHAPTER 22

CYRUS

“You know Imogen will want to leave as soon as possible,” I said to Ridge as we made our way up the stairs to the second floor of the bed-and-breakfast. He’d given me the details of the plan even though I told him to wait until we were with Imogen.

I’d offered myself up as bait to lure Bernard out of hiding. They might have been looking for Corbin, but I wouldn’t let my brother risk his life to save my future mother-in-law. I wasn’t looking forward to becoming literal bait, but I wanted to be the one who jumped in and saved the day for my future family.

I peeked my head into the hotel room before swinging the door open to make sure Imogen was decent before she met Ridge. What the hell? She wasn’t there.

“Beautiful?” I called, but no one answered.

Ridge examined the room as well. “She left a note,” he said, pointing to the small notepad with the bed-and-breakfast logo on the top. She positioned it at the end of the bed, tilted a certain way so that we’d notice when we walked into the room.

“Maybe she skipped to the bakery for another cupcake,” I said, trying to be optimistic but failing. A note was never a good sign. Especially when the note writer’s mother had been kidnapped.

“Yeah, sure.” Ridge walked over to the pad, skimmed it, and then tossed it in my direction.

“No, she wouldn’t,” I said, scanning the message. My stomach twisted and turned with each letter.

Cyrus,

Went to save my mother. Don’t worry. Be back soon.

I tried to be mad. Betrayal clouded my emotions, but I had to admit that if it was up to me, I probably would've done the same thing. Nothing would keep me from saving Corbin if he was the one in trouble. The problem was that I just found Imogen and didn't plan to let her go running off into the dark night alone.

"We have to get her back," I said to Ridge, turning on a heel to face him.

He already had his phone pressed to his ear, and even though his face portrayed calmness, his words came quickly. "We'll get her. We know where she's headed, and she doesn't have much of a lead."

I checked my watch. There was no way to know if Imogen plotted to leave the entire time and darted out as soon as I left the room or if she took time before escaping. But at least thirty minutes had passed since I left her.

Rather than be upstairs with Imogen, I waited in the lobby for Ridge. Then he turned up with Corbin and we stood down there talking for longer than I should have allowed. It was my fault she left and my lack of ability to do anything quicker.

"I'm coming with you," I said, following Ridge when he turned and left the room without warning.

How did I let this happen? I recognized the possibility that Bernard would still be interested in Imogen, but I naïvely thought her mother was safe. It was another miscalculation on my part and led to doom.

A black SUV pulled up to the curb as soon as we exited the bed-and-breakfast and I recognized it as one from Ridge's fleet. Ridge jumped into the passenger seat and I slid into the back.

Drake was already at the wheel and the second our doors closed, he pulled out onto the empty street and turned toward the airstrip. If we used the chopper, we'd beat them to Portland.

“There’s three hours until the helicopter can be here and then they have to refuel,” Drake said, driving past the bakery.

Ridge drummed his fingers on the armrest of the passenger side door. “Shit, it’s only three hours to make the drive.”

Damn it.

The ex-Navy SEAL had enough muscle, but he was also full of brains. He was right. By the time the plane refueled and we were able to take off and get to Portland and then leave that landing strip to make it to the warehouse where Imogen’s mother’s kidnapper told us to meet, it would be too late. We could’ve made the drive one and a half times in that length of time.

Drake idled at the stop sign in downtown. “What do you want me to do, boss?”

Ridge slapped the car’s dashboard in anger. “Put Riley and Lee on the plane and the three of us will drive.”

My anxiety was already spiked, my system flooding with adrenaline, as I tried not to think about all the things Bernard could do to Imogen once he had her back under his control. Ridge’s loss of temper didn’t help. I knew it was bad when the situation upset him.

Drake shook his head. “Riley is still MIA.”

Ridge grunted and the hand he had rested on the dashboard turned into a fist. “Fine, call in Lee and Sloan.”

Drake’s phone rested between his shoulder and his ear, which left me in the back seat to piece together the day that started so well, became a shit show, and I only hoped didn’t end in a tragedy. “How in the hell did she even get a car?” I asked myself more than anyone else.

It’s not like she had an Uber drive her to Portland.

Drake continued on down Main Street and turned toward the highway, all the while barking orders into his phone. Ridge was busy typing away. He didn’t give any indication who he

was talking with, but from the way he tightened his hand around his phone, it wasn't good news.

"My brother and I will have a long chat when he finally gets back," Ridge said, and then he turned around in the seat to look at me. "And Katy is missing."

Drake groaned and turned on the road to lead us toward the highway. "Her Honda?" he asked, trying to determine which of the cars Katy drove.

If this had happened a year earlier, she had a crappy old Honda to get up to Portland, and we'd probably beat them there. But now she had Pierce's garage of vehicles to choose from to make a proper getaway.

Ridge shook his head. "No, she's driving Pierce's Tesla. Step on the gas."

All of us understood the severity of the situation. Katy wasn't likely to get to Portland and chicken out. If she coached Imogen on what to do, the two of them meant trouble. Drake pressed his foot to the gas, and we sped through the winding road out of town and into the growing darkness.

* * *

THREE HOURS LATER, we made it to the warehouse outside of Portland. The impressive driving time helped by a steady hand and the location of the warehouse being on the outskirts of the northern side of the city. Portland wasn't a large city, especially when compared to New York, but I wasn't in the mood to deal with any traffic that evening.

The warehouse was set back in an industrial lot full of other buildings that looked just like it. The only way we found the location was a big sign with the address numbers pointing in the right directions.

Except Drake didn't drive us right to the warehouse door. He stopped the SUV by a building in the front of the industrial park in one of the half-filled parking lots. There must have been a night shift happening, and we blended in with the other vehicles from the workers.

“Why are we stopping here?” I asked. I stared at the warehouse in question, the one we needed, but it was way down the line. An entire row of buildings stood in our way. If Imogen had already made it inside, she was too far away.

With this much distance between us, we wouldn't be able to make a quick getaway to safety once we snatched Imogen and her mother. I wasn't much concerned with Katy. She put herself into this mess, and she could probably find her way out of it.

Ridge looked back at me with an annoyed expression on his face as he popped open the top of a small black box. “We can't go in guns blazing,” he said, tapping something in the box I couldn't see and then his phone screen lit up.

“Why not?”

They were obviously both carrying and more than likely had a weapon stashed in the vehicle somewhere. I didn't have nearly as much experience as the SEALs, but Corbin and I spent afternoons at the shooting range. I could hold my own if need be. And when it came to getting Imogen back, I had a major need.

