

HEROES FOR HIRE
BOOK THREE

A man and a woman with extensive tattoos are shown from the chest up, looking upwards and to the right. The woman has long blonde hair and is wearing a watch on her left wrist. The man is shirtless and has a watch on his left wrist. They are embracing each other. The background is dark and moody.

Liar

K.W. COLESON

liar

HEROES FOR HIRE

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To my thirsty readers who love a man in uniform. Thanks for sticking with the sexy seven. They've been waiting for you.

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CHAPTER ONE

adam

The sound of gunfire rang out throughout the quiet night air. Except twenty minutes ago, that quiet was ruined. I heard our targets shout from a distance; they were part of an enemy terrorist cell. They were responsible for the bombing of an American embassy in Lebanon. Several Americans were killed along with a large number of Lebanese citizens who were in the area.

We had orders to take the bombers out. We neutralized them and rescued the few survivors they pulled from the wreckage as hostages.

Our intel indicated there was a new leader in charge of their group, an extremist cell. The word on the grapevine was that he wanted to play games. He had a reputation for being cruel, and his methods for results were unusual. He seemed to get off on the fear of others—he had no idea what real fear was, but he'd learn. It would be the last thing he felt as he stared into our eyes while we put the barrel of a rifle to his head. We'd make sure he understood the true meaning of fear before he went *lights out* and we avenged our fallen Americans.

“Straight ahead,” I called out to Wells in front of me. His head was turned to the right, scanning the building for any signs of unusual activity. Our intel led us to believe they used the village as a cover for their operation. I saw a suspicious young male entering the building straight ahead. He turned to glance at us for only a split second, but that was enough time to see the worry in his eyes. We weren't a threat to the

residents here—unless they were helping the extremist group. Some villagers even liked our presence. They benefited from our presence with supplies and snacks.

Wells moved forward quietly and reached the front wall of the building. He put his back against the bricks next to the door. We fell into position around the door, ready to breach it.

I was the breacher. While a lot of breachers in other, less-skilled units might have a sledgehammer, I didn't. I had more body mass and strength than your average guy, even for Special Forces. Therefore, I hadn't met a door that I couldn't smash my way through, at least not in these parts. They couldn't afford heavy steel doors.

Gunfire came from the roof of the building above us. They shot rounds into the awning that provided us with cover.

"Time to go, Strong," Wells ordered.

"Roger." I kicked out in front of me. The bottom of my boot made contact with the wooden door, and it splintered from the force. I took a step back and allowed Garcia and Mendez to step forward. They entered first to clear the room.

"Go, go, go!" Wells shouted.

They rushed through the door, and then Wells, Jones, and Yates followed. Guy and I brought up the rear. We had five people missing from our team for the rest of the mission; their injuries were too bad to continue on. We should have been pulled, but too much was riding on grabbing the group's leader now. We couldn't let him disappear again.

The front of the line checked the first rooms while Wells and Jones moved deeper into the house, and Guy and I followed.

"All clear," Garcia called from behind me.

We heard footsteps up above us. I went running for the stairs with Guy and Jones at my six. I was eager to get my hands on the fuckers who shot at us only moments ago. I was eager to swiftly put a stop to a new terror cell and send a message in the area: *Don't fucking try.*

I got to the top of the stairs and saw a man standing there. I came to a dead stop, which was hard to do for someone my size and speed. The man's hand was wrapped tightly around a small detonator. His vest was visible, and his body shook like a leaf. I could smell his terror. I could read it in his eyes. He didn't want to be there with a bomb strapped to his chest. He was coerced or forced. I wasn't sure which was worse. Both sucked.

On the walls to the right and left were the injured Americans pulled and kidnapped from the ruins of the embassy. They had various degrees of injuries. One had a poorly applied tourniquet on his leg. There was no amount of therapy that would ever magically fix this trauma for them, assuming that we all survived.

"Easy there. Can you understand me?" I asked the man who had our lives in his hand, *literally*. I really hoped he freaking knew English. Our interpreter was downed.

He nodded.

"Let me get these innocent people out. They have families, jobs, and people who need them. You don't want to hurt them, do you?" I kept my tone calm and leading. I wanted him to relinquish control to me, and to do that, he needed to like or fear me. I'd rather go for first and use the latter as a last resort.

He shook his head. Good, I could work with that.

"Is someone forcing you to do this?" I felt the presence of one of my brothers behind me. He didn't make any sudden movements, which was good. We didn't want to spook the scared man who was one finger movement from killing us all. Rescuing the prisoners was the new number-one priority, and it needed to happen quickly.

He nodded his head.

"Who?" I asked.

Behind me I heard Guy and Jones whispering to each other. I was vaguely aware of Guy backing down the stairs to go warn the others. We knew he was the only suspect still in this building; his oppressors left him behind to take out as

many Americans as he could. This was all a trap, and we fell right into it. The intel was bad, and we might all die because of that. It wouldn't be the first time, and it wouldn't be the last. Intel was just as valuable as the men who acted upon it. There was a bad informant who was likely being granted refuge, and that posed a danger to those in the safe house. The whole scenario was fucked. The danger stretched much further than our team and those civilians trapped in the building with us.

The man remained silent, staring at me. He swayed nervously on his feet, like he might pass out. He didn't bother to acknowledge my question, and that jacked my heart rate up even further. The adrenaline of the situation had the sound of my blood pumping in my ears.

"Let's try something else," I mumbled. I implored him to listen to me with my eyes. "Will you let these innocent people go? The people who did this to you, they want us soldiers, not these innocent civilians," I said, trying to switch gears. I wasn't a hostage negotiator, but I'd been a part of enough training exercises to take a crack at it. What other choice did I have?

He nervously shook his head and then turned to face the window behind him.

Without moving my head, I looked behind him and saw the sniper scope pointed toward us from the opposite rooftop.

"Fuck..." I mumbled, then immediately took control of the situation. "Get out, get out. Quietly and stay out of view of the window." I kept my body language calm and non-threatening. I didn't want the sniper to pull the shot before we had a chance to clear the room. I was more concerned for my brothers and the innocent civilians who were trapped in here. I wasn't worried about taking a round directly. I wore my helmet and my armored plates. I'd been shot before and survived. It only took a few months of physical therapy, and then I was right back at it with my team. But explosives were a different story. Those would make a bloody mess out of all of us if I didn't keep my cool.

The civilians crawled along the wall toward the door. They did their best to stay out of the view of the window. Even the man with the tourniquet on his leg was pulled behind two others. I spared a glance behind me to see that my team was at the bottom of the stairs, ushering the civilians to safety, probably out a back door and out of view of the sniper.

When the room was cleared, only I and the vested man occupied the space. I started to ease my way toward the stairs behind me. My footsteps were light, my movements slow, and my gun was aimed in the direction of the window. The sniper was the more immediate threat. If the man with the bomb wanted me dead, he'd have already lifted his finger from the switch.

I thought through my options instantly. If I shot the man in the vest, I'd be killing myself anyway. I'd be blown up by the blast. If I somehow survived that, I highly doubted that the sniper would let me get very far. I kept my gun trained in the sniper's direction. In two more steps, I'd exchange fire and then take cover. The man that stood between us never stood a chance.

I heard the silenced shot penetrate the shoulder of the man in front of me. In a matter of seconds, he would release the button. He'd be dead and hit the floor, and he'd lose his grip on the detonator. Another shot connected with the man, and my face was covered with the man's brain matter. I turned my back toward what was left of him, and I threw myself down the stairs as the explosives detonated. I was engulfed in hot air and flames as I went hurling down the stairs. I felt the heat of the flames against my uniform, and it was nearly unbearable. It felt like being roasted alive as I flew toward the sun. The two seconds I flew through the air abruptly came to an end. My head bounced off the floor, and I went lights out.



I woke up startled by the dream, suffering from a hell of a hangover. My empty whiskey decanter sat on the coffee table

in front of me. I didn't even make it to my bedroom before I fell asleep.

Fuck, that was a lot of liquor, but I needed it. I got terrible news this evening—one of my battle buddies passed. Gone to Valhalla. I'd known him since basic training. I hadn't seen him in years, but I still greatly felt his loss. I could still see him joking behind the drill sergeant's back and getting caught. His quick wit and sense of humor cost him a lot of sit-ups and push-ups.

I was thrown through a loop at the reappearance of the bad dream. It'd been a while since I thought of the explosion. I guessed the brain worked in mysterious ways. My near death was now linked in my mind with his death.

I stared down at the tattoos that covered my arms and legs. They covered up a majority of the scarring. Most people never knew it was there, hidden under the ink that covered me. The tattoos could only do so much. There were some injuries that were more difficult to cover up. The PTSD caused from another man's brain splattered across your face or the bomb that almost killed you right after was just one of those things.

What bothered me the most might not be that another man's life was needlessly wasted, but that TV and movies glorified what we did, what we went through. It was almost never as it was portrayed by cameras and actors. This was real—it was dark, and it was endless. The actors got to slip back into their own personalities when the film stopped rolling. They got to stop pretending to have the illnesses that plagued most combat veterans and those in similar jobs.

I rose from my spot on the couch and moved my empty decanter to the kitchen sink. I grabbed my phone from the counter and trudged back upstairs. I had a letter I needed to write to my buddy's family, and then I needed to pack for a flight.

CHAPTER TWO

abby

“**T**hat was excellent work, Abby. I know the undercover assignment was longer than expected.” He clapped me on the shoulder in congratulation. “Doesn’t matter now, you got through it. That’s what it takes to be a good agent, the ability to adapt,” my boss, Special Agent Bob Dempsey, told me. He always gave an unwanted wrap-up after we finished an assignment. This was the seventh one, and it was just as annoying as the first.

We’d worked together for several years, and I was quickly stepping out from under his shadow. By his words of praise—which were far and few between—I earned his respect. I felt a strong sense of satisfaction from being good at my job, even if it meant listening to a long-winded monologue.

His silver hair caught the light, making it look white. The twinkle of pride showed in his eyes, proof that he meant his words. This was the first time he caught me alone since I returned from my last assignment, infiltrating and bringing down a human trafficking ring.

“It was just part of the job.” I gave a casual shrug. My suit jacket was a little tight around my shoulders, and it restricted my movement. It was the same response I gave after every wrap up. I enjoy the praise, even when it was sandwiched between annoying bits of monologue. Although I’d never tell him that.

“Yeah, but the lengths you go to is much more than most female agents tolerate. We’re not talking about being shot by a suspect. What you do has the potential to be more emotionally

scarring.” He was absolutely right. We all made an oath to serve and protect, but most agents had boundaries they operated within. I was different. It was why I was recruited in the first place.

“Are you okay? Do you need to seek any counseling?” he asked. His face softened, and so did his tone. It was the same question he always asked after every mission was complete. I could tell that he genuinely cared about my well-being, and that touched me. He was a rough-and-tough guy. Most people never saw the softer side of him.

“It was no big deal.” Like always, I played it off. “I’m just glad to be back to a normal routine. That’s what helps me the most.”

I did my best to block out the memories from my time undercover. The disgusting, vile men I slept with weren’t worth any of my mental space. In my waking hours, I did a pretty good job of keeping them from my thoughts, but my dreams were a different story. I would take that secret with me to the grave. I didn’t want or need anyone at the bureau to think that I was weak—it was already hard enough to be a female special agent. I had so many challenges to overcome, but I did it. I couldn’t just lie down and give others more ammunition to make me seem inferior. There were several agents who wanted Bob’s job when he retired, but I was the strongest candidate because of my work. I had to remain the perfect agent; I needed that position.

“You should really consider seeing a therapist again, even if it’s just one more visit. What you witnessed, it was pretty bad. I know someone who has an organization who helps those who are victims of trafficking and sexual abuse. She has a team of psychologists on call. She could get you a visit with one of the best therapists in the country. Obviously, it is all anonymous,” he offered.

“Bob, I told you, I’m fine. I’m glad to be back. I just want to move on.” I made direct eye contact and kept my breathing even so that he wouldn’t know that I was lying. He nodded his head, and then he began pushing my buttons again.

“You know what you need?” He began pacing the room. My anxiety level spiked. Bob Dempsey’s pacing never meant good things for me.

“What do I need? Besides an extremely large cup of coffee.” I mumbled my words. He cornered me before I got my first cup. He was lucky I’d made it this far through the conversation.

“You need a vacation.” His suggestion came with a mischievous smile. He stopped pacing and leaned against the desk behind him. He crossed his arms and stared at me, the grin growing even wider. It wasn’t predatory or creepy—which I was very familiar with; it was the grin of a man with a plan. One he couldn’t wait to put in motion. I knew that grin very well, and I wasn’t sure if I should be pissed off or nervous.

“No, I don’t,” I responded dryly.

“Let’s not call it a vacation then. Let’s call it a tropical assignment.” His smirk had me narrowing my eyes in suspicion. Tropical was not our jurisdiction. The most water in my region was usually the Pacific Ocean. Occasionally I was tasked out to the East Coast, but nowhere tropical.

“What are you up to?”

“The question is, what are you about to be up to? Let’s say I have something going on that’s off the books, and I was looking for someone I trust to supervise from afar. Would you be up for a trip to the Caribbean to supervise my assets?” he asked.

“How *off the books* are we talking?” I was definitely worried. “You know we have a liaison office that covers that area, right? Can’t you just assign it to them?”

“Let’s call my assets private bounty hunters. They are leading an international hunt for a suspected human trafficking ring operator. As for the liaison office, I don’t trust them.” He took a large gulp of his coffee. When he set the cup down, he crossed his arms again as he waited for me to get my thoughts together.

“You don’t trust them? What spurred that?” I was caught completely off guard by that. He didn’t trust a whole office?

“I learned of human trafficking and smuggling that’s been happening right under their noses for years. Not once has it been looked into by their team,” he explained.

“Maybe they really didn’t know?” I offered, but it sounded more like a question. If there was a human trafficking ring happening and they knew about it, that would be unprecedented. Sure, there had been double agents in the past, but an entire office, that was unimaginable. It would rock the whole world’s faith in the FBI, and the repercussions from that were too harsh to think of.

“It’s a pretty big ring. Lots of women have disappeared over a series of years. I don’t know how they couldn’t suspect a trafficking ring. The same type of victims are always taken, and there are patterns to the kidnappings. I’ve spent a lot of time looking into this since we got the intelligence.”

He was right, something like that did send off some major warning bells. I didn’t want to think that a whole office could be that incompetent or corrupt—but when he laid it out like that, it sounded pretty damning.

“I can’t imagine an operation as large as you’re implying could have existed for so long under an entire field office’s nose. Unless they were in on it. That liaison office is far removed from headquarters.” I was sure to them Washington, DC, felt worlds away. “What if they are getting a cut of the profits, or even worse, what if they are providing weapons or doing the kidnapping?” Those thoughts were even more unprecedented, more outrageous.

His face was full of barely suppressed concern. “I’ll give them the benefit of the doubt, because I know what you are going to say next. Even if they really didn’t know what was going on, they should still be fired. Incompetence isn’t an excuse. Not when it comes to the lives of innocent people, and so many of them.”

He was right; I was going to continue playing devil’s advocate. Even doing so, there was no scenario in which the

office couldn't be punished. Incompetence of that scale was massive.

“So you want me to babysit these bounty hunters and... what? Make sure they don't get hurt? Make sure they do things the right way and do all of this right under the noses of the agents with jurisdiction?” I understood the scope of the issue, but what exactly was my purpose? “What's the end goal? If we suspect a bunch of dirty agents, what do you want me to do about that? I know I'm a good agent, but I think that's asking a lot from me. What do you want me to do, sleep with the agents from the office there and see what I can find out?” I ambushed him with questions. I was rambling, but I couldn't help it. My imagination was running with the details, and my anxiety followed. I could tell that what he was asking for would be very different from my other missions. I was already trying to figure out how to compensate for that.

“Slow down, Abby.” He put his hands up in a calming motion. “My assets are more than capable of tracking down this ring. They are the team of civilians that provided all the intel on the Vegas trafficking operation. Remember that raid that got that Robbie jack-off? Remember that one?” he asked.

“I remember reading the report. I was undercover during that operation,” I countered. I was extremely surprised that it happened the way it did. Mistakes were made, big ones. While I trusted Bob, that investigation and arrest was not one of his best. I imagined it would have gone differently if I was there, but maybe that was just my ego talking.

“They are more than capable—but I don't want to leave them on their own in another country. I also don't want them on the radar of the liaison's office. If we are dealing with dirty agents, we have a big problem. I don't want them to find out we are investigating the ring. I need someone on the ground that I can trust. Someone who is going to make sure my civilians stay safe and away from the dirty agents. I need you to keep them off everyone's radar while you work to compile an official case on both the trafficking ring and the liaison office.”

That was a very big task. Running two separate yet intertwined investigations like that, while managing to keep some civilians out of trouble, seemed like work for a whole team, not one special agent. “I really don’t know, Bob. This could blow up in your face—our faces. You want me to watch civilians break laws and then do nothing about it. They may get results, but at what cost? Especially if they fuck up. Is this worth our careers?” I already knew his answer, but I really needed him to think this through. He was the boss, and I’d do what he said, but this wasn’t the groundbreaking work I signed up for. I was here to investigate civilians; I was not part of internal affairs. The Department of Justice would have to look into something like this.

He remained silent, so I continued firing off questions. “Do you really think that a bunch of civilians who got lucky once can run a whole investigation into this operation? Especially if there are dirty agents at play?”

I was met with more silence, and it frustrated me. I wanted to throw a coffee cup at him to get a reaction. Instead, I pressed on. “What happens if the dirty office figures out what’s going on and reports us? Surely you know there are protocols for reporting suspected illegal activity by agents. This is not the way to go about it.”

“It’s risky, I know, but there is something going on, Abby. I can feel it. I’m reading between the lines that *Robbie* punk painted. Someone is helping this ring operate.” His voice was full of passion, and his eyes were alight with zealotry. Gone was the man who kept his composure and his posture. Instead, I saw a man consumed by a new mission, and the thought frightened me. How far was he willing to jump down this rabbit hole? And how far was I willing to jump with him? I was Abby, not Alice, and I wanted to keep it that way.

“Robbie’s trial ended only two weeks ago. Since then, I’ve given this team all the intel we were able to gather, and they ran with it. This new suspect, he’s the leader of an international trafficking system—and like Robbie, he has people who do the legwork for him. Due to the work these kids did, we’ve convicted several traffickers and we have new

leads. We've only begun to unravel these twisted threads. These civilians started that," he said, his fiery passion only growing. He was going to bat for them.

What he didn't add was all the other ways their investigation and the resulting convictions impacted the bureau. We received increased funding to the sexual crimes and human trafficking unit. Bob went to the highest decision makers at the bureau and reported how utterly embarrassing it was for the organization to have civilians get this information and how that was completely unacceptable. After all, that was one of the biggest busts our team made in a while, and it had been spearheaded by civilians. He wanted more staffing, better training, and most importantly more powers to intervene when a ring was suspected. The last part was out of their control—we could only operate within the laws—but everything else was considered and granted. Although those changes only came after Bob gave a statement as an anonymous source to the national news to make sure the bureau felt the pressure to increase the budgets. Luckily for him, it worked, because it could have not been his problem anymore—he could have been fired. They weren't able to prove it was him, so he didn't even get a slap on the wrist. He was becoming ballsier by the day now that retirement was almost upon him. I liked this version of Bob, because it got results, but it was scary to ride his coattails.

Since the increased funding, several more agents were hired and currently in training. They were to join the team soon. Bob was pushing me extra hard to make sure I'd be ready for my new role as their mentor. I was told they were like me—rough around the edges with a chip on their shoulder and something to prove.

"But why me? I don't see what I can add to a team who did our job faster than we could. Why haven't you hired them for the bureau? Why not have them investigate the bureau without involving an agent from said bureau?" I asked. I was hoping I could get Bob to talk himself out of this or, better yet, go straight to the higher powers with his suspicions. He was a respected agent; they'd listen to him.

“I don’t have actual control of the civilians, especially when they do operate within the laws. If they joined our team officially, they’d be split up. They don’t want that.” He paused for a moment, thinking hard about his next words. “Without permission from the country, we won’t be able to go in and act or arrest suspects. As bounty hunters, they just have to get the suspects or victims into international waters where we can have a ship waiting to transport them. They collect the bounty money, and they continue to work on their own terms— together.”

“Why are they willing to go to all this trouble? The money can’t be that good divided up between a large group. Do they really want the task of taking on the FBI? As civilians, that’s going to bring down a world of hurt on their shoulders.” Did they all know how harebrained this sounded?

“They don’t know my suspicions about the rogue agents, and it needs to remain that way. I don’t want to ruin their trust in the bureau. I also don’t want to skew their investigation. I need them to track down the ringleader, and while they do that, you can catch any corrupt agents that are spun in the traffickers’ web.”

“So I’m supposed to just keep them away from the other officers, keep them off the radar, and then document any suspect agent activity? That’s going to be incredibly challenging, if not impossible.” This was a tall order—and I thought New York was bad.

“You’ll get it done. I have faith in you.” I felt the sincerity of those words. “This group is special, and once you see them in action, you’ll know what I’m talking about. They take their mission very seriously.” He paused again, and I could see how conflicted he was to continue with his thought, but I knew Bob—he’d say what he needed to, regardless of how it would sound. “The two women in that group were severely impacted by kidnapping, and one of them was almost trafficked herself. One of the assets, Jones, his sister was taken by the Vegas ring. He and the others tracked her down, and that’s how we got our intel. The men are retired Special Forces Green Berets, and they rally behind saving others from the same demons they

survived. It's a purpose they all desperately need," he said with a sigh.

His fingers tightened around the coffee cup. His earlier pacing and the several long pauses told me he was holding back. I knew just how to push his buttons into spilling it, but I hoped it wouldn't drive a wedge between us. He seemed protective of the group. I was almost jealous. He and I had been working together much longer than he and the civilians. Yet he clearly cared about them, in the same way he cared about me—and that slightly irritated me. Call it selfish, but I wasn't perfect.

"So a bunch of washed-up soldiers get to run around and flirt with such a high-risk operation?"

Bob's spine straightened as he looked me dead in the eye. His glare was almost hateful. I instantly regretted my words. I'd pushed too far—one of my biggest flaws. Sometimes I had a hard time separating my tough-girl persona from myself. The persona bled into conversations it shouldn't, and I often ended up with someone mad at me. It was hard to make myself vulnerable. I was used to getting results by pushing hard, making it difficult to know when to be soft—or even how.

"If you took a look at those *washed-up soldiers*' records, you'd know exactly how decorated they are. They've done things for this country they can never speak about. Three of them have the Distinguished Service Cross, and three have Silver Stars. All of them are recipients of Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts. They've saved numerous lives. More than you have. They saved an entire foreign city from getting blown sky high, but neither of us are supposed to know about that. They've suffered serious injuries and made unthinkable sacrifices for their country. One is even missing a leg. Give them some respect. They've earned it," he said. His tone was deadly serious. He didn't even stop to take a breath. I'd clearly stepped over a line.

"Got it." I felt guilty. He gave me what I wanted to know, but I manipulated him to get the info. He inexplicably trusted the group, going to bat for them, come hell or high water. It

wasn't like him to approach things from an emotional angle. He was a logical man, but there was a first time for everything.

He relaxed his shoulders, which went stiff as he politely told me to fuck off.

“Now back to your other question.” He cleared his throat. I really felt sorry, because he was going to compliment me, right after I pissed him off. “What you add to the team is a line of communication. You keep me in touch with what's going on, and you will guide them down the right path if they lose direction or go off course. You'll be the buffer between them and the agents. You have the experience and drive to take on a challenge like this. I know that you are eager to prove yourself, and this is how. If you are successful in finding evidence to back up my suspicions, this will make your career. I'd do this myself if I could, but the group would know I'm up to something, and the other agents might recognize me.”

“Wouldn't the office know of my entrance to the country? Do you think I might blow the cover for your bounty hunters?” It wasn't like looking at flight manifests was unusual for agents. They did that to look for wanted fugitives all the time.

“You might be an agent, but for this op you are a vacationing tourist. Hence my earlier recommendation that you take a vacation. It would be documented with the bureau that you are off the clock and not sniffing around for a trafficking ring.”

I rolled my eyes at his insistence. It seemed like I really didn't have a choice in the matter. He gave me my cover before I even knew I needed one. He found his way to sink his claws into me and drag me down into a whole new type of danger. Creepy old perverts, I could handle. Facing off against my peers, that was far from my normal op.

“And this team, are they supposed to know who I am?” I asked.

“No, you'll be undercover again. I don't want them to know I am involved in this. I told them that I wouldn't be. That Jasmine girl has a temper, and she'd call me up and chew me out if she thought I was sending them a babysitter and that

I was withholding information when I pointed them in this direction in the first place,” he said with a chuckle.

I rolled my eyes at the fact that he was slightly terrified of one of the members of this team. So much so that he was just avoiding confrontation all together.

“How exactly do I establish that cover?” I asked skeptically. “How do I make them trust my advice and judgment if I can’t tell them who I am? If I don’t have any type of expertise they can trust, I’m useless to them.”

“You’ll have to develop that,” he said with a shoulder shrug of his own.

“Are any of them single? I wonder if I can try to form a romantic relationship with one of them?” It was my go-to.

“I don’t know, and that’s your choice, not mine. Here’s their names and their addresses. These two happen to be getting married in a few days, in the Bahamas. Why don’t you fly down there and see what they are up to?” Bob said, and he passed me a wedding invitation.

They were getting married in the same place they were going to look for a trafficking ring. *That’s commitment. Or insanity.*

I glanced down at the invitation; it was printed on thick cardstock paper in a pale lavender with silver embossed letters.

Fancy.

“Why do I recognize this name?” I asked.

“Do your research. I’ll put in your PTO request.” He winked and tossed the coffee cup in the trash as he left. I stood there in shock and stared after him. *There goes my recovery period. I guess that settles that.*

I was pissed he was taking my PTO for this mission; but I guess I’d get that back when the operation was complete. *Or I’d better if they didn’t want a HR complaint stacked on top of my findings.*

I sat down at my desk and combed through the social media pages for the ragtag team of bounty hunters. I found the profiles for the happy couple, and I nearly shit my pants when I realized why the name seemed familiar. The bride, Christine Daniels, was the Vice President of Green Oil Industries. Her groom was her bodyguard. The pieces clicked together—she was who Bob was referring to when he said he had a friend with connections to psychiatrists. She was the founder of the Human Trafficking and Sexual Abuse Awareness Foundation. We directed the women rescued in New York their way. I felt a little starstruck because her mission was so closely aligned to mine. She wanted to help the women who had been abused, like I had. *Now I feel like a dick for referring to her group as a bunch of washed-up soldiers.*

Way to fuck that up, Abby.

Each man in the group was just as good looking as the next, until I hit the last one on the list, Adam Strong. He was the sexiest one of them all. I scrolled through his pictures, maybe a little longer than necessary. *Let's call it research. Better than the alternative, thirsty.*

The man was jacked, like a bodybuilder. The muscles looked all natural. I found a photo of him standing by a luxury pool with a few of the guys in his group. He was shirtless, and his entire upper body was tatted from the neck down. It gave him a bad-boy vibe, which was exactly my type, even though I spent most of my time putting them away. *What's really sexy are the good men disguised as bad ones.* Adam Strong was definitely a good guy, despite his very hard and intimidating appearance.

Suddenly Bob's plan didn't seem as bad as I originally anticipated. I was expecting fifty-year-old vets with graying hair and big bellies who talked about the good ol' days. These guys looked like they were still enlisted. I had loads more confidence in them now.

It was said not to judge a book by the cover, but the cover could be very telling. After all, it had the title and the author. So far I was willing to crack open the spine and take a look at the pages, all of them.

I found several photos of the men in their uniforms from their time in service. Their patches had been removed for the photos, so I couldn't look up specifics regarding units and missions.

Bob's confidence in these men didn't seem unfounded. They were likely highly skilled operators in foreign environments. They'd be very capable of surviving in whatever situation they were dropped into—even paradise.

I looked into the other girl in the group, Jasmine. She was just as pretty as Christine, and she seemed to be paired up with Will Jones.

I spent hours diving into the dynamics of the group and felt confident that I would be able to weasel my way into it somehow, as long as one of them was attracted to me.

Was I interested in a relationship? Absolutely not. I barely had time to keep a houseplant alive in my tiny apartment. But I'd do what Bob expected of me. I was a workaholic through and through. Which was partly why I wasn't interested in a relationship in the first place, but creating a romantic relationship while undercover, and using that to my advantage, was my specialty. I could play the part well.

The only things I was interested in from men were free drinks and the occasional one-night stand. Adam Strong looked exactly like the kind of guy I would have let buy me a drink at the bar and then bring me home.

I purchased my plane ticket online and then left the office and grabbed my gym bag. I was determined to get a good sparring session in before I left for paradise.

CHAPTER THREE

adam

I stepped up to the back door of my Uber and felt a barrage of emotions. I was excited and nervous and wished this wasn't a mission-related trip. I could use a week to get drunk and hang out with my friends. Then I felt selfish for that thought. I was going to the island to watch my friends get married and then save a bunch of missing women from the sex trade. One of my battle buddies was in a morgue somewhere, waiting for eternal rest, and I was worried about a vacation. I pinched myself as punishment.

"Damn, you're a large fellow, aren't you?" the driver asked me as he rolled down his window.

"Yeah, that's not the first time I've heard that, and it won't be the last," I grumbled. I added annoyance to the list of emotions.

If I had a dime every time someone mentioned my size, I'd have just as much money as Jones. Christine's wealth was too large to wrap my head around, so there was no comparing it to that.

"You're going to the airport?" he asked me.

"Yes, and I'm in a hurry," I answered as I climbed into the back with my bags.

"My apologies. Let's get you there, then," he said and shifted the car into gear.

We pulled onto the highway, and I settled into my seat. I wished I had thought to ask an old friend of mine to come with me to the wedding, but the idea didn't come to me until late

last night, and by then it was too late. While Christine had told me I could bring a plus-one, and marked it down, I would be showing up by myself.

I was fucking lame. None of the others were showing up with dates, but I held myself to a higher standard. While they claimed they weren't looking for a woman, I was the opposite. I wanted my special someone, and it was pathetic that I still hadn't found someone.

Wells had Christine, and Jones had Jasmine. I only had myself. I had spent a lot of time watching how they interacted with each other, and I decided I wanted what they had. I wanted to find someone that I could lean on like they did and someone who drove me just as crazy. I wanted to find that person who lit a spark and set my world on fire.

I was a romantic at heart, but I kept that close to my chest. That didn't fit most people's preconceived notions of me. I wished I had tried to find a date sooner, but I thought I would be fine. I thought it wouldn't affect me to show up single, but as I laid in bed with my thoughts last night, I realized how wrong I was.

I wished I could tell my mom about this, but she already knew about how I was feeling from the other side. That was the thing about spirits—they were supposed to be all knowing. Talking out loud to her was difficult and made me emotional. There was no way I was going to do that in the back of this cab. The driver might piss himself seeing a man like me cry.

I shook my head to help clear my thoughts, and I played with the zipper to my bag absentmindedly. I needed to focus on the upcoming mission; we had another asshole to take down, and I spent two weeks itching to get started.

The two weeks after Vegas had been a blur. I spent my free time in the gym and learned new fighting moves, and I went to the range to practice my marksmanship. It didn't matter that I was already a sharp blade, a lethal weapon forged by the U.S. Army; every blade could become dull, and I'd never let that happen to me.

We had a few group phone calls and started to put things into motion, but most of it was wedding related. So much of what we were getting into with the trafficking was unknown. Boss's file of information hadn't been too thick. All of Wells' and Christine's guests would be flying to the island and arriving at the resort today; and tomorrow was the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner. The wedding would be the following day. Then the guests would leave the day after the wedding, and we'd get started on our mission.

Life was going to get extremely busy due to our almost full-time bounty-hunting gig. Christine had a lot to juggle as the Vice President to Green Oil Industries, but according to her flexible boss, AKA her father, she was able to do a lot of her work remotely. He understood her wish to help other survivors like her. So he allowed her to take her work remote so that she could spend several weeks giving talks to groups of survivors. He wouldn't be so accommodating if he knew what his daughter was really up to, catching the guys nightmares were made of. Those who thought so little of others' lives that they were willing to destroy them, just to make a few bucks. It wasn't too long ago that she escaped from a kidnapping situation, not once, but twice. She was tough as nails, and it was one of the things that drew Wells to her. He wasn't often a man of many words—except for within our group. Although he didn't need to use words for me to see how he felt about her. I could read it in his eyes, and the set of his jaw when anyone paid too much attention to her.

I tried not to let my jealousy turn me into a green monster. The comic book world already had one of those. I wasn't jealous that Wells got Christine; I was just jealous that I was not in a relationship like theirs. I was steps away from my thirties, and I had no prospects, only my hand.

The taxi jerked slightly and pulled me from my thoughts. The ride was quiet as we made it through traffic to the airport. When the driver let me out in the departure lanes, I wasted no time loitering. I quickly walked to security—I needed to make sure that I made my flight with plenty of time to spare. I was anal about arriving early, and unfortunately I was a little later than I wished to be.