“Only two of us have guns, and we don't know how many he has stationed around the building.”

Drake stood beside him and nodded. “Stealth is our friend right now,” he said as a small device floated up from the box Ridge opened moments earlier.

No, it didn't float. It flew. The bug, because that is exactly what it resembled since it was no larger than a yellowjacket, hovered in the air in front of my face. Ridge's attention returned to his phone and he used the small screen to direct its movements. It zipped away from us headed toward the warehouse. Once it was out of sight, Ridge used his cellphone screen to track what the spy device saw.

Drake tucked an earbud into Ridge's ear and then the static sound coming from his phone grew silent. Ridge looked over at me and put a finger across his lips, and the three of us

slowly made our way around the large buildings as he continued to direct us via his spy device.

I tried to keep my eye on the screen and also walk, but there wasn't much to see until the bug reached our final destination. Ridge hovered it near a window and Imogen's face came into view. I sucked in a breath when I saw her standing next to another woman who was decidedly not Katy.

Vonnie, the woman we met at the bakery, and Imogen were talking to another man surrounded by a large open space. The picture was grainy, but we had enough detail to make out their faces.

Ridge stopped in the other edge of the building, one away from the warehouse, and pulled his gun from his back pocket, holding his phone in one hand and the gun in the other. "That's not Bernard. It's the Grandmaster," he said, more to Drake than me.

"That's not good," Drake said in reply and complete understatement.

I learned enough about the Grandmaster and his disobedient employee, Bernard, when Corbin became wrapped up in the situation earlier. We didn't want the legendary mafioso involved here.

"We have to save her," I whispered into the darkness, repeating what all three of us knew, but I felt the need to reiterate.

I trusted Ridge with my safety, but in that moment panic unlike any I'd felt before stole my breath. We weren't here to dig up dirt on the Grandmaster or his organization. We needed to save Imogen. Ridge had to remember the plan.

One question, however, hadn't yet been answered. "Where's Katy?" They said she was driving Pierce's vehicle, but she was nowhere to be seen. Every sweep the bug made of the building it was just the three people. The Grandmaster, Vonnie, and most importantly Imogen.

Ridge shook his head, but before he finished, we noticed movement as a new car drove up to the warehouse we watched

so intently. A vehicle I recognized.

CHAPTER 23

IMOGEN

“I ’m never eating fish again,” Vonnie said, wrinkling her nose.

Yeah, it was definitely a decaying fish smell. Vonnie and I entered the warehouse where the text message sent us less than five minutes earlier, but it took that long to decipher the horrifying smell permeating everything in the place. Fish guts.

It probably took so long to figure out because I didn’t have extensive knowledge of the smell of rotten seafood, but now that I’d pinpointed it, there was no way she was incorrect.

The smell made it so I had to focus on not gagging. You never wanted to offend the leader of a gang about his smelly warehouse while you are trying to negotiate for the release of your mother. I wasn’t sure of crime boss etiquette, but if there was such a thing, that was definitely in the book.

In ways, it was helpful. Because focusing on not throwing up all over the man’s shoes kept me calmer than I should have been in the situation.

“If you take her, she wants M&Ms. But only the green ones. Someone needs to pick out all the other colors,” Vonnie said using a lot of hand motions, mimicking picking out different colored M&Ms and tossing them behind her. “And they must wear gloves.”

I didn’t want to question her methods. “I don’t like M&Ms,” I whispered.

She leaned over and whispered back in my ear. “Katy says during negotiations it’s always good to start with something crazy.”

When she returned to her original position, I nodded. It did sound plausible. I wasn’t sure we’d get crazy a man who ran a criminal enterprise that spanned from Chicago to a now apparently Maine to agree, but I’d try anything. It became abundantly clear as we walked into the building and he

introduced himself as the Grandmaster that we were not here to meet Bernard like I expected.

I knew enough about the crime lord's organization to understand our situation just got worse. Which really if you thought about the life I lived the last few weeks, was definitely saying something. Originally, his rogue employee, who struck out on his own, kidnapped me, and now I walked into a kidnapping situation with the boss—the Grandmaster himself.

Except honestly it really didn't scare me as much as I expected. My mother was still being held by the crazy person, so that was concerning. At least her captor wasn't Bernard. It's possible the Grandmaster had more compassion. He didn't look like a scary mob boss or godfather. He didn't even use a cane. And he didn't have any scars or a cigar hanging from his mouth.

In a weird way, he was handsome. The man had to be over six feet with dark brown hair, almost black with the poor light in the building. Even his eyes weren't scary. They were bright and bold. The most alarming part about him was his age. He couldn't have been more than thirty-five, tops. But that was me being very ungenerous—in my defense he kidnapped my mother, so I wasn't sure if I had to be kind to him—he was probably thirty. He had the faintest hint of crow's feet around his eyes, and he even smiled when he saw us walk in. It wasn't an evil smile. It was friendly. If I saw him in a restaurant, I'd smile back.

The most alarming part of the Grandmaster had to be his completely normal and unalarming appearance. If you crossed him on the street, you'd probably swoon.

Of course, he kidnapped my mother and did business in a warehouse that smelled like an overturned sushi truck spoiled on the highway, so I ignored the good looks.

The calm smile he wore into the warehouse slipped into a frown as he stared at Vonnie, trying to work out if she was on drugs. "You're not a rock band and this isn't a fucking concert venue."

Unperturbed by his stare, Vonnie only shrugged. “Well, I’m sorry. I’ve never facilitated a hostage negotiation. Give a girl points for her first time.”

“Good. You should keep it that way.” The Grandmaster rubbed the end of his gun against his eyebrow and I cringed. I’d seen enough gunshot wounds in the hospital to know that could not be smart, but I didn’t consider it the time to tell him how to live his life. Also, I’d forgotten the gun. He had it out the entire time, but until he used it as an eyebrow scratcher, he held it at his side and I’d been able to pretend like it wasn’t there.

Apparently, over the last week or so, I’d become superb at denial. It worked for me so far, and I planned to keep going with it.

“And you’re confused, dear lady. This is no negotiation. You walked into my building unarmed, which means you belong to me.”

Vonnie crossed her arms and held her head up high. “We have backup plans.”

The Grandmaster lowered his gun but lifted one of his eyebrows. “You mean the blonde woman hiding behind the side door?”

As if on cue, the door in question opened and someone pushed Katy into the room by pressing a gun into her back. “We have a car approaching from the north,” the man pushing Katy said.