I made it through the TSA pre-check quickly; I didn't bother with metal detectors due to the hardware in my foot from a bad break years ago. I was relieved when I made it into the main part of the airport with time to spare—so much so I didn't pay attention to where I was walking. I bumped right into a beautiful blonde and knocked the bag out of her hand. It hit the ground with a thud. The only thing that stopped her from hitting the ground too were my hands as I reached out and grabbed her arm to steady her.

“I'm so sorry,” I offered in a rush.

I was so embarrassed, if I was capable my face would have turned red. That was not the best demonstration of my skills as a highly trained soldier. In fact, I could see my old drill sergeant laughing at me in my head. I hated the fucking dude. If I saw him again, he'd be lucky if I didn't rearrange his face.

The blonde's head whipped around to look at me. She looked a little surprised, probably due to my size or the fact that I nearly knocked her on her ass. I let go of her arm. She hesitantly smiled and then picked up her bag.

She made a show of righting her shirt, as if the collision had skewed her clothing. “No need to apologize. I was in my own head. I probably could have avoided this if I was paying attention,” she assured me. She certainly didn't seem mad; her smile stayed plastered on her face. It took a lot of effort to tear my eyes from hers.

“That's along the lines of what I was going to say,” I answered with what I hoped was a winsome smile.

She was absolutely gorgeous. Her long blond hair cascaded over her right shoulder. With her short-sleeved shirt I could see tattoos covering both her arms. Her lips were lush, and she seemed almost ethereal. She looked like a dream I didn't want to wake up from. She was just my type.

If I was in a romantic comedy, I would be stumbling all over my words, but I wasn't. Nothing about my life was funny; it was usually intense and filled with nightmares. I was suddenly struck with nerves, which was something I'd never experienced due to meeting a woman. It took me so off guard

that I had no idea how to salvage this brief, awkward moment that happened as we both stood and stared at each other.

“Well, I’d love to stand and talk, you seem nice, but I’ve got to get myself a very large coffee before my flight,” she said, and her smile softened.

“Yes, I probably need to get to my terminal. Have a safe flight, and again, I’m sorry,” I apologized and tipped my ball cap like a good ole’ Southern gentleman would do.

“Nonsense, and you too,” she returned and then turned her back to me as she walked toward the food court on the other side of the airport.

I found my terminal and settled into a seat by the windows to wait for them to announce that my flight was boarding. I pulled out my phone and pulled up my app that contained all of our research so far.

Brent Ricketts was a rich bastard. He was a blond-haired, blue-eyed man in his forties. He looked like a rich playboy who modeled for a sports magazine for older men. He dressed flashy and did his best to ride the line between laying low and being noticed. He owned real estate all over the world, but it appeared that he chose Nassau for his large-scale trafficking operation. It wasn’t hard to see why; so many college kids vacationed there that he had endless women to choose from.

We didn’t have much information on exactly where Ricketts was living because he traveled so much. He had many homes attached to his name, and many of them were also owned by various corporations or trusts. We weren’t exactly sure which were investment real estate or which were for his private use. Even on the island he at least had partial ownership of over twenty homes. We did our best to try to pin down where he could be hiding, but it was honestly just a shit show—a shot in the dark. We needed to get our feet on the sand and scope out those properties one by one. These kinds of locate-and-extract missions were easier when we already had the intelligence. It was why I became the boots on the ground when I joined the Army. Sure, I enjoyed brain teasers, but I was not cut out for an intelligence job. While I was capable of

research, I'd rather just be in the action instead. That didn't matter now, because there wasn't much intelligence about Robbie or what he knew about this trafficking ring in the tropics.

The original file that Bob Dempsey, AKA Boss, gave us didn't have much information. There was a photo of Ricketts and a map of the tropics with Nassau and a few other islands circled. For all we knew, he had separate operations on each island. Nassau was our best guess after searching the number of disappearances on each of the circled islands. The number of missing women was tripled compared to the other islands. Yet not much was being done about it. There were no international headlines, no protests or large search parties. The women just disappeared quietly into the night while their government did nothing about it. It was scary and rivaled what happened to some women in the Middle East.

My phone vibrated in my hand as a message appeared on my screen.

Christine: Did you make it to the airport okay?

Me: Yes. Waiting to board my flight now. Don't worry about me. You are getting married in two days. Go fret over the seating chart or something.

Christine: Hah! You know me well enough to know just how high strung I am. This wedding has had my anxiety whipping me around like a rollercoaster. I don't want to think about one more little detail. I can't wait for the whole thing to be over. Then I can call Jake my husband and we can all go hunting for some assholes.

I chuckled at her response. I felt bad because she was trying to plan an entire wedding in what was essentially two weeks. When one was as filthy rich as her family was, they could buy their way into any timeline. The problem was there were still a lot of decisions to make. At least that was what she told Mendez, who told me over beers last week.

Me: Everything is fine. If it makes you feel any better, I know that all Wells cares about is that you make it to the altar. You could be wearing a bikini under a trash bag and he wouldn't care.

Christine: Thank you for that. I just sprayed water out my nose. My mom just gave me the most horrified look.

Me: Glad to help. Can't wait to catch assholes and save people. Take care and remember what the day will be about.

Christine: I will, thank you, Strong. You always know what to say to make me feel better.

Me: Keep that secret to yourself or Wells might throw you over his shoulder whenever we are in the same room.

Christine: Okay, now you have me snorting. I've got to go before my mom has a stroke. Have a safe flight.

I pulled up my research app again and stared at the names and photos of those reported missing recently on the island. Some of them were tourists, but most were locals. I tried to commit each one to memory. With trafficking in areas like this, you never knew when you were going to run into a victim or who they'd be with. Sometimes they were sold like household servants, and other times they were trafficked for sexual acts. I wanted to save them all, just like we had in Vegas. We had gotten lucky there, and part of me questioned why Boss trusted us enough to do this. There were plenty of ways for a bunch of retired soldiers, even as highly trained as we were, to fuck up an operation of this size. When we were trying to get Mary back, we were so emotionally invested that we could have made some big mistakes. We didn't have any personal connections to this place, we just wanted to continue our work and make a difference where we could, although I doubted we would be any more objective. This line of work was filled with emotion. Anger, sorrow, shock, there were plenty of emotions to take one by surprise.

There was going to be a payout when we caught the Ricketts bastard, but the money wasn't a factor for any of us. We had always taken care of each other, making sure none of our buddies were hungry or cold. Now several members of our group had more than enough money to take care of the rest. Not that the rest of us would give up our pride to ask, but the option was always there.

I knew the crew was ready to get their boots on the ground—or flip flops in the sand—with this operation, but Jasmine, Jones, and Christine were more eager than everyone else. It was all they had talked about for two weeks. The night we found out about Brent Ricketts and his operation, Jasmine and Christine stayed up all night, throwing theories around, and eventually their men had carried them to bed, long after the sun had risen. I felt like I had been twiddling my thumbs most of the past two weeks, even though I was training.

Jasmine and Jones had been living together for the past year and had taken Jones' sister under their wing. It became apparent shortly after she was rescued that she had some issues related to her kidnapping. She had worked through most of them by the time Robbie's trial came around. She recently started a job at Christine's foundation, helping others who were victims of the same abuse she suffered. She'd do good things as a phone operator and handling crises. She could help put victims at ease until the psychologists could get on the line. While I didn't know Mary as well as I knew her twin brother, I was very proud of her, and I knew that Jones and Jasmine were as well.

Jasmine was Mary's best friend, and she spent a lot of time making sure that Mary was okay after we rescued her. Jones forbade Mary from joining us on this trip. That didn't go over well at first. Mary had yelled and refused to talk to him for two days, but in the end he won. She had finally settled into a new normal and was doing much better, and he didn't want to jeopardize that. Halting a sex trafficking ring would be very dangerous and triggering. After a lot of consoling, Jasmine convinced Mary that continuing her work with Christine's nonprofit would be the best thing for her.

Jasmine was looking forward to this wedding, but I could tell she felt guilty leaving Mary behind; they were best friends. Jasmine went through hell to help rescue Mary, and that included shacking up with Jones. The two of them bickered like a married couple, and it's amusing to watch.

I was startled from my thoughts when the *flight boarding* announcement was made. I stood up and was the first to join the line and board.

The airline didn't have assigned seats, so I found a nice window seat toward the back of the plane, right near the door. I chose the spot out of habit—I knew how to exit a plane mid-flight safely. Not that I wanted to do that from a plane full of civilians.

I hoped no one would want to squeeze next to me. Due to my larger size, I unintentionally flowed over into the space of the seat next to me. My shoulders were just that broad.

I stretched my legs out in front of me and relaxed my arms, which were crossed against my chest. I popped my headphones in to ignore the sounds of others boarding and the speech that the attendants would give before takeoff. I'd jumped out of plenty of planes, and there was nothing they could teach me about survival if this bitch was going down.

CHAPTER FOUR

adam

I stared out the window to my right and felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. I was surprised to see the blonde I nearly steamrolled earlier. She stood in the aisle right beside my row. I pulled an earbud out and tried not to look too excited.

“Fancy seeing you here,” she greeted me with a small smile.

“Are you stalking me?” I asked with what I hoped was a sexy chuckle.

Her face went blank for a moment like a deer in the headlights.

“I’m just joking,” I told her with a small, breathy laugh. *I’m such an idiot. I already blew this.*

She released her own breath and laughed too. “Do you mind if I sit here?”

I looked around. The plane had filled up quickly, and most of the seats were taken. The last two available seats were next to me.

“Feel free,” I said and scooted my body a little closer to the window to make her feel more comfortable. If I was going to have to share a row with anyone, I was glad it was her.

She stashed her bag in the storage compartment above my head, and her shirt lifted. I caught a glimpse of more tattoos up her stomach and sides. I was blown away at her appearance. It wasn’t very often that I came across a girl who was just as inked as I was. She was also an athlete. Her abdomen had been

toned, and her arms were well defined as she pushed her bag above her head. She didn't seem like a bimbo, which was the type I usually attracted—so that was nice.

She sat down in the aisle seat and sipped on her extra-large iced coffee.

“You weren't kidding about the coffee earlier, were you?” I teased.

“No, I wasn't. I need coffee like a fish needs water.” She beamed a pearly white smile with perfect teeth at me. She was so beautiful that I couldn't help but stare for a moment. Then I had to work double time to keep from going hard at the sight of her. I had spent only two seconds thinking of what she'd look like naked.

Where the hell are my manners?

“My name is Adam. It's nice to meet you,” I said and then reached out my hand.

“Abby, it's a pleasure to meet you.” She flashed me another smile. “Thanks again for letting me sit here.”

“It's the least I can do after I almost knocked you over.”

“Eh, it takes a lot more than a hard chest to knock me off my feet,” she said with a smirk. I swore her eyebrow raised just slightly, as if she was challenging me to do just that. I could knock her off her feet and onto her back in a heartbeat.

I watched as her eyes darted down to look at my hard chest. Then her eyes flicked back up quickly. She bit back a guilty smirk. She knew she got caught checking me out, and I liked it.

“Oh really, and what makes you so balanced?” My voice was teasing and slightly suggestive. If we kept up this witty banter—verbal foreplay—I was going to have to go to the bathroom pretty soon and take care of some needs. I'd never masturbated on an airplane, but there was always a first for everything.

“I'm an athlete. I have a good center of gravity,” she countered.

“Must explain it then.” I looked away to turn off my music completely. I didn’t need Lynyrd Skynyrd in my ear while I tried to flirt.

“What are you doing in Nassau?” Abby asked.

I almost stumbled as I tried to formulate a response. I couldn’t tell her about the whole hunting human traffickers bullshit. That might be enough to scare her and everyone else on this plane. Last thing we needed was the flight to be delayed because people wanted to exit.

“A friend’s wedding,” I answered. It was still the truth, just half of it.

She watched me for a moment, her eyes searching my face. It was as if she was looking for something. She looked like a mother searching her child’s face, trying to catch them in a lie. “That seems nice.” She reclined into her seat and stared straight ahead at the attendant who had started her safety speech. Another attendant walked down the aisles to make sure we were all buckled.

“Yeah, they are good friends of mine. I’m happy for them,” I said with a relieved sigh. If she thought I was lying, at least she didn’t call me out on it.

“Then why the dramatics?” she challenged, referring to my sigh.

She had no chill or filter.

I spun my lie around the truth. “Eh, just wishing for my own happily ever after one day. What about you? Why are you heading to the island?” I asked, to change the topic to something else.

“Vacation,” she answered, almost giddy.

“By yourself?” I asked. She struck me as being fiercely independent, but I was still a little confused. “Don’t most women vacation together, or with their boyfriends? I’ve heard it’s not safe to travel alone as a woman,” I pressed.

It was unfortunately a man’s world, and this island was no different. Cruel men lured women into their nets and they were

dragged into the abyss to never be seen again. I thought of Abby falling into that trap and had to hold back a rage. She was something rare they'd certainly covet.

“Well, I'm not most women,” Abby responded quickly. I could see a fire in her eyes that told me there was a story behind her words. One I didn't know if she'd ever explain to a stranger like me, but I was curious.

“No, clearly you aren't. You are heavily tatted, and you say what you think.”

“I'm also single, don't have many girlfriends, and I am very capable of protecting myself,” she said, answering my question.

“Are you?” I asked, curious about both of her answers. Single and hardened.

How in the hell a woman like her wasn't snatched up by now was beyond me. I'd only known her for a brief moment, but she was already the real deal. Someone I could relate to.

“Very,” she said with a bit of warning. Her eyebrow raised in challenge. Like she was daring me to ask her for a demonstration or daring me to ask why she was single. I could go either way, but I was sure the demonstration would make me rock hard. Capable women were my kryptonite, and if she felt capable enough to challenge me, well, it was game over. I wasn't sure that I'd ever had a woman want to challenge me. It was new and exciting. I was a hard ass to the rest of the world, but right now I might as well have drawn hearts over my eyes. It was a shame that I wasn't traveling for vacation. I was going to be very busy, and she'd be on a return flight home before I knew it.

“I'll take your word for it.” My lips curled up on the right side into a smirk. “What kind of training do you have? Athlete to athlete, of course.” I winked, doing my best to be playful. I wasn't sure I'd ever tried this hard to be charming. This must be what Jones and Yates did all the time. It had to be exhausting, but I could see the appeal. To have others look at you as desirable and not a threat to their safety.

“Judo and Capoeira,” she answered quickly and turned her head back to gauge my reaction.

“That’s...impressive. It takes a lot of training to learn some of the flips in Capoeira,” I praised.

“Thanks, and what styles do you practice, aside from deadlift?” she mocked with a serious face. Then after a few seconds she could no longer hold onto the expression and she smiled again. The woman actually made my insides flutter. *Holy shit.*

“You’ve got jokes. I like that. I studied Krav Maga and Kung fu. I’ve studied the highlights of others, but I don’t usually let my opposition get close enough to me for hand-to-hand to be required,” I stated.

“Let me guess, former military, and your weapon of choice is...a M4 Carbine?” she said. She hit the target center mass with her guess. That struck me as strange, unless she was also in the military. With the tattoos and her physique, it would make sense.

“Guilty,” I said with a cheesy smile. “You know more than the standard civilian. Did you serve?”

Her eyebrow ticked just slightly; a normal person may not have noticed, but I was trained to notice. “No, I just know my stuff,” she answered, too quickly. It was possible she lied, but I let it go. Why lie about service, especially to someone else who served? It wasn’t my business and she wasn’t required to share.

The plane taxied down the runway, and we took off without incident.

“So why Nassau?” I asked, not quite ready to give up on our conversation. This girl was exactly my type, and the hopeless romantic in me wouldn’t let me give up this shot. It was like we got a second chance being on the same flight after our earlier run-in, and I didn’t want to piss it away.

“A friend of mine told me I should come here,” she answered as she grabbed some pretzels from the stewardess, then she passed a bag over to me.

She pulled open the bag and drew a pretzel into her mouth. “Why did your friends decide to have their wedding in Nassau?” she asked me. I watched her lips as she chewed; they looked perfectly kissable, even with pretzel crumbs on them.

“Because it’s beautiful, I guess. I wasn’t privy to their wedding planning,” I said with a shrug of my shoulders. *Lie*.

“Indeed it is,” she echoed.

I could feel the lull in conversation like it was a physical wall I was slammed into. Abby looked down at her phone and scrolled through something on the internet. It looked suspiciously like a police report, but I ignored it. Who knew what her job was? She could be a police officer or lawyer.

I decided to try to strike up conversation again in a little while. I wouldn’t push her too far and take a chance on her changing her seat. I put my earbud back in and stared out the window. It was nighttime, so I couldn’t see much besides the lights of cities far below, and when we made our way over the ocean, it was just inky blackness beneath us. It reminded me of the many times I waded through dark water just like it to take out targets or recover caches of weapons stolen by terrorist organizations. While I liked to swim, I no longer did so at night. Those missions took the fun out of that for me.

We were fifty minutes into the flight when I saw a light come on and felt the cabin shake a little. I pulled my earbud out and listened to the flight attendant’s announcement.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are experiencing some turbulence. You may experience some discomfort while we pass through this rough patch. I can assure you that everything is well and we will be through it soon. Please remain in your seats and buckle your seatbelts.”

The attendant put the phone back on the wall, and I looked over to find Abby’s fingers wrapped tightly around the armrests. Her knuckles were white. Her chest raised and fell rapidly.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

“Fine, I’ve had some bad flying experiences I’d rather not relive,” she said through clenched teeth. Then she nervously bit her lip.

“I can understand that. Want to hear about my experiences? You know, as a distraction?” I offered.

I didn’t normally speak about my time in the service with civilians; most would never be able to understand what I did, and a lot of it I couldn’t discuss with them anyways. But I’d talk about almost anything if she’d train those piercing blue eyes on me. I’d like to distract her from her fear.

“Go ahead, gentle giant,” she said. She continued to look straight ahead at the back of the seat in front of her. The nickname she gave me was eerily similar to what Christine and occasionally Jasmine called me. It made my heart ache and my chest flutter at the same time.

I didn’t know what came over me, but I said the most suggestive thing I could before I stopped myself. “Hah, I see what you did there. Trust me, I am far from gentle,” I said with a wink. I knew she saw it out of the corner of her eye because her face tinged slightly pink.

“One time I was in a helicopter, don’t ask where, I can’t tell you, and it was falling from the sky. The pilot was struggling to gain control after a malfunction. Want to talk about white knuckling it? The pilot regained control only ten seconds before we would have had to bail in order to stand a chance at surviving. This was in a hostile territory, so there was always the chance of getting shot right out of the sky as we were maneuvering.”

“Wow,” she said, her eyes wide like she had imagined the whole scene in her head. Like she wasn’t in this plane experiencing minor turbulence, but in a helicopter quickly losing control.

“Yeah, I said a lot more in the moment, but I don’t think other passengers would appreciate my reenactment. I have a very large vocabulary of curse words, and man did they come flying out during that free fall, and most of the rest of our mission.”

She chuckled at my words. I saw some of the tension leave her hands and her neck, which had been strained with tension. Her shoulders lowered just slightly, which told me that laughter had helped her. I could certainly keep her laughing, although I was no Yates. He'd have had her laughing so hard that she cried.

"There's no way you'd survive something like that to perish in some minor wind, right?" she asked.

"Not without a hell of a fight," I said with a wink.

"And you know how to parachute from this thing?" She sounded skeptical.

"Of course I do." I pretended to be insulted that she questioned that.

"Okay, good. If this bitch goes down, I call dibs on you as my jump partner," she said. The woman on the other side of the aisle shot her a look because of her language. I laughed at the eavesdropper's shrewd face.

"Yes, we'll buddy up."

Just then the turbulence stopped, and the seatbelt light turned off.

Abby ordered a drink from the stewardess who came back up the aisle, and I passed. I needed to keep a clear head going into this assignment. I'd allow myself tomorrow night, and the night after, but I'd keep a clear head for the rest of the trip, and that meant today. I had planned on scoping out the island once we landed, before I checked in. I always liked to know my surroundings, and Google Maps couldn't replace having your feet on the streets. Abby had me reconsidering my plans for the last thirty minutes.

"So what do you do for a living now?" Abby asked after the stewardess brought her drink. She sipped on it as she waited for my answer.

"I'm kind of between jobs right now," I answered. I hoped she'd accept the half truth and let it go, but I doubted I'd be that lucky.

“Boo. What kind of jobs do you normally work?” she asked with another raised eyebrow. Those things had been getting a workout during our conversation.

“Uh, private security,” I answered.

“Oh, for anyone I’d know?” she asked me.

I simply shook my head. I was not opening any cans of worms with this woman. She was way too nosy for her own good, but that did nothing to squash my attraction to her.

“That’s a shame,” she said with a tsk, then she took another sip of her drink.

“What do you do for a living?” I asked.

“I’m a fitness instructor,” she said, almost too quickly. It was as if she had expected me to ask her, so she could give her pre-planned response. Most people did that when they lied, but who was I to judge? I was withholding my current job. Neither of us really owed the other the truth.

“Is that fun?” I asked her.

“Lots.”

I felt my phone vibrate in my hand. I had paid for the inflight wifi.

“Excuse me, I need to take this call,” I said to Abby as I stuck my earbud back in.

“Jasmine, what’s going on?” I asked her.

“Where are you?” she asked.

“I’m still on my flight.”

“Don’t you know you are supposed to have your phone off on flights?” she asked me. I could hear her smile through her voice.

“Yes, but I paid for the wifi. What’s up? Why are you calling?” I asked.

“Will is driving me up the fucking wall, and I don’t want to stress out Christine right now. I need someone reasonable to vent to.”

I chuckled.

I didn't know if I was necessarily reasonable; I was just a good listener.

“Okay, tell me about it, but remember I'm not a psychologist, so I can't give good advice.”

“Good thing I don't need a psychologist, I just need a bro, and someone who thinks logically,” she countered quickly.

“Okay, I'm your guy.”

“I knew you were. I wanted to canvas the island. We got in two hours ago, and I'm sitting around like a bump on a fucking log. Honestly, this is precious time we can't waste. Tomorrow and the day after are completely about Christine and Wells, as they should be...”

“But you feel like you should be doing more right now,” I said, cutting her off. I had to choose my words carefully given my audience. I was sure Abby was listening curiously.

“Exactly, there are people out there that need our help. What if I spot a clue, and I would have missed it if I didn't go?” she asked.

“I get it, I do. I'm guessing he doesn't want you to go alone?” I asked.

“Exactly, he promised Wells he'd help with something, and therefore he's unavailable.”

“And no one else is around?” I asked.

“No one that doesn't have something to do. Yates' stupid ass is laying out on the beach. I want to punch him. Can I punch him?” she fired back quickly.

“You're a big girl. Do what you want. I'll be landing soon. How about this? If you wait for me to arrive, I'll go with you. I was actually planning on doing the same thing once I dropped off my bags,” I told her.

“God, I knew you were my favorite out of the bunch. I'm going to give Yates a good slap, and then I'll meet you in the lobby. Text me when you're here, okay?”

“Of course, I’ll see you soon.”

She disconnected the call.

It was silent for fifteen seconds before Abby’s curiosity got the best of her, like I knew it would.

“I’m going to be nosey. Who was that, your girlfriend?” she asked.

If I had been drinking something, I would have done a spit-take like Christine had said she did earlier. Jasmine was beautiful, but she was already spoken for.

“No, just one of my friends attending the wedding. She’s upset that her boyfriend won’t go explore the island with her, so she wanted to know if I would,” I said.

“Ah, that sounds like fun. Do you want some further company?” she offered.

I felt bad, because it seemed like she genuinely wanted to go. Did she want to tag along because she was interested in me? One could only hope. I was going to have to decline the offer, though. Jasmine would be furious if I wasted this opportunity to discuss our mission or what we’d discovered. I learned the hard way that I didn’t want to be on Jasmine’s bad side. She may have said I was her favorite, but there was a time that I wasn’t. It involved me taking the last donut from the box, one that she had specifically been saving.

“Thank you for the offer, but I think she’s looking to vent about her boyfriend to someone who knows him well,” I said, making excuses.

“Oh, well have fun,” she said, sounding a little dejected.

“Thanks.”

It felt awkward between us, which was a shame. I had this desperate and crazy idea in the back of my head that I could invite her to the wedding as my plus-one. Christine still had one on the list for me, and as of right now, there would be an empty seat at our table.

Just then the seatbelt light came on and the flight crew announced we would be landing and I began to panic. Would I

ever see Abby again?

Yes, just ask her to go with you. The worst that happens is that she says no.

I took a deep breath and then released it. *Here goes nothing.*

“I kind of have a strange question for you,” I prepared her.

“What’s that?” she asked. She raised an eyebrow out of curiosity. Her face was too beautiful, and it tripped me up for a moment.

“Do you want to go to my friend’s wedding with me, as my date?”

She sat there open-mouthed for a moment, and my stomach sank.

Fuck.

CHAPTER FIVE

abby

Wow, I really didn't know what to say or think. I had been trying to figure out how exactly I was going to find my way into this group. I hadn't expected to run into one of them in the airport, or the hottest one of the group. Now that I had seen him in person, he really was my type. He looked giant and intimidating, the typical bad boy. I could see the tattoos that covered his arms and the one peeking out from under the collar of his shirt. He clearly gave off a *don't fuck with me* vibe, but I didn't care. After all, I did the same thing; I carried myself in an intimidating way, unless I was undercover.

However, buried under that bad-to-the-bone exterior, I could tell there was a lot more to him than met the eye. He did his best to comfort me during the bout of turbulence, and while he was clearly curious about me, he respected the boundaries I had set. He seemed to have a soft spot that I wouldn't have guessed he had. *He's exactly my type*. In my case, opposites did not attract. He and I were cut from the same inked burlap sack.

In my training we were taught how judging someone based on their appearance was a double-edged sword. It could give you a good first impression but could also be very deceiving. Adam Strong was very deceiving, and that didn't send up the red flags like it should. Instead, it only made me more curious. I was curious if he was just as unforgiving in the bedroom as his persona to the world might make one believe. Or was he a tender lover, sweet and passionate?

Snap out of it, Abby. This is an important assignment, not a reality TV show for finding love.

He asked me to be his date to the wedding, and I couldn't quite believe my luck. I was trying to figure out the best way to locate where he'd be staying when he had asked. I had no reservations and had planned on secretly following him there and then praying there was an available room.

"Uh, you know what? Sure, I don't have anything else going on. When is it?" I asked and then closed my mouth. I was pretty sure I left my jaw hanging open for a solid thirty seconds. I had seen the hint of rejection cross his face before he schooled it. He had thought my shock was a refusal.

"Wait, really?" His eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Sure. What resort are you staying at?" I asked casually. Now I had a reason to ask; he was clearly interested in more than just a conversation with a seatmate. He wanted to meet up at some point to attend the wedding, so it would be appropriate to ask.

"You're going to laugh, but I don't even know. One of my buddies is paying for the place. It's one of the large resorts on the beach, I think."

"Ah, me too!" I lied.

There were a number of them on the island. Which one was he staying at? How could I get him to share with me which one?

"Look it up. We can always catch a ride together," I pushed.

He chuckled and then pulled out his phone.

I felt the plane touchdown on the runway and anxiously waited for Adam to show me the name of the resort so I could book online on our way there.

"This one," he said and showed the screen.

"No way, that's where I'm staying," I said, pretending to be extremely shocked. I thought he might be shocked to learn

how unnatural that felt. Not much got me excited now except for my work.

“Awesome. We can share a cab.” He looked pleased.

The plane taxied to the terminal, and we exited into the airport. I let Adam walk ahead of me so I could book my reservation without him catching me doing so. My eyes shot up when I saw the price of the room per night, but there was nothing I could do. I already dug this hole, and I’d have to cry about shoveling myself out of credit card debt later.

The taxi ride from the airport to the resort was filled with small talk between Adam and the taxi driver. Adam had asked what life was like on the island. He’d also inquired into what the crime rate on the island was. When the driver nearly shrugged off the question, Adam sat back in his seat and looked out the window for the rest of the ride.

When we pulled up to the large resort, I was blown away. The place looked like paradise, and I knew I’d have a hard time leaving when all was said and done. I had been hesitant to take a vacation—I didn’t want to send the wrong message about my dedication to the bureau—but now that I was here, I was glad Bob had handed this one over to me. At least for the time being, I could feel differently depending on how the mission ended.

We approached the front desk and checked in. The lobby was welcoming and crowded with people. It was a wonder they even had a last-minute opening, but it appeared they had a section of rooms blocked off for the wedding, and since Adam and I checked in together, they assumed I was with the wedding party. Our rooms were just down the hall from each other based on the room numbers they gave us.

We turned to walk toward the elevator, and a woman approached us. She looked like she had some Hispanic lineage and her hair was a beautiful dark espresso color. Her eyes were laser focused on Adam. This must be his friend who called him. She was gorgeous, and I was slightly jealous, because his face lit up when he saw her, and he gave her the warmest smile.

“It’s about time you got here! What did you do, swim from Florida?” she asked as she wrapped her arms around him.

“You’re so funny.” He faked a laugh, and his eyes crinkled at the corners. “I’m here now. Just let me drop off my stuff and we can go,” he responded with a teasing smile.

“Who is this?” the woman asked as she turned her attention to me.

“This is Abby. She’s my date. Abby, this is Jasmine,” Adam said, introducing us.

I held my hand out. “It’s nice to meet you,” I offered.

She gave me a quizzical look but took my hand in a firm shake.

“It’s nice to meet you too. I didn’t realize you were seeing someone,” Jasmine said and shot Adam a look. She sounded almost like a jealous ex. If Adam hadn’t explained that she was with his friend, I might have read too much into her question. Regardless, she sounded a bit distrustful.

“We just met on the plane ride over, but I couldn’t resist,” Adam said with a sexy smirk. Honestly this guy was hot as fuck, and it was interesting that he carried that charm with him in conversation with others. It was like an armor he carried to disarm people. The moment he wasn’t interested in interacting with someone, he could lose his warmth and look scary as hell.

I only spent a couple of hours with Adam, but I already knew that he was a puzzle that I liked the more I fit the pieces together.

“Okay then,” Jasmine said with a smirk.

Adam turned back to me. “Let me see your phone. I’ll program in my number.”

I hesitantly handed it over. It would only take a minute of snooping for him to figure out that I was an FBI agent. Bob’s name was in my recent calls list. It was actually a rookie mistake for an undercover mission, and I could have kicked my own ass for it.

His phone beeped with a text message.

“There,” he said, then passed back my phone. *Crisis averted.*

“I’ll catch up with you later. Enjoy your first night of vacation,” he told me, then he winked.

Jasmine grabbed his arm and started tugging him toward the elevator. I held back and waited a few minutes to allow them to take the elevator without me.

Well, that was interesting...

I went up to my room using a different elevator, and when I opened the suite door, I was awed by the beautiful space in front of me. The walls were a lovely light turquoise color with white trim. The white furniture looked high end, and the bed had a white sheer canopy over it. The space wasn’t massive, but it was gorgeous. It belonged in a magazine, and now I knew why I was paying so much. Once I took a few steps further into the room, I realized that I had an oceanfront room. Not that I could see much now, besides the inky darkness of the night sky and moonlight reflecting off the water. I knew it would be a gorgeous view, and I couldn’t wait to sip coffee while watching the sunrise.

It was something that Lilith would have liked if she were here. I felt a sudden pang of guilt and longing for my friend. She had been trapped in the trafficking ring in NYC. She had been sold a week before the whole operation was busted, and she had been my light in the darkness. She had spent hours telling me about her love of the ocean, and how if she made it out of the high rise, the first thing she wanted to do was watch the sunrise or sunset over the ocean, preferably with a strong drink. *I’ll enjoy one for you, Lil. I hope you’re safe.*

I had no idea where she was sent, and I wasn’t sure how to rescue her. Those thoughts had consumed a lot of my time since the trafficking ring was raided. Prosecutors and police were still combing through records, and I had no idea how long it would take them to track her down. As soon as they did, I’d be part of the team to go rescue her. I’d demand it.

As I glanced out the window, I realized that it would be pretty difficult for Adam and Jasmine to go sightseeing in the

dark. Part of me really wanted to follow from a distance to see what they were up to, but that was a line I couldn't cross. I couldn't take a chance of getting caught so soon without building some sort of trust. Jasmine did not seem like the type of woman to be easily fooled. In fact, she kind of reminded me of myself.

My phone vibrated in my hand.

Bob: Make it there okay?

I smiled at his concern.

Me: Yes, I ran into Adam Strong in the airport, and he asked me to be his date to his friends' wedding. P.S. This place is expensive as hell, and you better be wiring some money to pay for it.

Bob: Good, keep earning their trust. Let me know if you reach any major developments.

Me: Got it.

He didn't text back anymore after that, and he conveniently ignored my comment about money.

I unpacked my bag and took a bath in the bathroom that seemed more like a spa. The large soaking tub sat next to the large window and overlooked the ocean. It seemed absolutely perfect.