I expected another frown or sneer, but the Grandmaster smiled. That one was slightly alarming. It was more of a hungry smile, as if he’d been told our driver was about to drop off his dinner. If this was the animal kingdom, he would definitely be in charge.

“Good. How about we show them a little of our hospitality?” the man I no longer found very attractive said. His eyes sparkled like he was looking forward to his hospitality and we all knew it wasn’t fresh towels and a pillow mint.

Vonnie included me into her negotiation technique, but we needed to hurry the entire operation along. Plus, the dead fish smell was still grossing me out. I tried to breathe through my mouth, but sometimes I forgot and then almost died. It reminded me of the boat where they held Cyrus and me.

“Look,” I said and then took a hard swallow. I waited until my stomach was under control before I spoke again. “Let Katy, Vonnie, and my mom go and then you can keep me,” I said, pointing toward Katy to make sure I clarified who he was letting go.

“No.” I had to give the man. It was a simple and effective answer although not the one I wanted.

I crossed my arms, mimicking Katy and Vonnie’s stances. It made me slightly more powerful. “I’m worth more.”

At that, the Grandmaster’s calm smile returned. “Oh, you’re cute.” He raised his gun and pointed it at Katy. I really hoped he had the safety on that thing. “This one is attached to Pierce Kensington. I can assure you she is worth more.”

I was losing all my bargaining chips and if the Grandmaster knew who Katy was, we really were outmatched. “But...” I said, letting the word sit since I didn’t know what came after it.

For the first time that evening, I was scared. Before I’d been so sure we’d walk in and I’d ransom myself in my mother’s place. I figured once we had my mom safe, Cyrus could bargain for me. Nothing changed except my mom’s safety, but now I realized I miscalculated.

The Grandmaster laughed, and it sound honestly joyous, like this conversation thrilled him. “Don’t worry, you’re important too. You’ll bring me Corbin or his twin,” he said, lowering his gun again. “It seemed Bernard can’t tell them apart.”

It was a curious thing to say, but I didn’t have more time to press him because we had important matters at hand. “What about my mom?”

His hand flew up, and I flinched, even though it wasn't the one holding the gun. "Bring her in, Moose," he said to the man who pushed Katy through the door and then stood in front of it.

He walked across the open warehouse to a door on the other wall. Really, it was a warehouse full of doors. There had to be at least two or three on every wall with no indication of where they led except for one at the far end, which had a bathroom sign attached to it. Not that anyone could've paid me to use the bathroom that reeked of fish death.

The seconds stretched on, and what was probably only fifteen felt like thirty. The door moved and he and my mother stepped out of it.

I ran in her direction. "Mom!"

She locked her arms around me and squeezed tightly. I never wanted to let her go, but now she'd walk out on her own. I stepped back and checked her for other injuries. I saw no black eyes, bruises, or dried blood on any of her clothing. She looked quite fine. Didn't even have a limp or bandaged fingers.

"Did you have time to finish your ballgame?" the Grandmaster asked my mother.

And then the craziest thing in the entire world happened. Like super crazy. crazier than Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez getting back together. My mother smiled at him. "I did. The Braves took it in the last inning."

"You were watching baseball?" I asked, a little accusingly.

The Grandmaster laughed again, like he found it hilarious. "Yes, we stopped in at your mother's house during the game and she was quite irritated she wasn't able to finish. I had Moose find her a replay."

"The screaming?" I asked.

My mother's face turned a slight shade of pink. "You know how stressful those things are. The game was just

getting started, and we already had two errors and were down a run. I can't believe the team came back from that."

I chose not to believe it. That denial thing was still going strong for me, so I lifted my mom's arm and searched her for bruises. She had to have a bruise somewhere. Anywhere. I licked my finger and rubbed at her cheek, searching for makeup.

She patted my hand away. "I'm fine. Except from what I hear, you have some explaining to do, young lady. Kidnapping and hitchhiking with truckers? What about safety? Do you think you graduate college, get a job, and all those lessons I spent years putting into your head just fly out the window?"

A snort came from behind me, and I whipped around to see if it was Katy or Vonnie since it definitely had a feminine pitch to it, but both of them schooled their features into blandness before I determined.

"What's your long game?" Katy asked, and I dropped my mother's arm to pay attention.

The Grandmaster laughed, and his carefree attitude about the whole situation was getting rather annoying. This was a kidnapping and a negotiation. He could at least take it seriously. He snapped his fingers and Moose brought in two chairs.

Katy never dropped eye contact with him and circled beside the other chair, getting ready to sit. But he held his gun up at her, this time in a frightening way, and she paused. "Sorry, that chair is reserved for our future guest. If I had known to expect more people, we would've ordered more furniture."

"Obviously," Katy said, choosing instead to lean up against the chair rather than sit on it. "So your plan includes two chairs and Imogen's mother, but what for?"

The Grandmaster lifted his shoulder a fraction. "I hate to tell you, but you're overthinking it. Simple plans are the best of plans. I used Imogen's mother to lure one of the Kensington twins to this location. I then sent out a message to Bernard that

I had Corbin already. He wants to make a deal, and this way I have the upper hand. Bernard has been bad and deserves punishment.”

“So a plan to use the hacker to lure your enemy out into the open. Classic,” Katy nodded at the man as if she appreciated the idea.

The Grandmaster, I really needed to ask his actual name because calling him Grandmaster had become a bit ridiculous, smirked back. He obviously enjoyed the praise. “Exactly. I told them we could do the handoff tomorrow night at 10 p.m., so expect him to arrive any minute. Bernard never could handle the anticipation.”

No. No. No. We couldn’t be caught in this warehouse between the Grandmaster and Bernard when they faced off for the first time.

A gunshot rang off somewhere outside the warehouse and all of us froze. Vonnie screeched. My eyes were so wide they dried out with the fishy air and I clutched my mother’s hands, not sure which door to run to. Katy’s gaze met mine, and she looked worried, too. Shit. If she was worried, I needed to be petrified.

The man in the chair only chuckled. “Ah, that sounds like my errant underling now.”

CHAPTER 24

CYRUS

Ridge readjusted the focus on his device. I glanced at the surrounding area. A boat, what looked to be like an old-school fisherman's vessel, bobbed on the water a hundred yards from us. Being able to see what was happening on the screen but not make out what they were saying drove me insane, and I let my focus wander to the boat. Corbin and I usually spent a few months each year sailing in various locations, but right then, I didn't think I'd ever go near a boat again.