While I soaked, I tried to figure out my game plan. While I had avoided some of Adam's questions, I needed to have my whole backstory in place. I had told Adam I was a fitness instructor, and I needed to stick to that. I tried to put more effort into my backstory, but my thoughts kept wandering back to Adam. When I ran into him in the airport, I was initially shocked by his appearance; he was just as massive as I had

imagined he would be. His chest was broad, and I could see the outline of his pecs through his shirt. His shoulders were perfectly shaped under the fabric, and I could only imagine what his abs looked like. His social media profile pictures hadn't done him justice, and I was sure the same was to be said about his abs. I was a sucker for those.

I wished I had taken more time to study his tattoos. I was curious to know what art he chose to wear forever. I didn't want to be caught gawking at him, so I resisted the urge. I'd already spent too much time staring at his chest. I knew that he checked out my tattoos, and even my body. That was fine by me. My body was no longer what made me vulnerable; it was my strength. It was my armor to cover what I carried inside. I wasn't above sleeping with the enemy or seducing them into a trap, like a siren. Many agents at the bureau had hard lines in the sand that they wouldn't cross—but I wasn't one of them. I would do whatever it took to get the job done.

In my last undercover operation, I lured the trafficking ring into kidnapping me. I did what I could to earn their trust and make myself useful. For my efforts, I was removed from their inventory and was reserved for the private use of leaders of the trafficking ring. Over time they began to let their guard down, and I snuck information to the bureau. Eventually, my colleagues raided the high rise they confined us to, and my operation was declared a success. I spent over six months undercover as the perverted elite's plaything, but I came out on top. I was on my next assignment, in paradise, and they were going to spend the rest of their lives behind bars.

At least in this mission my ethics wouldn't be as questioned by these bounty hunters as they would be by my colleagues. Some agents were so stuck up and looked down on me because of my willingness to get the job done, no matter the cost. *Slut* was the least of the insults that had been hurled my way. I knew it came from jealousy; my arrest record was a mile longer than theirs. Somehow investigating credit card fraud wasn't as rewarding. *Go figure.*

My thoughts drifted back to Adam's face as he winked at me, and I felt a tightness in my lower belly. It had been a while

since a guy had actually attracted me enough to take notice, and he definitely had my attention. I was almost positive that after all the awful men I had slept with, I was going to start taking an interest in women soon. Yet he reeled me right back in, and I wondered what it would feel like to run my hands down the front of his chest and into his waistband.

I let my head fall back against the back of the clawfoot tub and let my hand drift between my legs. The brief touch of my arm to his peck hadn't been nearly enough.

I bet his cock is just as massive as he is.

I let my fingers touch all of the best spots that made me feel alive. When I was done, I drained the water from the tub and settled in for a long night of research on the bounty hunters and their suspect.

CHAPTER SIX

adam

“**W**hat the hell, Strong?” Jasmine said as soon as we were through the front doors.

The humid air hit my face, and I broke into a sweat. I didn't want to be interrogated for asking a woman to be my date. I knew Jasmine was trying to protect our mission, but I was entitled to a chance to find my person too.

“Don't *'what the hell'* me,” I said with a roll of my eyes. I wiped away the sweat that had instantly formed on my face and wished I had time to change into shorts before we exited the hotel. Jasmine had been in a hurry, and there was no arguing with her about exploring while the businesses were still open.

“You brought a random chick with you? What's the matter with you?” she said and pinned me with a glare that I could feel, even in the darkness. I laughed when Jasmine turned her temper on Jones, but I wasn't a fan when my ass was parked in the hot seat.

“Well, to be fair, Christine told me I could bring someone. There is an empty seat at our table,” I said in my defense.

“An empty spot would have been fine. The only people at our table are supposed to be our group. We could have discussed our mission,” she said.

“No, Christine's rule is no mission talk on the night of the wedding. You know this,” I argued.

“That doesn't mean we would have to follow it,” she countered. She arched her eyebrow as she crossed her arms in

frustration. It reminded me of Abby's overactive eyebrows.

"Yes, it does. Christine has been a great friend to you, and to me. We will follow her one rule. I mean, look what she did. She had her wedding here so that we'd waste no time in looking for these guys, and her parents are floating the bill. We will respect her wishes, Jasmine." I pinned her with a glare of my own, which I knew was just as intimidating as hers, if not more so. While her gaze said, "I'll cut you," mine said, "I'll bash your face in without even trying." My size had a lot to do with that.

"Okay, fine. No mission talk at the wedding, but tonight's not the wedding, so let's talk. I think we need to spend some time checking out the sketchy areas." It was a great redirect, and I was just thankful she stopped grilling me about Abby. "This island is pretty big, and it could take us a long time to canvas the whole place, but the sketchy areas will give us a good idea of what could be going on. Not to mention, who knows if this is all contained to this island or if it spills over into another? The locals in the bad part of the island would know."

I gave her a nod and then gestured with my hand for her to lead the way.

We left the resorts and began visiting restaurants and small businesses in the not-so-pleasant areas. These were the places that the tourists avoided, and we stuck out like sore thumbs. From the way we talked to the way we dressed, we didn't belong there. We approached anyone who would talk to us. On more than one occasion, I had to square up my shoulders to make myself even more intimidating. I wanted to make sure that anyone with bad intentions stayed away. The whole excursion was a miss that just left me feeling more exhausted and a little discouraged. No one shared much with us. Two storekeepers were ramblers and talked about the missing girls, but they didn't have a whole lot of helpful information. The other storekeepers warned us to stay away and stop asking questions. Naturally that made us even more curious, but there was nothing we could do. They didn't want to talk to us.



“Wait, you’re telling me you invited a woman you just met?” Garcia asked. He looked torn between a frown and a smirk. The expression was almost as amusing as his disbelief. Was it that I finally took interest in someone or that she was crazy enough to say yes?

We were gathered around a table eating breakfast. I was starving and in the middle of shoving food into my face like it was going out of style. The crepes at this resort were amazing, and the fruit was so fresh it was probably picked this morning. And don’t even get me started on the bacon. I knew the staff was watching me to make sure I didn’t go back for thirds. Jasmine had started to fill the others in on last night’s exploration of the island—I wished she would have left Abby out of her story.

I hadn’t heard from Abby since we parted ways last night. I was wondering if she had changed her mind about going as my date. After all, why would she want to go to a wedding with a complete and total stranger during her vacation? Maybe she wanted to sit on her ass and drink Mai Tais all day. If she did, I couldn’t blame her. I hoped that maybe she felt the same attraction that I felt—like we were two tattoos inked by the same artist. If she were smart, she would have told me no, and she would have been content to do the full tourist experience. However, she didn’t seem like the kind of girl who came here to tan on the beach. She seemed like the kind who wanted to go diving shipwrecks or snorkeling with the sharks. Both of which seemed like my idea of a good time and might be another reason I was attracted to her in the first place. Something about her just screamed, *I’m a badass!*

“Yeah, I did—but she’s hot and my type. Christine doesn’t care. She’s the one who told me multiple times she left a plus-one spot for me. Now, let’s drop that topic and get back to something important, like our mission,” I said. I looked at Christine and hoped for some backup. I didn’t want that attention on me. It was bad enough that when the wedding was over I’d have to ditch Abby to start work on our mission. I

hoped she'd understand or that her vacation was only a short one in the first place.

"He's right, I did tell him he could have a plus-one," Christine added.

"Why?" Jasmine asked. *Because this mission doesn't preclude me from finding a partner.*

"To be fair, I thought he'd bring his sister or something," Christine mumbled, and the group snickered. Christine sent me a look that told me she was picking on me in good fun, but I wasn't laughing.

So fucking funny.

"You guys are real comedians. You are busting my gut here," I said sarcastically and rolled my eyes. "Anyways, when we interviewed the locals last night, we got two types of reactions. There were those who were real cagey, avoided talking about the disappearances entirely, and told us to go away. They said they didn't want that bad energy around."

"What's even weirder is they didn't deny that something strange was going on. They just didn't want to talk about it. They almost seemed...scared," Jasmine added.

"That is strange, but I can't believe you went without me. You couldn't wait until this morning?" Jones asked.

"No, you had other commitments, and I wanted to get a head start on this. Today was going to be busy enough anyway," Jasmine answered.

"Hey, she was ready to go out on her own. At least I got her to wait until I arrived," I told Jones.

"Thanks, man," he said and held his hand out for a fist bump.

"Gotta look out for my girls," I said with a wink to Christine and Jasmine. They giggled, and their guys rolled their eyes at me. Even Yates looked annoyed that I tried stealing his vibe, funny and charming. He could keep his prosthetic, though.

"What about the other response?" Christine pressed.

“The other response was rambling. Several of the locals would not stop talking about it. They were visibly upset and mentioned this has been going on for years now. A group of Europeans showed up on the island, and there have been disappearances ever since. They happened before but were a lot less frequent,” I answered.

“Did they happen to name drop or say which country the Europeans were from?” Mendez asked.

“No, they said they couldn’t talk about that without their lives being in danger. They were more than happy to talk about the missing women and a few children. There’s a long list. More than we realized.” It was quiet for a moment as we all reflected on that. The only sounds were our chewing and the background noise from the other guests in the dining area with us.

“Did they mention the other islands?” Yates asked, breaking our solemn silence.

“No, they have no idea about what’s going on around them. Most of these people live paycheck to paycheck. They can’t afford to leave the island and observe the rest of the world,” Jasmine said.

I felt a pang of guilt. Everyone thought island life was perfect, but that was only if you were a tourist and had money. The locals who lived in the bad part of the island didn’t have money—and they hardly had the same feelings we did about the island. For us, it was paradise; for them it was just a prettier version of the slums.

“So now what?” Jones asked.

“Now we take some time to look into the Europeans. This Ricketts guy has real estate in Europe, so this could be another way we confirm that the intel from Boss was good. However, when the locals said Europeans, it made me think there are other people involved. Could be his lackeys, they could be business partners. It’s possible that there is someone else involved who outranks Ricketts.” I could only imagine the tangled web an organization like this would have. From what Boss explained, the Vegas trafficking system was a lot smaller

and newer. Ricketts was in operation well before Robbie was. “The thing about this intel is that it came from an interrogation, but it doesn’t make it the truth.”

“He’s got a point. I think we need to cast a wide net and see what’s relevant,” Yates said and then shot a look at Guy.

“I’m on it,” Guy said, and he opened his laptop screen. The man didn’t go anywhere without a computer, even breakfast.

Everyone shut up for a few minutes while Guy quietly sleuthed through the internet and ate his breakfast. We were all wrapped up in our own thoughts. There was still a lot to figure out. We had the complication of being in a foreign country. At Vegas, Jasmine was the source of intel and we trusted her. We couldn’t trust anything that Robbie had shared with Boss, even if we wanted to believe it was true.

Christine and Wells were making googly eyes at each other, and if we weren’t here for their wedding, I would have teased them about it. Even Yates was holding back, which was strange.

Things were about to change for our group; I could just feel it. While Christine had practically been a part of our group for over two years now, and Jasmine a year, things were serious. I could tell that Jones was head over heels for Jasmine, and one day we’d be attending their wedding.

A pang of jealousy hit me. We all had issues, and it took a special woman to see past them. Wells was a grouchy, overprotective caveman, and Jones was the reformed player, but me, I was just some intimidating-looking brute with a thing for pain. They were both locked down and happy, and I was over here feeling desperate. So much so that I invited a stranger to a wedding with me because she was hot.

As I stuffed a bite of crepe into my mouth, I wondered what Abby was up to.

“So, how hot is this chick?” Yates asked me as he nudged my shoulder with his.

I rolled my eyes at his question. I knew what he was up to, and I could see right through it. He stirred up trouble whenever he could. That seemed to be a habit of his when a new woman was brought into the fold. Not that Abby was really in our fold. She was just my date for tomorrow. She wouldn't be in the fold unless she knew all about our mission and was involved, but that wouldn't happen. I couldn't take a chance of her interfering with our work. What if she went to the local police to tell them about what we planned to do? Even if she did that with good intentions, it could backfire and blow all of our plans sky high. Our group would hate me for that. Not only could she ruin our plans, but her involvement could put her in danger. I planned on making sure that she stayed safe while she was here on vacation and didn't end up as another face on a missing poster. There were already enough of those fluttering around the island. I hadn't missed the young, pretty faces looking back at me from the corkboards in local establishments. I didn't want her on one.

I couldn't trust the good intentions of someone without skin in the game. Both Christine and Jasmine had been trustworthy because they had something to lose. Abby didn't.

"She's pretty hot," I said to indulge him and to distract myself from some dark thoughts.

"Please indulge us with a description of how hot she is," Christine said with a laugh.

"Jasmine, you've seen her. Can you give them your honest opinion?" I asked with a laugh. I just wanted to finish eating my food without being asked about every detail.

"I won't lie, she's a pretty girl. She also looks tough as shit. She's all tatted and fit. She's exactly your type," she said and looked at me.

"Now you know why she's my date." I went back to shoving another bite of crepe into my mouth.

Abby was different from any other woman I met. If she really did know martial arts, she was certainly a force to be reckoned with. That didn't curb my need to make sure she was

safe while vacationing here, but it helped calm my anxiety some.

“Are you going to invite her to the rehearsal dinner?” Christine asked.

“I don’t know. I planned on maybe visiting her today, to see if she wants to get a drink. I figured I’d spare her from the pressure of you guys until tomorrow.” I was half joking and half serious. We were all pretty intimidating, especially when we were together. Not to mention, there were so many inside jokes between the lot of us, I didn’t want her to feel left out.

“Invite her. I want to meet the girl version of you,” Garcia said with a curious twinkle in his eyes.

“I agree, let’s meet lady Strong,” Guy said as he looked up from his laptop screen. He took a sip of his coffee, and I saw him smirking over the rim.

“You too?” I asked him in an exasperated tone. Guy usually wasn’t a taunter.

“Hey, I’m cheering for you, don’t mistake my fun. I’m just really interested in what a female version of you is like,” Guy added.

“Why? Are you interested in dating me?” I teased at the same time Christine said, “I’ve got a dress that maybe we could squeeze him into. Would that count?” The group broke out into laughter. The comments kept coming, and soon the whole table was howling with laughter. I could barely catch my breath, and tears ran down my face from laughing for so long.

As if my thoughts had summoned her, I saw Abby walk into the dining area. She approached the buffet and seemed oblivious to my group sitting here. When her plate was full, she turned in our direction to look for a place to sit. I knew the moment she spotted me, because her eyes widened slightly in surprise. I waved to her and tipped back my head, motioning for her to come join us. She approached the group slowly, taking us all in. She used caution as if she was approaching a poisonous snake.

CHAPTER SEVEN

abby

I loaded up my plate and looked on in amazement at the wide spread in front of me. While I was typically health conscious, more so than the normal person, I couldn't resist the sugary smells that assaulted my nose.

Chocolate crepes, bacon, avocado toast, and fruit were piled on my plate. I was looking forward to finding a quiet place to sit and enjoy them. I hadn't heard from Adam yet, but I'd give him a text after breakfast to see what he was up to for the day. I needed some time to figure out how to approach him and his group. Then I needed to figure out how to prove my trustworthiness so they'd bring me in on their plans. The problem was I needed them to let their guard down enough for me to catch glimpses of what was going on. To them I was a random tourist. They had no idea of our mutual connection or my employer—and it needed to stay that way. We may have separate missions, but they were linked. They'd take down a trafficking ring, and I'd take down a rogue FBI office, if they were in fact rogue. We needed each other to accomplish our goals; they just didn't know it yet.

I was surprised when I scanned the dining area and found Adam sitting with his whole crew. He stared at me. He probably saw me the moment I entered the room. It was part of his training to be aware of his surroundings, and I cursed myself for not doing the same. I usually was, but I blamed the smell of the delicious food and the relaxed environment. It had my full attention from the moment I stepped off the elevator.

Adam motioned for me to join him. One by one, the heads of his friends turned in my direction, and I scanned the crowd as I tried to gauge their individual reactions to me. I took a few hesitant steps forward, and Adam pulled an empty chair from another table over to his.

“Abby, these are my friends. I apologize in advance for any barbaric statements they might make, especially this one,” Adam said with a smile. His head tilted in the direction of his friend who I recognized as Yates. If I remembered correctly, he was the one with the missing leg.

“You weren’t kidding,” Yates mumbled under his breath before he stood and extended his hand toward me. I balanced my tray in my left hand and then grabbed his hand with my free one.

Interesting, they’d been talking about me. *Only good things, I hope.*

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said in what I hoped was a pleasant tone.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” a brunette said from the other side of the table. She had on a white shirt that said “bride” in glitter.

Christine Daniels.

“It’s nice to meet you, too. Congratulations, by the way,” I said and then nodded toward the word on her shirt.