Ridge fiddled with the controls on his phone and moved the spy device further into the room, landing it on the edge of a partially open window. That gave us a better view and sound, but considering he still had one bud shoved in his ear, I couldn't hear what was being said.

The waiting game sucked. I'd never been great with patience and being on this side of the building and not next to Imogen, where she needed me, hurt. My leg twitched, wanting to get moving, and I tapped my fingers soundlessly against it.

A car, which Drake tracked, pulled into the industrial lot and drove right to the abandoned warehouse, parking close to a side door. Night had fallen in the lot beside the warehouse, and only a few lights illuminated the space. I leaned forward to get a better look because the car casting shadows resembled the one that trailed Imogen and me throughout the southern section of the United States. New dread filled my stomach.

Two men exited the car and one turned back, pulling a long shotgun from the backseat. More evidence they were the same men from Florida and Georgia.

Ridge stood and tapped Drake on the shoulder. His gaze met mine, and he nodded. "It's go time."

We slipped around the edge of the building when a gunshot rang out into the night. A scream came from inside the warehouse. A shriek so loud it sounded as if it happened right next to us shattered the evening. We ran as one, headed

for the back on the opposite side the men from the vehicle used.

Drake and Ridge placed themselves on either side of a metal door, and I fell into a spot next to Drake. The sound of metal being kicked in rumbled through the night and then another gunshot, but no more screams followed.

“If I asked you to stay here for safety, would you?” Ridge asked, leaning over the doorway so he didn’t have to shout.

I shook my head. Was he crazy? “Fuck no.”

His lips fell into a straight line and he stepped in front of the closed-door. “That’s what I was afraid of,” he said in one breath. Then the next with the next his foot hit the door right underneath the handle, and it flung open.

Ridge slipped into the space like a ghost, and Drake followed. Sadly, my entrance was not as stealthy, but I did my best to tag along. The room we entered was dark and held nothing more than a desk and two filing cabinets. The light was off, but residual beams of light streamed in from a large window that allowed the room to look out at the warehouse section of the building.

It was a good vantage point to begin our mission, but still too far from Imogen. I couldn’t even see where they were from this location.

“Papa, I’m home,” a voice yelled from somewhere in the warehouse.

The response was almost instantaneous. “In here, wayward son.” The words came from somewhere to our left and Ridge nodded in that direction, letting us know to turn that way as the three of us snuck out of the back room.

The second section of the building contained a hall space with a long walkway to stretch the entire building. We moved slowly with our backs up against the wall, making our way toward the opening at the very end.

Noise came from behind us, but we didn’t even try to be quiet. The person who had broken into the building, which I had to assume was Bernard, made so much noise as he

prowled his way through the warehouse that he covered our sounds.

The wood floor groaned as Ridge took his first step, and he froze, holding his arm out to stop us. Then with quick precision, he made his way down a few alone without creating more noise. I followed next and the two of us hovered at the end, waiting for Drake to join us.

Now only one room separated me from Imogen, but it still felt a million miles away. The empty building allowed the voices to echo and the three of us hovered in the back wall, listening to the conversation.

“Where’s TerminalChaos?” Bernard asked, and I stepped a little to my right to get my first view of his face.

“You’re early,” the other man’s voice said and, after another quick step in the right direction, he came into view. Undeterred by the entire scene, the Grandmaster lounged on a leather chair in a relaxed pose. “But have no fear. I always provide for my children.”

Two men stepped into the room standing right behind Bernard and pushed him closer to the middle of the warehouse where two chairs, one with the Grandmaster already in it, filled the space and nothing else.

I nodded for Ridge to head to his right and we all took a few steps in that direction, putting the scene before us in view. We were only in the small section of the building, covered by shadows. If anyone turned their head, they’d spot us in an instant. Thankfully, everyone’s attention stayed focused on the middle, where all the action was about to take place.

Imogen and her mother stood off to one side, huddled together, clutching each other. Katy and Vonnie were a few steps to their side, both watching intently as if it wasn’t happening right in front of their faces, but an action movie on TV and they hoped they didn’t get interrupted with a commercial break soon. Something was wrong with those women.

With my gaze on Ridge, I waited to see what he'd decide to do. At what point did we rush in and rescue the women? From one second to the next, our entire situation changed.

Imogen turned her head a fraction and spotted us in the shadows. Her eyes grew wide and she let out a gasp, which had her mother turning to spot us as well. Ever my strong woman, she hadn't been teary-eyed before, but after seeing us, she wiped stray liquid from her eye.

I did my best to tell her to not give our attention away, and she firmed her stance, nodded once with a quick head jerk and turned back to pay attention to the scene unfolding in the middle of the warehouse, but I could tell she glanced in our direction every few seconds.

Seeming to notice she was missing out on something, Katy looked around the room and spotted us as well. She cringed when her gaze fell to Drake and Ridge, and then she turned right back around, staring at the Grandmaster pretending she wasn't seconds away from a rescue. Vonnie stood beside her now, looking bored. The action seemed to take too long to unfold for her preference.

"There's only one problem," the Grandmaster said as three more of his men filed into the room and stood in the half circle surrounding Bernard. Ridge was right, we were definitely outnumbered. "You've been a very disobedient child. Sex trade. Kidnapping. What else have you been hiding?"

We didn't need background music to kick in at that moment to let us know the conversation between the Grandmaster and his once protégé was about to meet a fever pitch. Ridge motioned with his shoulder and I waved for Imogen and the other women to make their way over slowly so not to be detected.

Her mother took one step to the right and then paused. And then another. And then another. It was agonizingly slow, and I wanted to yell out to make a run for it, but the thickness in the air warned that it any moment everything might explode like a powder keg.

As the endangered women made their way toward us, the conversation between the two men continued.

“You are missing out on so many opportunities. You were supposed to lead our crew, but instead you continued to let prime opportunities pass us by. For a boss, you never think of the money,” Bernard argued.

The Grandmaster reared back, and then, with a slow headshake, his shoulders relaxed. “And you only thought of money.” He slammed his fist down on the chair, his movements not matching the calm of his words.

Everyone in the room froze. My heart barely beat as we all waited for what happened next.

The Grandmaster stood and stalked toward Bernard. I waved more frantically to get the girls to move quicker because we were running out of time. “You’re feral, Bernard, and you know what happens to dogs who bite their masters.”

Imogen finished her walk across the space, and once her feet hit the shadow, she dove into my arms. I pulled her in tightly and ran my hands over her, searching for injury while nuzzling my head in her hair and placing kisses over the strands.

Katy and Vonnie were the last two to make it and our now large group hovered in the shadows as Ridge walked backward, headed toward the door we came in through. We didn’t want to leave ourselves open for attack once they realized we were gone, and we needed a quick exit.

I cut my eyes to the two men in the middle of the room and followed the group with my footsteps.

Ridge opened the back door, the metal creaking from disuse over the years, and he and Imogen’s mother slipped out of the warehouse. I pushed Katy and Vonnie through and then paused for the last few seconds. The Grandmaster leaned toward Bernard, and his words were as dark as the night that waited for us outside the warehouse.

“We put them down.”

A shot echoed through the empty warehouse. Drake shoved me against the back, pushing me outside it into the dark night where a few paces ahead of us the five other members of our group raced through the evening night into the industrial park to safety.

CHAPTER 25

IMOGEN

One calm week later

“IT’S NOT AS good as the front page,” Cyrus said as he skimmed the article in the Pelican Bay newspaper. The big flat pages cast a shadow over his face from the sun’s rays on the warm beach.

I dug my hands into the sand, getting myself closer to him on the towel we shared at the public access portion of the town’s beach. “What are you talking about?” How could he find a reason to complain?

He moved a little to have a better view. “Our placement is disgusting.”

I leaned right into his space, getting as close as possible to read the article again. Our picture took up half the third page of the paper. I’d never made the paper, let alone that close to the front. One time in elementary school, we wrote letters to the State Legislature, and the newspaper came and took pictures of our entire classroom as we did it. I got in the group shot, and they used my name in the small caption. But this was a highlight of my fame.

If a kidnapping and rescue were third page newspaper material, I never wanted to do what it took to make the front headline.

As I rescanned the article outlining Corbin and my dramatic kidnapping, and then my heroic—although slightly moronic—attempt at saving my mother, I grinned. Someone could write a book about it. Cyrus moved the paper more in my view and then chose his new position to gain access to my ice cream cone as he licked a large dollop off the side. I pulled it back in full annoyance.

“They put Pierce on the front page last year. It was just a stupid engagement announcement. A kidnapping should definitely supersede an engagement.”

I laughed and dug my toes into the warm sand and then held my cone out for him to lick a chunk off the top.

The sun's rays were warm on my skin and the smell of the sandy beach was enough to cement this memory for a lifetime.

"I don't care. I want an extra copy for my mom." Sure, I already had five copies, but I didn't plan to admit it to him. The *Pelican Bay Journal* wasn't a large newspaper. All five copies were still thinner than one regular newspaper, but it counted. "Look how good that picture is."

I wasn't necessarily what you'd call photogenic. The only time I had uploaded a new profile picture was when I used a filter. I purposely never showed my driver's license because it looked like I had bathed in a truckload of salt and then forgotten how to use a hairbrush the morning of my appointment.

But my picture in the paper was amazing. Whoever took the photo deserved a medal because they made me look fantastic. Especially considering I'd been rescued from my failed attempt at negotiating my mother's release. In the photo, we were sitting at the police station back in Pelican Bay as we all gave our detailed account to the local detective and the one who drove up from Portland.

I hadn't slept and the genuine shock of the situation was finally setting in right as they snapped the shot. Maybe that was what made my eyes look so bright. Because I don't know how else that photographer took a picture of me with no sleep, in a dingy police station, yet somehow made me look like a movie star with decent hair and eyelashes.

Cyrus stared at the picture in question. "I look like Corbin."

My toes dug into the sand deeper as I laughed. I'd done a lot of that the last week. "You are twins."

"No, but look at that frown," he said, tapping his face on the picture and jostling the newspaper.

I wrapped one of my arms around him and gave him a quick side hug, passing over the cone for him to finish. He needed it more than I did. “You were stressed.”

Cyrus didn't frown often, but if there was ever a time in his life he could, it was after rescuing me from the Grandmaster.

Plus, about thirty seconds before they took the photo, he received a text, actually later we learned the text went through all of our cell phones at the same time. Like one really disturbing group message from the Grandmaster that he'd taken care of everything and promised none of us had to worry about Bernard anymore. He also apologized for our troubles. Five cell phones ringing together with an identical message made a man frown.

It wasn't until the next day when a fruit bouquet showed up with his deepest sympathies and a handwritten card from the Grandmaster that Cyrus got mad. I admitted it was a weird gift although I didn't really see why he was angry. Especially since he ate all the strawberries from the bouquet before I even had a chance. It didn't seem right to be mad at a man for sending you fruit if you ate it.

Personally, I had no idea what the words “taken care of” in the text meant, but I chose not to ask. That denial game still hadn't steered me wrong. Everyone else assumed Bernard had become fish food, but no one had any proof.

In a weird way, I almost felt sad for him. I mean he kidnapped me, chased me up the coast of the United States, and tried to use my boyfriend for his nefarious means, but he was a man who chose a life of crime and then eventually it turned on him and took him out too.

The man obviously had big brains, considering he ran a secret operation away from the Grandmaster for at least a period before being caught. If he'd only put his smarts to good, maybe he'd have changed the world.

Katy told me I was crazy to feel bad for him and he got what he deserved, but I liked people and tried to remember that everyone had good in them. I didn't watch sports, but I

always felt bad for the losing team, and it was easy to have sympathy for criminals when you had empathy for the reasons they turned to a life of crime. We didn't know Bernard's story or even the Grandmaster's. Why did one choose to become a mob boss in Chicago? There had to be an interesting back story.

Or maybe it was wishful thinking.

Cyrus closed the newspaper and folded it up, setting it on the beach beside us.

"Don't ruffle it. I'm going to have it framed." Either that copy or one of the five others in the hotel room.

"Where are you going to hang it?" he asked, smoothing out the front page of the paper even though I didn't need that one for framing.

Hmm. I hadn't considered that far into my plan. Maybe Cyrus rubbed off on me in just a few days. "I don't know. My bedroom or the living room," I said, listing off various rooms where someone would hang a newspaper clipping. It wouldn't make a lot of sense in the bathroom and something told me it probably shouldn't go into the kitchen. "My kidnapping might end up a real conversation starter."

I could throw wine and cheese parties as an excuse to have people over and then casually wander over to that wall and point out the time I was kidnapped. It had real potential. Of course I had to learn about cheese and wine before I threw any parties.

I took an extended leave of absence from my job to mentally recuperate, but there'd be a slew of questions when I returned. I should buy more newspapers, have them laminated, and just pass them out.

Cyrus placed his hand against my chin and met my eyes when he said clear as day, "I love you."