“Thank you. Strong was telling us that he invited you to attend. I really hope to see you there. We’re having a rehearsal dinner tonight, too. I’m not sure if Adam had the chance to tell you about it yet, but I’d love it if you came,” Christine said with enthusiasm. I could tell it was completely authentic. Nothing about her words or tone were fake. What had Adam told them about me?

“I really appreciate that. You are very kind,” I told her.

“Don’t inflate her ego too much,” a good-looking guy said from beside her. I immediately recognized him as her soon-to-be husband, Jake Wells.

“It’s her wedding. She’s allowed to have a big ego. Most women wait their entire lives for this day,” I countered. If I was gambling correctly, the girls were the best bet on worming my way into the group. If I had their approval, the guys would follow.

“I like her,” Christine said with a smile and looked directly at Adam. Her look said, *Keep her*.

Jasmine looked at me and said, “It’s nice to see you again. I like your shirt.”

I looked down at my tank top that said, “Chilling with my gnomies,” and had the image of four gnomes sitting in snow.

“Thanks, I figured it would be ironic. I’m a big fan of it and sarcasm,” I replied.

Before Jasmine could respond, two equally good-looking Latino men who I recognized as Mendez and Garcia spoke. “Wow. Please don’t take this the wrong way.” That wasn’t a great start to an introduction. “You look like the female version of Strong, but way better looking,” they said.

“Haha, I will take that as a compliment. Adam is very good looking,” I said, looking around the table at all the guys, who were ogling me.

Several of them blushed when they realized I knew they were checking me out.

“Okay, so what’s your deal? You’re hot, in shape, and on vacation alone? What’s wrong with you?” Yates asked me. His arms were crossed in front of him, and he leaned back, balancing his weight on the back two legs of his chair. He was blunt, and I always appreciated that. Adam looked like he wanted to kick the chair and send his friend falling backward. Instead he glanced up at me with a look that said, *I’m sorry*.

“Yates, what the fuck?” Christine asked.

“No, it’s okay. I don’t take it personally.” I mean, I did a little, but taking offense wouldn’t get me anywhere. “I work too much, which also answers why I’m so fit. I’m a fitness instructor. I’m also straightforward, have no filter, and often hurt people’s feelings.” I mixed some truth with the lie.

“Hm, well, what you need to find is a guy like one of us. We appreciate that trait,” Yates said, further pushing Adam’s limits.

“Maybe I do,” I said, and then my eyes turned to Adam. I watched as his cheeks flushed.

“Okay, can we stop interrogating the woman? Abby, would you like to join us?” he asked me. By the looks of things, they were about halfway through their meals. “Although I wouldn’t blame you if you don’t want to.” I was still awkwardly standing there, holding my tray.

“Why not?” I plopped down into the empty chair next to him. On my other side was Guy. He had a laptop open in front of him, and he minimized his screen so that I couldn’t see what he was working on.

Damn it.

“Hi, I’m Abby,” I said to him quietly.

“Guy, nice to meet you,” he said and held out his hand.

I shook it and then turned back to my food. I hadn’t had chocolate in several months. The last time I had chocolate, it was practically forced down my throat by an asshole who thought he was rewarding me for *being a good girl*. AKA, fucking all the higher-ups in the trafficking ring and not complaining about it. He had no idea my love-hate relationship with chocolate or that I didn’t always have a body like this.

I took small bites of the chocolate crepe. It was enough to still taste the chocolate and keep control over my cravings. I did not show the same restraint for the bacon or fruit—I inhaled them both. The group was all silent as they watched me eat, like they couldn’t wait for me to finish so they could ask more questions. Instead, I took control over the conversation; it was better than waiting for an ambush.

“So Christine, why a wedding in Nassau? I know it’s beautiful, but so are all the other islands. What made you decide on this one?” I asked.

Christine hesitated for a moment and struggled to come up with an answer.

“Well, it’s no secret her family has money, so that wasn’t really an issue for us. It was more of a ‘let’s pull up the map of the tropics and we’ll go wherever the dart lands’ type of situation,” Wells said. I didn’t miss the flex of Christine’s upper arm as she likely squeezed his leg in a silent thank-you under the table.

“That seems reasonable,” I said as I chewed on a piece of bacon. “How do you all know each other?” I pointed between all of them.

“The guys were all in my unit. We served together,” Adam said.

“We were later additions,” Jasmine said, pointing between herself and Christine. The way her eyes focused on me had me a little nervous. It was like I was a puzzle she was trying to figure out. For the sake of my cover, I hoped she was bad at them. She was the one that Bob had made a job offer to, so I knew she was intelligent and wouldn’t be easy to fool.

As Jasmine stared, the rest of the group started several conversations among themselves. They discussed their plans for the day. Christine reminded them that they needed to meet back up on the beach at three for the rehearsal, and then dinner would be in a restaurant in the resort.

“What are your plans for the day?” Adam asked me.

“Well, I didn’t really have any. I had planned to text you to see if you wanted to hang out.”

“Perfect, then we will hang out.” He beamed a charming smile at me—and my stupid heart fluttered. “Do you want to come with me to the rehearsal dinner tonight?”

“Won’t that be weird? I’m not part of the wedding party.”

“Doesn’t matter, you heard Christine. She wants you to go, and so do I,” he said. I could hear the slight hesitation in his voice, like he had been scared to put himself out there. That threw me a little, because a man as intimidating as he looked didn’t strike me as the kind of guy to be scared or hesitant.

“Okay, why not? What does one wear to these things?” I never got invited to weddings or nice events, unless they were work related. All my friends from high school or college stopped inviting me when I never showed up.

“Did you pack a sundress of some sort?” he asked.

I nodded my head.

“Perfect, wear that. The rehearsal is on the beach, so you don’t even need shoes,” he said.

“What did you want to do before then?” I asked.

“Hold that thought,” he said.

“Guys, I’m bailing on our plans. Let me know how it goes,” he said.

“Will do,” Jones said. Neither he nor any of the other guys seemed slightly upset. It was almost as if they expected this. They huddled together with their faces close together. They started some private conversation that was clearly not meant for my ears.

“Are you done?” Adam asked me as he stared at my plate. I took one last bite of the chocolate crepe and nodded.

“Let’s go. I want to check out some of the cool things the island has to offer.”

We stood up, and I said goodbye to his friends. I felt satisfied enough with the introduction. I wasn’t indoctrinated into their rag-tag team, but it also didn’t end with them telling me to stay away from their friend. So I’d say I made some progress.

Adam took me to the beach outside the resort, and we walked side by side. We watched people parasail in the clear waters around us, and a few boats took people out for different diving experiences. I thought it would be cool to do one of those, if my trip really was for vacation. Unfortunately, I wasn’t on vacation, I was undercover, no matter what the bureau thought.

After a stroll on the beach, Adam bought me a drink at the outside bar, and then we parted ways so that he could get

ready for the rehearsal. If I was being honest, my time with Adam had me very confused. I was so attracted to him. He was kind and attentive. He seemed comfortable with silence, and that was a very underappreciated trait. And the way that the sun had him sweating had me imagining what he would look like covered in sweat in the bedroom, beneath me. His eyes were bright in the sunlight, and I sensed something in him that I really liked. Hence the confusion, because I didn't want a relationship; I had no time for one, nor the mental capacity to deal with another man in my life. Bob Dempsey was bad enough. Adam had me wanting to throw caution to the wind and fuck his brains out. Seriously, it should be a crime to look the way he did, to be as hot and considerate as he was. It was only a matter of time before other tourists approached the group looking to hook up with the single men, and I couldn't blame them one bit—they were all attractive. I just hoped that maybe I would have my shot at bedding Adam before anyone else took their shot.

On top of wrestling with my own expectations, I was wrestling with something I hadn't felt from an undercover assignment so far: guilt. I had never felt guilty for the lies I told while undercover, but there was a first time for everything. I wished things were different and I could tell Adam the truth, even if I didn't want a relationship. I still didn't enjoy lying to him.

I sipped on my drink as I returned to my room to get ready. I laid out the dress and took a shower. As I stood there washing off the sand and the sun, I imagined what it would be like to sleep with Adam. Was he dominating or submissive? Did he have any strange kinks? It was all I could do to stop myself from imagining him bending me over the back of the bathtub and having his way with me. To feel him running his powerful hand down my spine as he took me from behind. My core throbbed at my naughty thoughts.

By the time the rehearsal came around, I was so turned on by the thought of Adam that I hoped that he'd invite me back to his room after dinner.

“You look nice,” Adam said as I found him on the beach. I supposed I did look nice. I was in a pale blue spaghetti strap sundress. The sides had small cutouts, which also exposed some of the ink I had on my ribcage.

“Thanks, you too,” I said. He looked fine as hell in his light green short-sleeve button-up and khaki shorts. His arms and thighs looked absolutely massive. Just another reminder of how powerful his body was and what it could do to me. His sunglasses rested on top of his head. He smelled like an expensive, woody cologne. I couldn’t get enough of the view or the scent.

“Are we ready to get started?” a woman who seemed extremely uptight said.

“Yes, Mrs. Daniels. Let’s get started,” the man holding the Bible said. He rolled his eyes and was clearly put off by the woman.

Well, this will be interesting.

CHAPTER EIGHT

adam

“**D**early beloved, we are gathered here to celebrate the love between Christine Daniels and Jake Wells,” the pastor said as he started the ceremony.

I stood two spots away from Jake. Next to him was Jones, and I was on Jones’ left. The sun beat down on me, causing me to sweat. I found temporary relief when the water ran up the beach and covered my feet. The ceremony was short, but Christine wanted to have her feet in the water, and what the bride wanted she got. So every ten seconds or so I was granted sweet relief as the salty water washed over the tops of my feet.

The guest chairs sat a little ways away. Still close enough for guests to hear and see us, but they were provided a little more distance between their nice clothes and the water.

My eyes moved to Christine, who smiled radiantly at Wells, and my heart felt full for them. Her white dress flowed to her knees. The top of the dress looked like a traditional strapless wedding dress. There were sequins and pearls and only girly shit. The bottom part of the dress was a flowy sheer fabric, which was layered over a less-see-through fabric. The breeze caught it and the skirt danced around her knees, just out of the water’s reach. Her bouquet was small and simple, full of turquoise roses and tiny white flowers. Jasmine stood beside her.

The pastor asked Jake if he would take Christine to be his lawfully wedded wife, and I snuck a peek at Abby in the crowd. She watched the vows with a small, polite smile. Her eyes shifted to meet mine, as if she could feel me watching

her. She flashed me a smile, and my heart hammered harder in my chest.

Water washed over my feet again, and I nearly sighed in relief. Abby's eyes didn't leave mine for the rest of the ceremony. I almost felt as though we were having our own private conversation. If you asked what it was about, I couldn't tell you, but it felt meaningful.

I was so distracted I almost missed the pastor announcing Jake and Christine as husband and wife. The crowd cheered as they kissed. It was full of passion, and the pastor had to cough as the kiss got too heated for his liking. The crowd cheered again, and there were some snickers mixed in.

The pastor dismissed the family and friends, and they rushed inside the resort for air conditioning and alcohol. We took photos, and I nearly sweated my balls off. I was disappointed that Abby followed the crowd inside. I would have preferred her to hang out with us while we took photos. I'd love for her to have seen just how photogenic I could be. *Women like men who are willing to take photos with them, right?*

The moment the photographer released us, Christine changed into a second dress. We were introduced to the guests as we joined the reception. I made my obligatory entrance and then started searching for Abby.

I found her standing in the back, nursing a drink. She was by herself and kept shifting her weight from foot to foot. Her left arm was crossed over the front of her chest as she held her right bicep—closing herself off. *She was uncomfortable.*

“Everything good?” I asked as I stepped up beside her and grabbed a drink from the open bar.

“Absolutely, I'm drinking for free,” she joked.

“How right you are,” I retorted and held up my full glass in a salute, then I downed it. “What did you think of the wedding?” I ask after I emptied the glass.

“It was beautiful,” she said without missing a beat.

“It was, and so are you,” I said, executing the complement perfectly.

She shot me a sexy smile, and my blood flowed south to my dick. She could have been wearing a trash bag for all I cared. Her dark green dress hugged her figure and wrapped around the front into a neat bow. I had a feeling she would have been wearing black if it weren't a wedding. In fact, I wondered why she brought a dress that nice with her on vacation in the first place but decided not to question it. She may be different from most women, but she was still entitled to look and dress the way she wanted. Her hair fell in loose curls around her face. They were pretty, and I felt the strong urge to run my fingers through them—just to mess them up. She looked too perfect standing there, way better than anyone I had hoped to score. Yet she was my date. *How'd I get so lucky?*

She stared at me as I stared at her.

“What?” she asked. Her forehead scrunched a little with curiosity, and her lips pulled up at the right corner of her mouth.

“Nothing, just admiring a piece of art.”

“Smooth, Mr. Strong,” she countered. *I'm giving Yates and Jones a run for their money.*

“I'm not just a smooth talker,” I said as I grabbed her hand and towed her to the dance floor.

“Oh yeah? Then show me what you've got,” she challenged. Her eyebrow tipped up again, giving her a playful appearance.

I pulled her up against me when we made it to the center of the dance floor. Her front was glued to mine, and I could feel her soft breasts against my hard chest. There was no hiding the bulge in my pants. We danced to the fast radio-edit hip-hop songs that came on; I swore I received a scowl from Ms. Daniels. I guessed that our almost-sex on the dance floor was a no-go for her and all the rich folks in attendance.

I pulled Abby off the dance floor and took advantage of the open bar again. “Do you want to play a game?” she asked me as the bartender handed her a drink.

“I’m very competitive, so the answer is always yes. What’s the game and the rules?” *Could she get any more perfect?*

“Every time your buddy Jake growls, take a drink. Anytime Christine rolls her eyes at one of her parents’ rich friends, take a drink. Whoever quits first for any reason loses,” she said.

“So the goal is to get absolutely plastered? Those two will have us drunk in five minutes. He growls at any man who puts his hands on her, for any reason. And every acquaintance of Christine’s family must be here; there are a lot of rich elbows in the room.”

“Exactly. What do you say, Mr. Smooth?” she asked as she traced a finger from the top of my right shoulder, down my pec, and to my waistband. I saw excitement and lust dance in her eyes as they followed the path of her finger.

She was half my body weight; I was going to win. *Easy-fucking-peasy.*

I pulled a hundred-dollar bill out of my wallet. “Keep these drinks flowing all night. I’ve got a game to win,” I told the bartender. He took the crisp cash, gave me a smile, and put another drink in my hands.

Game on.

CHAPTER NINE

abby

Adam's mouth was on mine, and I relished in the feeling. I tasted the scotch on his breath, and all it did was turn me on more. It was like the moment his lips touched mine he flipped a switch. I wasn't sure exactly what happened during the wedding; everything was a little fuzzy. I knew we drank *a lot*, and that might be my fault. When I closed my eyes, I swore I could hear the sound of Adam's friends' laughter in my ears. I thought they laughed with us, but I could no longer be sure.

The wedding ceremony had been beautiful, the calm before the party storm. I didn't know Adam well—hell, we were still practically strangers—but halfway through the ceremony I sensed something change in him. I wasn't sure what it was; I didn't know him well enough to even have a guess at it. He'd been quiet and appeared thoughtful through the rest of the ceremony and reception, until he approached me. Then it was like he turned off those feelings and I'd never seen that vulnerable side of him. We started our game and Jones stuck another glass of Scotch in Adam's hand and told him to drink up. Yates brought me mine, and we started pounding them down together. I vaguely remembered them making sexual innuendos, like drunken middle school boys. I also remembered snickering at them, encouraging their wild behavior.

So maybe I'm not the best influence.

Adam's mouth on my neck brought me out of my thoughts. His lips expertly moved over my skin, and his tongue traced

shapes as his hot breath warmed me past comfort. His hand roamed my lower back and another pushed my hair out of my face.

“I want...out of...this damn thing,” I panted as I tugged on the edge of my dress. It was clingy in all the right places. *Great for sex appeal, bad for comfort when trying to get dick.*

Adam broke the kiss and pulled my dress over my head roughly, and it made me only want to fuck him more. I didn't *do* quiet, soft passion. That was saved for love, which was something I wasn't capable of, not any more. I needed it rough, a reminder of how fucked in the head I was.

I slid my hand down the front of his dress pants and finally learned if *little Adam* was also large, and the answer was a resounding *yes*.

He moaned and grabbed my jaw; the tips of his fingers were strong and bruising. He brought my mouth back to his and bit my lip, hard. Not hard enough to draw blood, but close enough. If this was an indication of what was to come, I was going to be fucked into oblivion. My core clenched with need, and I bit back a smile against his lips.

I tightened my grip around *little Adam*, and I pumped my hand up and down his girthy length. He groaned and slid his other hand higher up my back. My strapless bra fell to the ground. His hands found my breasts, and I moaned—his fingers pinched and pulled my nipples. My thighs clenched in anticipation. I was wired so tight, I was in danger of shattering from just that touch.