My shoulders went back and my eyes grew wide. Wow. He just put it right out there into the world.

His thoughtful expression turned and to a jubilant one. "You don't have to say it back, but I wanted you to know

before I said the next part.”

“The next part?” I asked in a scared whisper.

“The next part is more of a story or a fortune telling. Imogen, if we’d had never met then right now, I’d be at a party. Or still sleeping off a hangover from a party the night before. Sure, I’d schedule a few meetings here and there to sell more of Corbin’s work, but really it was one meaningless experience after the next.”

“Yes, I can see how that may get boring after a while,” I said without even a hint of sarcasm in my voice. What kind of existence was it where you jumped from one party to the next? Cyrus was obviously a man who enjoyed a good time, but everyone’s life needed meaning—something deeper to keep you going.

“If not for you and this crazy whirlwind experience we’ve shared, I don’t think I would actually know what love is. Sure, I love my brother and my parents, but what I experience when I look at you is so much deeper.”

I wanted to shake my head and argue the validity of his words. We hadn’t known one another long enough, but I believed him. I believed every word Cyrus said because I felt it, too.

“Just to be aware, I’m not saying it back because you said it first. I love you, too, Cyrus Kensington.”

He laughed and then kissed me squarely on the lips. And even though it had happened a million times the last week, I still tingled from it deep into my toes. “Well good, now that that’s taken care of, we need to decide where we’re going to live.”

Oh. I normally thought out every step of my life, but with a few other things going on, I hadn’t taken time to think about how I lived in North Carolina and Cyrus lived... Everywhere. How would the two of us even make a relationship work? There was long-distance and then there was halfway across the world distance.

“Don’t look so freaked out,” Cyrus said, resting his hand against my chin again. “We can live wherever you want. I’m not attached to any place in particular.”

“North Carolina,” I said, not having to think about it for long. My mother lived there with all my other family. My job. All my stuff was in North Carolina.

We brought my mother to Pelican Bay with us and got her a room at the bed-and-breakfast. She took the week as a vacation to relax. While her kidnapping wasn’t as scary as mine or what I first expected when I raced in to save her, she’d still experienced a traumatic event. The Braves almost lost the baseball game. She and Cyrus got along so well. Like they’d been friends for years and they were even planning a trip to New York City to meet his mother and father. In fact, I worried about leaving the two of them alone because every time I did, I came back to another adventure they had planned. And quite frankly I was about done with adventures.

And while I found Pelican Bay to be the cutest small town ever, and I especially loved the fact they put me on the third page of their newspaper, it was the middle of summer, and the wind off the ocean was already chilly. We were sitting on the beach, but a gust blew up. It gave me a chill across my skin.

“Done,” Cyrus said, not arguing with my decision at all. “But no more hospital parking garages.”

“Deal.”

EPILOGUE

CYRUS

A little more than a year later.

“BET you never thought we’d get here. Did you?” Corbin asked, as he found a spot to get comfortable in the lounge chair beside me. I grunted in agreement and waited for him to pass me my cocktail.

“It has been one hell of the year,” I agreed. Somehow, not only did we survive, but we both ended up with our soulmates.

It helped that Imogen and Hazel got along like long-lost sisters.

Cyrus adjusted the umbrella, putting us both back into the shade, and then waved to his girl as she ran toward the crystal-clear water of our favorite place to visit. “At least we survived and had an exceptional year,” he said, echoing my earlier thought.

I scowled at him. “Don’t say that shit out loud and put it into the universe. It’s only October.” Sure, things had stayed calm the last few months, but that didn’t mean we made the entire year unscathed.

After confirming the Grandmaster wasn’t involved in my abduction and making sure Bernard was taken care of, Corbin and I went back underground. Having a home base too long became a risk. We still had our home in Pelican Bay when we wanted to return, but we could no longer stay in one place. It wasn’t just our safety on the line anymore, but Imogen and Hazel as well. It was our job to look after them, and I didn’t take it lightly.

“Relax, brother,” Corbin said, sounding very much unlike him.

So much so, I turned in my chair to glance at him completely to make sure he hadn’t swapped with someone else who looked exactly like me. “Aren’t I usually the carefree one and you the anxiety-ridden over-planner?”

Corbin decided we needed to mix things up and go back underground. He'd never admit it out loud, but we were twins and had a deep connection. The fact I'd been kidnapped because someone thought I was him was a hard pill to swallow.

It wasn't his fault, and the only person blaming him was himself, but I wasn't ready to share Imogen with anyone else yet either, so I didn't argue. As far as her mother understood, Corbin and I were reclusive billionaires who spent our lives on boats partying. It was a façade we played well for years and we picked it up again quickly.

There were fewer parties, though, and more gorgeous locations on tropical islands. After this visit to Ibiza, we were set to meet her mother and spend a month in Jamaica.

After that, who knew where life would take us? It didn't matter where we landed as long as I had Imogen by my side.

"I've been thinking," Corbin said, taking a long draw from the straw shoved into his fake coconut.

"Those words have always been a little scary." Now I knew how our mother felt whenever Corbin said them. I had a feeling he wasn't talking about designing another computer system.

He readjusted himself in his chair, his feet poking out into the sunshine on the beach where we lay. "I'm thinking about asking Hazel to marry me."

He probably expected shock. My brother didn't run into anything lightly. He considered all the options before deciding, but we changed in the last year and if I said it was too soon, it would be a lie. I'd had similar thoughts about when it would be socially acceptable to ask Imogen, and I was planning to do so in Jamaica when her mother came. "You should," I said and waited for his response. It would be good.

"You really think so? What about the 'why settle with one pussy when you can have them all' mantra you held for years?"

Rather than look at him, I continued to watch Imogen in the water as she splashed around riding the waves and using her body as a surfboard. “Times change and I guess we got older.”

Cyrus didn’t answer, but I saw him nod from the corner of my eye.

I watched the woman I loved with my entire heart and the other woman who would soon be my sister-in-law as they both jogged out of the water and came up to where we were sitting on the beach. Imogen dropped her wet body right on top of mine, ocean water cold against my heated skin as it seeped in through the bathing suit I put on but hadn’t yet gotten wet.

“When are you going to get in the water?” she asked, placing a quick chaste kiss against my lips and then taking her hips down into my lap. If she kept moving like that, we’d end up back in our room soon.

I moved her a little to the left to give myself room and then brought her closer to nuzzle into her neck and lick a drop of salt water from her skin. “Maybe later tonight,” I whispered into her ear.

“We still heard that, you know?” Corbin yelled beside me. Hazel whacked him affectionately on the arm.