When his left hand left my breast and traveled south, I sucked in a breath as it slid into my small lace thong.

“You're so fucking wet,” Adam spoke onto my lips. I felt his lip tug up into a satisfied smirk.

“You seem to make me that way,” I whispered back with a nibble on his lip.

It was silent for a beat, except for the sound of our heavy panting.

“Oh yeah, this is all me?” His voice sounded husky; I wanted to take it away completely. I wanted nothing but grunts and growls and moans.

“All fucking you. Now shut up and show me how much you want me,” I demanded.

“Fuck, talk dirty to me.” His voice dropped into a commanding growl. My core tightened again in response. *Fuck.*

“Why? Does my body not do it for you?” I challenged as I sped up my hand, which was still stroking his cock. I wanted to drive him as crazy as he was me. I wanted to wind him so tight that I’d enjoy the glow of his explosion as he reached his boiling point.

“Way more than you know. I wanted you under me the moment I bumped into you in the airport.” His expression was deadly serious, and I had no choice but to believe him. If I was being honest, I wanted him then too.

“Show me,” I demanded.

He pulled his face away from mine, and I felt the absence of his body heat. His body slid down mine, and his lips kissed their way south, over my breasts, my belly, and then the outside of the thong. His teeth latched onto the edge of them, and he yanked them down. His teeth let go of the fabric, which fell to the floor in a wet heap. I watched as he pocketed them. He knew I saw him take them, and he didn’t care.

“A little souvenir,” he said with a wink.

He could take anything from me he wanted, except for my heart. That was something I could never give.

His lips touched my clit, and my body rocked. His large hands wrapped around my thighs to keep me in place. My heels gave me a little bit of height but also made me less steady on my feet. The placement of his hands fixed that. His tongue traveled from front to back, and it made me want to squeeze my legs together in pleasure. He continued to lick me, and my legs started to quiver. He removed a hand from my thigh and inserted a finger into me. I moaned too loud and had

to slap a hand over my mouth to muffle my sounds. Adam's finger and lips brought me to an orgasm that had my toes curling in my heels. My ankles wobbled, struggling to keep me upright. I brought my hands down to his shoulders to catch myself. His face turned up, and he smiled at me. I wanted to lean down and kiss him; something about the pleased look on his face disarmed me some. He was a giver, not a taker—something I could appreciate in a man.

My phone vibrated on the end table, and I sighed in annoyance.

“Do you need to get that?” Adam asked.

Normally I'd say no, but I knew that vibration sequence, one assigned specifically to Bob.

I nodded. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't apologize,” he said as he brought himself up to his feet.

I walked fully nude, aside from my heels, over to the nightstand.

“Hello?” I answered.

“I'm checking in. How is everything going?” he asked.

“Uh, good, but I can't really talk right now,” I said, trying to make myself sound normal and not breathless and horny.

“Everything okay?” he asked. *I must have done a shit job.*

“More than okay. I've got to go,” I said and then hung up.

I held my breath while I waited for him to call back, but he didn't. A stunt like that would be an easy way to blow someone's cover. So was an unplanned phone call like that.

“Who is calling you at one in the morning?” Adam asked. Suspicion clouded his face as his eyebrow raised high over his right eye.

“A client of mine. She's on a special program, and she'll call at all hours of the day or night and ask if something is okay for her to do. She's had prior health issues, so she's super cautious,” I lied. I immediately felt guilty about the lie, and the

others I told Adam while building my cover. That had never happened before. Usually I felt no remorse for them; it was part of the job. Why was this time different? Was it because deep down I knew Adam was a good guy and not an enemy?

Maybe I felt guilty because I was using him. He and his friends weren't my target. I was here to supervise and take down a field office of FBI agents. I wasn't here to help them with their mission, just to keep them out of trouble while I worked on mine. The fact that I had to sell them a cover story felt weird. He was an ally, I should be able to tell him the truth, but I couldn't.

"That's strange..." he said. He sounded skeptical, and a worried knot formed in my stomach.

I let out an annoyed laugh. "Tell me about it, but she pays well. The cash is worth the weird calls, even in the middle of the night." I shrugged my shoulders as if I didn't understand the make-believe-client's ways.

Our cloud of lust had disbursed, retreated back up into the atmosphere—and we both started to sober up. I felt another pang of remorse. I wasn't quite ready to end the night.

"Would you want to go on a walk to get some fresh air?" he asked. Maybe he didn't want it to end either?

"Yeah, I'd like that." I let out a relieved sigh. "Let me get dressed and put on some flip flops." I dug through my suitcase and found my sandals. I pulled off my heels, and I swore my feet sighed in relief.

I slipped into soft shorts and a silk spaghetti strap top. With my feet in comfortable shoes, we left the room and made our way down to the lobby. There were stragglers left over from the wedding, but I didn't see any of Adam's friends.

Instead of walking on the beach, we began to walk down the road that led to our resort, along with some of the other resorts on this part of the island.

"About earlier, I'm sorry," Adam said.

"What are you sorry for? I had a great time," I said and meant every word. It was more than a great time. I'd fucked

lots of men, but none of them possessed the skills that man had with his tongue. Not to mention, he was the first man who was rough, but there was no real threat behind it. He was rough because he liked it that way, not to scare me.

“I feel like I took advantage, we were both drinking, and I let it get to my head,” he said. I took a moment to study his face, and I could see that he was being sincere. He looked riddled with guilt. *This man might be perfect—that’s the scary part about him.*

“Adam, honestly, it’s all cool. I have been attracted to you from the second I saw you in the airport...” That was a lie. It was from the second I saw his picture online, but I couldn’t admit that. “I really wanted to do what we did, and I wish we had been able to finish it.”

“Really?” he asked. He turned his face to look at me, to see if I was sincere.

“Really.” I gave him a small smile, so that he could see I was in fact earnest with my words.

“Can I take a rain check on that?” he asked.

“I’ll be absolutely furious if we don’t finish what we started at some point,” I answered with a grin. I wasn’t here to manipulate his heart—I really did want to ride him. I wanted to hear him groan my name and feel him pull my hair as I made him cum.

I sighed at the cold breeze, which helped cool down my thoughts, which were starting to run away with my perverted brain.

“Did you have a good time at the wedding?” he asked.

“I did. Your friends are cool.” That answer was the truth; they did seem pretty cool. They reminded me of a few agents that I knew—ones that didn’t judge me.

“Yeah, they’re assholes, but they’re mine,” he said with a grin. I could feel the love he had for them from here. It was a type of friendship I had never really experienced. It was something that I’d only heard about and seen in movies. It was a brotherhood that came from surviving the fires of hell in

combat together. I wasn't jealous of what he had to do to form those bonds, but I was jealous that he had them. My time in the Navy hadn't given me anything of the sorts.

A horn honked and brought me back to the present. We were half a mile away from the sketchier part of the island. Cars zipped past us, headed to and from the resorts. Headlights blinded me as I heard the loud echoes of gunshots pop off. A surge of adrenaline hit me. It took only a second to assess—the shots weren't fired in our immediate area, but close enough that we could run to the crime scene. They came from straight ahead, the sketchy part of the island. *Go figure.*

Adam's muscles tightened—the result of that fight-or-flight instinct. He would never run from a fight; he'd run straight to it. However, he was escorting a woman who needed protection, and he had no idea that in most situations, I was the wolf in sheep's clothing; I was the one offering protection. I saw his hesitation in how to react.

“We need to check that out,” I barked in a calm but firm tone. It was an order, not a request. I felt myself slip back into my training. I curled my toes tight in my sandals to make sure they'd stay on as I sprinted in the direction the shots came from.

I heard the sound of Adam's footfalls behind me. His size made it hard to run as quietly as I could. He was a mountain of muscle. I made quick work of the half a mile between us and the source of the shots. Even my flip flops hadn't slowed me down much. Adam stopped right beside me. He looked at me with confusion as we listened for signs of activity that would tell us where shots were fired from. It only took seconds to hear a woman wailing and for us to follow the sound.

My heart raced in my chest. It didn't matter how many similar scenarios I had been in, my body's reaction was always the same. *Sometimes you can't overpower biology and evolution.* We turned a corner and saw a man lying in an alley. He was flat on his back in a pool of his own blood. His hand desperately clutched his side.

Fuck, that looked bad; it likely hit an organ.

I dropped down on my knees next to the man. They landed in the warm blood, and I tried not to shiver at my foreboding thoughts. My hand pulled his away from the wound, and I applied my own pressure to slow the bleeding.

Blood slipped between my fingers, and I knew the man was in extreme danger of bleeding out. He had minutes left to live unless we did something. I was trained in life-saving skills, but I was not a surgeon, and we were very far from an operating room.

I heard the cries of people surrounding us. There were sobs and curses, but no one approached us. He was either written off as a lost cause or they were too scared to help.

I needed to stop the bleeding to give him a chance at survival. I wracked my brain for something, anything. Then it was as if a lightbulb lit over my head. I remembered a trick that I saw in an online training course for emergency medical treatment and stabilizing patients in a battlefield-like environment. Tampons were good to plug bullet holes. Even better, I always had a spare one in my purse. My crossbody bag was still hanging from my side, but I couldn't take the chance and remove pressure from the wound to grab it. I needed both hands on the wound to keep the pressure steady.

I looked at Adam, who had knelt down on the other side of the man, checking for more injuries.

“Adam, reach into my bag and grab a tampon,” I ordered. My voice was shaky, but I didn't care. I'd never had to stabilize a patient in this bad of shape before. I was scared, and I'd own it.

It took a second, but I saw his eyes light up when he realized how I planned to proceed. Combat medics carried material similar to and inspired from tampons. The material soaked up blood and expanded to fill the size of the wound; it would help temporarily slow blood loss. Adam reached over the victim's body. His face was close to my arm, and I could smell him from here, his scent mixed with the iron-like smell of blood. He opened my purse and pulled out a tampon. He removed it from the package at lightning speed, as if he was a

woman who had used tampons for half her life. *Why was I slightly impressed?*

“On the count of three, move your hands and I’ll plug the wound,” he directed. I nodded quickly, eager for assistance. He may have actually done this before.

The crowd was still gathered, watching—but there were no sounds of sirens or emergency paramedics. Usually minutes after a shooting like this one, sirens could be heard in the distance, bringing with them a faint glimmer of hope. Yet the silence fell flat, along with my expectations of the wounded man’s chances of survival.

“Has anyone called for emergency services yet?” I screamed to the crowd.

“Yes,” a woman answered. Tears were streaming down her face, but the rest of her was composed.

“Ready?” Adam asked me.

I whipped my head back around to look down at our patient. “Ready.”

“Three, two, one, move,” he ordered, his voice calm and steady.

I raised my hands off the man’s side, and blood gushed from the wound. He wouldn’t survive all this blood loss. Adam immediately plugged the wound with the tampon and then kept firm pressure on the wound, giving the tampon the chance to absorb the blood and expand to the size of the wound.

“There, that buys him some time, but not much. If it’s hit an organ, he’s going to need emergency surgery,” Adam assessed.

“Which neither of us are specialists in,” I answered.

I looked down at the wounded man, who looked like he was drifting in and out of consciousness. His breathing was labored, and his chest rose and fell with sharp breaths. His eyes drifted closed and then opened quickly a few seconds later. He wasn’t going to make it.

I needed to keep him awake. If he fell asleep, he might never wake up. “Sir, can you hear us? We need you to stay awake. Can you do that for us?” I asked our patient.

He couldn’t speak, but he nodded, just slightly. It was enough to let me know that he was still with us. He hadn’t given up yet, and that was important. If he did, no one was going to be able to save him.

Keep him talking.

“Does anything else hurt, or is it just this wound on your side?” I asked, trying to assess the situation for the emergency crew who would hopefully be here any second.

The man didn’t respond. He just rolled his head from side to side and moaned in pain. We kept pressure on the area and made sure the tampon stayed put. I felt Adam’s eyes on my face, but I ignored him. It was not the time to make googly eyes at each other. He was going to have a bunch of questions about how I handled this whole situation. Most people didn’t run toward gunfire, and most fitness instructors didn’t have any idea how to plug a gunshot wound. I couldn’t tell him about my training from the Navy; he’d know I lied to him. I needed to come up with another lie. If I didn’t, my cover would be blown, and that had never happened to me before.

I hoped it never would.

CHAPTER TEN

adam

Abby's hands were firm on the wound, and I was surprised by how calm and collected she was. Most women would have run away screaming in the opposite direction, unless they were a trained healthcare professional, trained in combat of some sort, or law enforcement. She was a fitness instructor. Something about her didn't add up. Her hands had been confident, sure as she kept pressure on the wound. Her face was all too serious as we did our best to keep the wounded man alive.

The idea to use a tampon to plug the bullet wound was incredible and again hinted that there was more to Abby than she let on. She did all the things that I would have done if she hadn't done them first. I might be strong and powerful, but she was light and quick. It wasn't a race, but she had led the whole way to the crime scene. It was as if she was used to running straight into danger instead of running from it. Like she was made for this, like she was just like me. The thought made me proud for some reason, and also more confused.

I barely knew the woman, and she had me second guessing everything. She'd done so much to impress me, and I hadn't known her for more than three days. The way she carried herself and the way she acted under extreme pressure told me more than it would the average person. She was lying to me about something—or at least wasn't sharing the full truth. I tried not to think too negatively; maybe she was a nurse before she became a fitness instructor, who knew? I wanted to ask her more questions. I wanted to get to the bottom of who she really was. I'd never been this infatuated with another person

so far, but the more I learned, the more I saw, the more I was determined to see everything. She made me want to break through all her walls and destroy anything she could use to keep me out. I wanted to know her inside and out. That was relationship type stuff, and also slightly stalkerish.

I'd always wanted my other half to be someone who was like me, who understood the lifestyle I lived while in the Army, the same lifestyle I had a hard time letting go of. My willingness to help protect Christine and help find Mary was evidence of that. Abby wasn't scared by the sound of gunshots or dying men; instead she confronted them head-on. She ran straight into danger and led the way.

Is Abby my perfect match? Does she have what it takes to be with someone like me?

If she could handle a gunshot victim, who knew what else she could handle with the same level of calm and confidence? For half a second, I considered telling her why Christine and Wells chose this island for their wedding. I considered telling her about our mission and asking if she wanted to help. But I thought better of it after a quick moment of insecurity. Plugging a bullet wound was completely different than hunting down a human trafficker. Not to mention, I didn't want to do anything to put her in danger.

Guilt suddenly bloomed in my stomach, anchoring my feet to the ground. Why did I feel so guilty keeping something like that from her? It was none of her business in the first place. My friends would also kill me if I told her about our mission without running it by them first. We needed to keep our cover on the island—tourists, here for a blowout wedding. No one suspected the true purpose for our visit.

I was so desperate to keep Abby around, and close by, that I considered spilling my guts if it meant she'd stay to help us. That was a weakness, something I wasn't fond of in myself, but I could admit it was there. We didn't need any help, but I would let her think that if it meant I could convince her to stay—convince her to spend a few nights in my bed.

Yates would give me so much shit if he knew what I was thinking. Pirate fucker.

The whole group would, but he'd start making jokes about fucking her, and then I'd have to snap a perfectly good prosthetic leg and shove it in between his ears.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts as the island's emergency services arrived. Their footsteps and voices had been what brought me out of my wandering head as they came into view. They crouched beside Abby and me, and they took over. Other hands replaced mine, and police officers guided us off to the side. The woman who had called for help allowed us to wash our hands in her sink before the police got a chance to question us. It turned out the victim was her employee.

“So you're telling me you didn't witness anything?” the officer asked. Abby was questioned separately. I could see the side of her face as she gave her account of what happened. The officer who spoke with her probably had more information than what I shared with the officer who questioned me. It was obvious what we did to help. I figured I didn't need to describe it in excruciating detail. I didn't think they truly cared what the man's warm blood felt like between my fingers or what his groans of pain had sounded like.

“That's what I'm saying. We heard the gunshot and went running. I'm a retired combat veteran and figured if there was anyone injured that I could help,” I explained again. It wasn't quite true; I just followed Abby here. I had to make sure she stayed safe, but I wasn't going to put any attention on her. I didn't know who could be involved in the trafficking ring or if these cops were dirty. The less attention put on Abby, the better.

Given our group's past experiences, I was a little critical of law enforcement. I was especially skeptical of them in foreign countries, where they liked to take advantage of tourists. I waited for him to try to trip me up, to try to pin this back on us somehow. At least we had a lot of witnesses to our arrival and no weapons on us. I half expected the man to try to extort money from us somehow.

“Did the victim mention who shot him?” the officer asked.