Imogen kissed me again. “You want to go for a walk and see if the little shop is open yet?” she asked, reminding me of the area of shops we drove past the other day on the way to our resort. I promised her many island vacations, and she wanted to buy one of the popular wraparound skirts. I learned quickly not to argue when she finally let me buy her something. She could have the world.

I slipped off my chair and brought her with me, using the towel I was lying on to wrap around her shoulders. “You two heard the lady. We’re going shopping. Do you want to come?”

Corbin shook his head. “I’m gonna go for a swim to get some exercise.” He looked out toward his girlfriend and not the water.

Imogen crinkled her nose. “You should be careful because of the bacteria,” she said, looking between the two of them.

Hazel’s eyes widened. And she took a step back from our chairs.

“That is our cue to go,” I said, grabbing onto Imogen’s hand and walking back away from the beach out to the sidewalk that led to the shops. I laughed as we heard Corbin promising Hazel that it would be okay.

“I feel bad,” Imogen said as she walked beside me. “But really, that’s not a spot that saltwater is supposed to go.”

I laughed so hard it sounded like a snort and a chortle together and then lifted Imogen up in my arms, held her tightly, and then kissed her hard against the lips. “I love you,” I said, pulling a piece of her hair back and tucking it behind her ear.

She shook her head at me as if I was the crazy one. “I was trying to be helpful. They need to think of these things.”

“I know. That’s why you’re adorable.” Even after everything we’d gone through, Imogen hadn’t lost a single one of her niceties. She was still the most kindhearted, wonderful person I’d ever met. My girl didn’t let the events of the past year harden in her or turn her away from the world. She just continued right on being amazing. “I know.”

“Anyway,” she said, tugging on my arm to get us walking again. “I love you too.”

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—

Megan Matthews loves writing humorous romantic suspense featuring heroes with unbelievable abs, billionaire bosses, and heroines with attitude for days. She lives in Michigan with her techie husband, homeschooled son, their cat, and two guinea pigs.

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CRIMINAL BUSINESS SNEAK PEEK

****Continue reading for a sneak peek of His Ambush ****

CRIMINAL BUSINESS CHAPTER 1

SHILOH

“Be careful, Rainman, with a name like hers she might bite,” my mugger spit. It didn’t make a lot of sense and I had more pressing issues at the time, but still, the insults stung.

It also wasn’t the first time I heard someone use a dog reference to make fun of my name. Nobody was original anymore. I blamed the Internet. I stepped down the first batch of stairs in front of the bar’s back entrance with both hands held high. A classic robbery move.

“Gee, I’ve never heard that one. I guess after I finish kicking your ass, I’ll have to go yell at my mom for naming me Shiloh.”

Was it smart to use sarcasm on a man who held a gun to me with his finger on the trigger?

No.

But I made dumber choices in the past. His finger hovered over the trigger as if he couldn’t wait to shoot me, but realized I was no good to him dead. You can’t ransom a corpse.

At least if I was going to have one hell of a shit day, God put it all on the same day rather than spread out over the course of a week. When life really got down, you had to think positive. There weren’t many positive things about being held at gunpoint in the back alley of the bar in Chicago, but I’d keep trying.

I guess all those affirmations I did every morning hadn’t paid off yet.

“What are you smiling at, bitch?” The second attacker, who stood behind the first without a weapon, sneered. For a man not holding a gun, he was a rather asshole in his own right.

“I’m just thinking about what you’ll look like dead.”

What did it about a woman when being held at gunpoint didn't make me sweat any longer? It was the late September humidity, causing my curly dark brown hair to frizz and not the stress.

“Are you the Grandmaster's cousin?”

It was a stupid thing to do, but I popped my hip out after taking one more step down, putting myself closer to the barrel of the gun. Fuck it. If I was going to die, I wasn't going down begging for mercy.

“Did you come all the way down here to kidnap me and you don't even know for sure who I'm related to?” I made a tsk sound from between my teeth and shook my head in disapproval. “What will your boss do if I say no?”

Hopefully, he'd take the time to confirm I was indeed the cousin to Westley Richter before he shot me. If he was dumb enough to take sarcasm at face value, then I was screwed.

Rainman stood beside his accomplice and held up a full sheet of paper. My image was so large on it you can probably see every pore on my nose. Didn't the criminals in the underworld have any tact?

The first guy, I was gonna start calling him Tall Asshole since he hadn't given me his name, used the end of his Glock to tap the printed picture. How did I know he had a Glock?

I lived in Chicago in one of the most notorious crime families in the city. It came with the territory.

He twisted his weapon back in my direction when I stepped to the side.

“Yeah, you're definitely the Grandmaster's cousin.”

When my cousin, Westley i.e. the Grandmaster, was tapped to take over the infamous Chicago gang, The Masters, he taught me the ropes. I'd been helping him years earlier as well.

Chicago wasn't normally so full of criminals. The beautiful city normally kept its criminal behavior on the south side. I lived in it my entire life and had no plans to move.

Chicago had everything. As long as you owned a big ass puffy coat and could get used to the words “lake effect snow,” then you never needed to leave the city. Especially when your cousin practically owned it.

“The bigger question - who is stupid enough to need to ask?”

I took the last step off the stoop, putting myself at the same level as my attackers. The alleyway rank of pee and filth. Bad life choices. It was one of those things in Chicago you just eventually learned to love.

This close, we had just enough light between us for me to spot the man’s missing side tooth when he grinned as if he was holding some super special secret and couldn’t wait to tell me. That was the other thing about criminals. They could not keep a secret. “Haven’t you heard? The Grandmaster isn’t the only big player anymore. There are new guys in town. The Masters aren’t big enough to take on all the competition.”

I rolled my eyes dramatically and used it as a reason to check the end of the alley. It was a hundred feet away or more. Judging distance wasn’t my best skill. I could, however, mix a dirty martini in under thirty seconds. Something told me these guys weren’t looking for my bartending skills.

There was no way I’d make it to the ends of the alleyway. Not alive, at least. I should have worn the stilettos. Then I’d have tall heels to blame for my lack of a getaway. Without them, I only had my poor running skills to trip myself up.

“What is it with you guys and your stereotypes.? This is America. We don’t discriminate here.”

It was obvious that Tall Man had been born in America, but watched too many mob movies. His accent was Chicago and not the Chicago mob.

Growing up around the Grandmaster after he joined the Masters, I learned almost everything about mob life. Many people thought they were classic mob. The Master’s gang was more a collection of evildoers than your traditional syndicate. Although they were running much the same way.

In reality, mob life shielded me from many of the bad parts of the life. Westley always said it wasn't my responsibility to take the fall for his actions and when he took over, he maintained the same beliefs. That didn't mean he didn't make sure I knew how to fire a gun and defend myself. His bar was also the location of my current kidnapping.

I didn't know every single thing about the inner workings of the empire, but the one thing that Westley never hid for me was his overt annoyance at mob stereotypes. He said everybody always asked him which family he associated with as he climbed the ranks of the criminal empire.

We weren't part of any family. The Richters were a conglomerate, mix-matched American family who had been here for generations. It wasn't like learning how to be a criminal was something they only taught in Italy.

Westley hated The Masters considered part of the mob because he considered himself more of a pioneer. Someone who bucked the trends and carved his own path. When he took over the gang, they were a ragged group of thugs, but he turned it into a gang to be rivaled by no other.

It sounded like a lot of bullshit to say that he created a new mob family. He considered himself a new age friendlier criminal. But since I was staring at the end of a gun, he might be slightly delusional about the friendlier part. Westley kept me out of the family business dramas, but paid for my college and gave me a job at one of his bars to help me with spending money while I worked on my MBA at Northwestern. I'd skated by without seeing actual violence until the assholes showed up at the bar.

Some people may have considered Westley a nuisance relative, but in reality, he wasn't such a bad guy.

Rainman reached his hand out and stuck his discussing fingers around my arm, giving me a jerk. There's only one place they'd try to get me, the big black van at the end of the alleyway. If I went in, I'd probably never come out. At least not alive.

“No way, fucker. I’m not getting in your van.” Did they think I was stupid? There weren’t puppies or candy in that vehicle.

I jerked my arm from his grasp and tried to form an escape route. The alleyway dead ended at the back of the tattoo parlor, which closed at nine PM. They were not any help. It had opening at the other direction, but then I’d be running right towards a getaway vehicle. I’d locked the door to the bar or else I’d escape that way and make a run to the front door or at least to the silent alarm. Standing in the empty alley, I was screwed.

And all of us saw it.

Still, I wasn’t out of options completely. If I made it far enough down the alley, I might scream and someone else closing another bar might hear me. It was the only hope I had left.

I wasn’t a track star in high school because I was too busy running numbers for Westley to devote more time to after-school activities, but I had a feeling when it came to running for my life, I’d be able to get more speed. Hopefully.

I stepped to my left, hoping the two men in front of me continued arguing over the best way to get me in the van and didn’t notice. Just as I turned my body in that direction, two more men slipped out of the van. They left the back door open, and I didn’t know how many seats were in the vehicle, but I had a rough estimation there were now more men than seatbelts. They probably wouldn’t let me ride shotgun.

Shit.

“This is really going to piss off the Grandmaster,” I said. I hated calling him the Grandmaster. It was such a stupid and pretentious name because the organization called themselves The Masters as a ploy on master criminals. So dumb. Men. But I needed to invoke fear and if they were dumb enough to fear someone with the name the Grandmaster, it wasn’t my fault for using it against them.

“If you just get in the van, we won’t hurt you.”

I laughed, but it sounded pretty humorless. There was nothing funny about getting kidnapped. “You might not hurt me, but the Grandmaster is definitely going to kill you.”

Rainman reached for me again and I jerked back before they grabbed hold.

Couldn't a girl just enjoy a late night shift where the tips were amazing, but you had to work with the shadiest manager in the company? Plus, I just found out I had a paper due by the end of next week. I had enough problems on my plate at the current moment. I didn't need to add kidnapping to the list. There wasn't time to be kidnapped. I had deadlines.

And to make the day worse, I passed on the tetanus shot at my last doctor's appointment. I mean, honestly, how often did a girl come into contact with a rusty nail or something? But now all I could think about was a dirty, dark dungeon where they'd put me in with all the creepy crawly things. In my mind, they were ancient old vampire kidnappers who had a castle dungeon buried deep somewhere beneath the city. Chains were definitely involved and not the fun kind.

Fuck, I was under a lot of stress. You can't blame a girl for her active imagination.

“All right, we've heard enough of your bullshit. Let's go,” Tall man said and charged at me with the gun held out. I braced for impact, but rather than shoot me or knock me to the ground, he wrapped his long arms around my middle and started dragging me toward the van. I kicked and squirmed, but his accomplice helped by taking my other side, and there wasn't much for me to do.

So I screamed.

The short one hit me in the back of the head. “Scream again and he'll shoot you for real.”

They said no screaming, but no one mentioned kicking. I also dropped my weight, trying to make myself as heavy as possible. Three more steps away from the van and the two men who stood other side of it looked at me hungrily when a new player entered the field.

A sleek black Hummer came to a squealing stop directly in the middle of the alleyway's entry, affectively blocking us all in.

“What in the mother fuck now?” Rainman asked, but no one answered him. It seemed the newcomer in the environment wasn't playing for the same team.

He had to be sent from my cousin.

In my moment of distraction, they lifted me up and shoved into the back of the van. The door shut behind me and I screamed again because I was pretty sure a bullet couldn't make it through the metal frame. My scream cut off as the car doors closed on the other side and then gunshots.

Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop.

I dropped to the ground, trying to make myself as small as possible as they pinged around the outside of the van. The gunfire sounded like someone lit a firecracker in the alleyway, and then it stopped and everything grew super quiet.

I braced, ready to fight against whoever opened the door to get away, but as the handle turned and the door slowly opened, it wasn't one of the four men who tried to kidnap me, but someone new smiling in the opening.

This was a pure gentleman. He was tall and had dark brown hair swept back and put perfectly in the place. He didn't look as if he had got into a gun to fight with anyone within the last thirty seconds. His smile radiated happiness and his teeth were all perfectly white and straight. It was a weird thing to notice, but it was like how they say when you witness a crime, you fixate on the perpetrator's weapons. I just couldn't look away from that perfect smile. It took me at least ten seconds before I realized he was also holding a gun in his other hand, but he wasn't pointing it at me.

Had my cousin hired one of the hottest hitmen bodyguards in Chicago? I was thankful for the save, but if you had me followed, we were to have a serious talk.

After I told him thank you for saving my life.

“Shiloh Richter, would you like help out of this disgusting van?” he spoke, and it was like Angels sung. Okay, that might have been too much, but he was seriously hot.

The unknown man held out his hand, and I placed mine in it, letting him help me step to the ground with him, maintaining my balance. Like a true gentleman.

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