“No, he wasn’t able to speak, only shake or nod his head. He was barely conscious while we stabilized him.”

“Then that’s all I need,” the officer said. He already had my contact information should he need to reach back out. He closed his notepad and then walked back over to where the victim had been lying. He stared at the puddle of blood, inspecting for any further evidence. His partner soon finished his conversation with Abby and we were free to go.

Several people approached us and thanked us for what we did, but we kept moving. This place clearly wasn’t safe, even with a police presence. Not to mention, we had no idea who fired the round. What if they were mad we interfered and came back to get revenge? I could take a round, I had before, but I wasn’t keen on repeating the experience. I didn’t want that for Abby either.

When we were far enough away from the crowd, I sent a text to the group, giving them a one-line explanation of what happened. I left Christine and Wells out of the text thread; it was their wedding night, after all. Then I took a deep breath and steeled myself for a conversation that I may or may not like the answer to. Despite how in awe I was of Abby, I needed to shatter that opinion. She was too perfect, and I wanted to call bullshit. I wasn’t sure if this was self-sabotage or not. I may not have any real experience when it came to romantic relationships, aside from fuck buddies—but I knew enough about females to know that what I was about to do might piss her off.

“Okay, so how did you know how to do that?” I asked her. I trained my eyes on her in a hard expression, hoping she’d cave to my questions easily.

“Do what, put a tampon in a hole? Well, I don’t know if you were ever taught about the female body...” she said, trailing off. *Cute.*

Her answer would have been funny, if it were answering someone else’s question. The fact that she was using it to avoid mine had me a little frustrated.

“No, don’t do that deflecting crap. You demonstrated combat lifesaving skills, you ran headfirst into unknown danger, and you didn’t shy away when you saw all the blood. In fact, you just knelt in it and got to work. That’s shit that nurses, doctors, first responders, or service members do. You told me you are none of those things,” I said, my accusation just under the surface. *What are you keeping from me, and why are you lying about it?*

“I’m exhausted. Can we talk about this in the morning, once I can mentally unpack what just happened? I’m not unaffected by it, like you are implying. I just download this stuff differently, and it takes time,” she said. She sighed, and I could hear the exhaustion in it. It had been a long day, and we were well into a new one.

I huffed out a sigh. “Okay. But we are discussing this. There are some things that I want to tell you, but I can’t do that unless you are honest with me first,” I added. I really did want to tell her about our mission. I was going to talk to the group about it first thing in the morning. I had only known her for all of three full days, and I shouldn’t feel guilty about keeping our mission from her, but I did, and there was only one way to fix it. I knew my friends were not going to like the idea, but I’d fight for her. She’d be a good addition to the group; I just knew it.

“Fine,” she said with a whisper.

The rest of our walk back to the resort was silent. I wanted to reach out and grab her hand, but I didn’t. That was shit that couples did, and we weren’t a couple.

As the ocean breeze tickled my skin and rustled my hair, my thoughts began to wander to what Abby was keeping to herself and who she really was. Her tattoos led me to the conclusion that she could be a veteran. So many of us invested in the art during or after our service. Maybe she was a nurse or a doctor, but why lie about something like that? Why lie about prior service, or her job in general? I was just a stranger she met on the plane; why would I care what she did for a living?

We got back to the lobby of the resort and received strange looks. I looked down and saw blood on my white shirt and on the knees of my long khaki dress pants. She had blood on her knees and a little smeared on her chest. We looked like we just committed a murder.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” Abby said and took an elevator up to the room. I wondered why she had disappeared so quickly. I saw Jasmine and Jones standing in the lobby near the dining area, and Jasmine looked pissed. That answered my question; she left me to deal with my friends. Hell, if Jasmine wasn’t my friend, I might have high-tailed it out of there too.

I wondered what had happened to put that annoyed look on Jasmine’s face. The whole night had been great, all of my friends got plastered, and for once we enjoyed ourselves. The last time we did something like that was in Vegas after we recovered all the human trafficking survivors. What could have ruined that?

“Do you have a minute, man? We need to talk to you,” Jones said. He sounded a little nervous. I’d never known him to be nervous before, except for when his sister was kidnapped and Jasmine was in danger of the same.

“Uh, yeah, I guess so. Follow me up to my room? I’m kind of covered in blood,” I said.

Jasmine’s anger fizzled out, as if she’d been so focused on what made her angry that she couldn’t focus on anything else.

“Is the guy okay?” she asked, her body language and her facial expression softening some. She was less threatening now, and I was able to relax.

“I have no idea. He was alive when they transported him. Bullet likely struck him in the kidney. He would have lost a lot more blood if it weren’t for Abby,” I said and punched the elevator button to our floor.

They remained silent as we rode the elevator up and then got out on our floor. The silence continued as we moved down the hallway. I noticed Abby’s door was closed with a do-not-disturb sign on it. I hoped she was okay.

I unlocked my door, and we all shuffled into the room. They sat down on my bed while I shrugged out of the blazer, shirt, and tie I was wearing.

“So what did Abby do to stop the blood flow?” Jasmine asked curiously. I wasn’t sure what to make of her different mood or the reason for her question. Had she been thinking about that the entire elevator ride?

“She told me to plug the bullet hole with a tampon she had in her bag. Her hands were already on the man’s abdomen applying pressure, and if she took them off, he would have lost a lot more blood,” I said.

Jasmine snorted.

“That actually works?” she asked.

“Yes, they actually made wound dressings very similar to tampons. Medics carry them to plug bullet wounds now,” Jones answered before I could.

“That’s pretty cool,” she commented.

“Yeah, it is, but where did Abby get that knowledge? Most people don’t know things like that,” Jones asked. “Didn’t she say she was a fitness instructor?”

“That’s what I’m struggling with,” I said as I walked into the bathroom. I shrugged out of my bloody pants and then jumped in the shower.

Jasmine and Jones moved to the door of the bathroom. They gave me my privacy, but we were still close enough to speak.

“So, I may have an answer to that,” Jasmine said.

“Please share. I haven’t heard this yet. She was insistent that she tell us at the same time,” Jones said.

“Prepare yourself, it’s kind of a big deal,” she prefaced. Her anger was gone—replaced by something I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

“Please for the love of God, woman. Please spit it out,” I said. I was glad that I wouldn’t have to wait until morning to

possibly get a half truth from Abby, assuming whatever Jasmine shared was true. However, I didn't like that I was going to hear about Abby's past from someone else. I'd have rather heard it straight from her. I could have told Jasmine to hold off, or I could have had Abby come to my room. I could demand that she come clean, but I didn't do well with surprises or waiting. I had absolutely no patience when it came to games like these. Maybe it was another reason why I was still single. Weren't most relationships just a game?

"Abby is an FBI agent," she said quickly, like ripping off a Band-Aid.

I grabbed the grab bar in the shower. I was sure that my grip was about to bend it.

FBI?

I was about to tell her how wrong she was, but before I could, Jasmine said, "Let me explain. I thought she looked familiar. Remember my obsession with crime shows and all stuff related? I could have sworn she looked familiar, but I was having trouble placing her. It wasn't until tonight when I was completely sloshed that it came back to me. She is the FBI agent who just brought down a sex trafficking ring in New York. She was undercover for over six months, and she was awarded by the FBI for the accomplishment. I read it all in a news article. I have it pulled up on my phone when you are ready to read it."

"Can you text it to me?" I asked, my voice low and unsteady.

Part of my training was to adapt quickly, make decisions, and then move on, but I was having a hard time comprehending what Jasmine shared. *Abby is actually an FBI agent?* I supposed I shouldn't have been as surprised as I was. She ran straight for the source of the gunshots. As my brain started to connect the dots, a burning question came to me. Was our run-in at the airport and her ticket for my flight all by chance, or was this planned? Was my luck really that bad, that I'd almost brought a law enforcement official into our bounty-hunting gig, which bordered on the edge of what was legal? Or

did another FBI agent we know have something to do with this? *Boss*.

“Does she know Boss?” I asked. If she did, then that settled it; she ran into me on purpose.

“I believe so. He’s mentioned in the same article. They work out of the same field office. It would be hard for them not to know each other,” Jasmine said.

I let out a deep, angry growl. I clenched my fists, and it took all of my restraint to keep my hand from striking the wall. Christine didn’t need to pay for the resort to retile the shower.

“Are you okay, man?” Jones asked.

I was sure that my growl was the obvious answer to that question. *No*. They were probably worried I was going to wreck this whole glass shower. I felt like a bull in a china shop at that moment, a very expensive china shop.

“I don’t even know. What does this mean? She sought me out to do what, babysit us? Was this Boss’ doing?” I asked. “Why did she single me out?”

I felt angry, and hurt, and betrayed. Like my biggest weakness had been used against me. Was I so desperate for a woman’s love that she saw right through me and used it against me? Used it to distract me and pull the wool over my eyes? She was good; she almost had me. If it weren’t for Jasmine, who knew what kind of lies Abby would have fed me in the morning?

“I don’t know, but it all seems to be too much of a coincidence. You swear she didn’t tell you?” Jasmine asked. I could tell she was concerned about me. Her tone wasn’t as accusatory as it normally would have been. That fire was replaced by sympathy or pity. *Fuck this*.

“I swear. As far as I knew, she was a fitness instructor. After the way she handled tonight, I knew there was more to her than she was sharing. I asked as much, and she said we’d talk about it in the morning. I don’t know if she planned on telling me the truth or not,” I answered. I felt like a complete and total fool. I thought of myself as someone with higher than

average intelligence and a good gut instinct. This revelation only proved that I didn't know myself as well as I thought, and that scared me. I'd always been terrified by the idea of being the weakest link. Call it a result of a shitty childhood and endless bullying. I bulked up so no one would dare pick on me, I was the tough guy who could think or fight his way out of any scenario, but what if that wasn't really me? I had let someone with a good pair of tits and cool tats pull the wool over my eyes, and that was pathetic. The thought of her lying to me again only pissed me off more. I hated liars; it was one of my biggest pet peeves.

You can't take this personally, Adam. This is probably all just part of her job.

“If she is here to help us, what do we do about that? Do we let her help us? Boss clearly trusts her if he sent her here, and this island is pretty large. Another body, another trained mind could be a big help,” Jones added.

I looked through the glass and saw Jones and Jasmine were having their own private conversation with just their eyes. It was a conversation that they could conveniently hide from me, considering I could only see Jones' face clearly.

“You said she brought down a trafficking ring herself?” I asked. My head hurt from my own fury and high blood pressure. I massaged my temples, looking for some relief.

“Well, I'm sure there were people on the outside helping, but yeah. She was the lone undercover asset feeding them information and building the case. What she did is a pretty big deal. It exposed several politicians and a wealthy CEO. The FBI is making a big deal out of it,” Jasmine added.

Boss was sending his best asset in to help. She was particularly well trained for this type of situation. While we were too, our style was more of a “fly by the seat of your pants and hope you get lucky” type. We heavily relied on our military training and common sense. We weren't as experienced with the whole creating a cover, infiltrating, and collecting evidence shit, not like she was. Abby could be an asset. Regardless of her experience, would I be able to trust

her if we decided to let her work with us? Our group got along in Vegas just fine without her. Would bringing her in do anything to help us or just put us at risk and make us distrustful of one of our own?

All of our previous conversations had been based on lies. How was I supposed to get over that? She'd been lying to me from the very beginning, so the woman I thought I knew didn't exist. She was a figment of her own imagination designed to keep me from getting close to her. A rational part of me knew that she was doing this for a reason; this was her job. Going undercover and keeping it while putting together a case was tough, I was sure, but being on the other end of the situation was worse. I could handle her being an agent; hell, that impressed me. It required lots of training, mental and physical. Our team could use someone like her. I knew myself well enough to know that I would be able to let go of the lies. I gave her the perfect opportunity to come clean, but she insisted on pushing that off. If she had, I would have told her about what we were doing immediately and likely asked for her help. I would have at least trusted her a little if she admitted it to me directly. Instead she chose the coward's way out, and I had to question if she ever would have told me the truth. I didn't like that one bit. She didn't need to give us her cover. She didn't need to wreck my trust with a lie, when I would have been okay with her presence from the very beginning, even if Boss did send her to babysit.

I knew she was too good to be true.

“So what now?” I asked.

I turned off the water. I had aggressively cleaned myself, and my skin was an angry pink.

“It's your call. We're pissed that she lied, but we know we could use the help. You are the one she lied to the most, and you are the one emotionally invested in her. Don't bother trying to hide it. I know you too well for that. So you decide, do we interrogate her and then let her in, or do we kick her to the curb?” Jones asked.

That was the question. Could I swallow my pride and work closely with someone who lied to my face and possibly used me to figure out what we were up to? I had to be okay with it. If we didn't bring Abby in on this, we took the chance of others being kidnapped. If she could speed up our investigation, then I couldn't let my refusal be on my conscience. I couldn't live with that knowledge that someone was kidnapped because of my pride.

"I guess we'll tear her a new asshole and then let her in. That's clearly what she wants," I said. At least the last part.

"Are you sure?" Jasmine asked. I could see her concern, and I was grateful for her concern, but also her fierce passion. It's what helped us get the answers I needed about Abby.

"I'm sure."

My stomach rolled with the anticipation of calling her out on her lies. If she were a man, I would have considered hitting her, but I wasn't a monster. I wouldn't lay hands on a woman in anger, no matter how well she was able to defend herself or how much she deserved it. No, I'd make sure she knew just how disgusted I was by the lies, her cover be damned. I was a gentle giant unless provoked, and she definitely poked the bear.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

abby

I was operating on no sleep, and I could really feel it. I laid in bed and tossed and turned all night, contemplating what

I was going to do. When the sun rose, I moved to the bathtub, hoping the warm water and lavender bath salts would help me relax. I was one of the best undercover agents in our field office, and yet I struggled to keep this cover. I should have lied and said I was a police officer. It would have been way more believable than a fitness instructor. Then I could have pinned my response last night on that training. I couldn't have known that I was going to save someone's life like that, but I should have anticipated there was going to be trouble, and I shouldn't have underestimated Adam or his team. Maybe I let my ego get in the way, thinking I was here to babysit a bunch of inexperienced civilians. After speaking with them, and getting to know Adam, I knew there was more than met the eye with the guys, and hell, even their women.

It'd never been this hard to stay in character before, but then again, I'd never been in a situation like this before—working with good people who couldn't know who I was. I'd certainly never connected to someone like I had Adam while I was undercover. This whole situation felt unprecedented.

Deep down I knew Adam wasn't going to let this go. He was suspicious of me, and I wasted time playing games, trying to keep a cover that my heart was only half in. I wasn't sure why Bob wanted me to go undercover and hide my identity from these guys in the first place. I was an asset to a team, but only if they knew what I could bring to the table. If they

wanted someone they could take seriously and rely on for their expertise, my cover was useless.

I was so freaking stupid. I should have listened to my gut and just been honest in the first place. Bob might be my mentor, and one of the best agents I knew, but he'd been wrong on occasion, and this was one of those times. I screwed this up so badly, and I was beyond embarrassed. I was half tempted to tell Bob that I wasn't the woman for this assignment and to send someone else. Every time I touched my phone, I dropped it at the thought of letting Boss down and at the thought of jeopardizing my career because of a mistake that I didn't want to make in the first place.

I was going to have to tell Adam and his friends the truth. And that also meant sharing that I didn't want to lie, that I created a cover under Bob's orders. I'd tell him how sorry I was and how much I wished to be on their team, not just because that was what I was supposed to accomplish, but because I wanted them to succeed in their goal. My life's work was to make myself a weapon against those who took what they wanted and didn't care about the consequences, to seek justice for those who couldn't do it themselves. I wanted every trafficker and abuser behind bars, and that was what we had in common. I hoped that's what his team would focus on when the truth came out. My training had hardened me into a sharp blade, but even the hardest of blades had vulnerable spots, and for some reason I found one in Adam. I hoped he could understand that and that he'd eventually forgive me. I'd hate to think that I lost someone who could be important to me because I was doing my job.

I pulled myself out of the bathtub to grab another cup of coffee. I needed the assistance to keep me awake. I watched the sun rise through the morning sky from this very spot, and the water had long since gone cold. I pulled the plug and let it drain and then got dressed for the day.

My stomach rumbled with the nervous anticipation surrounding the idea of coming clean to the others. I'd go grab some food, and if Adam and his crew were down there, I'd explain everything then.

I opened the door and was surprised to see Adam standing there with his fist raised, as if he had been about to knock.

“Uh...hi,” I said with what felt like an awkward smile.

“Can we talk?” he asked. His face appeared hard and uncaring. In the short time I had known him, he had never looked at me like that before, and I didn’t like it. Did he somehow already know?

“Sure, come in,” I said. My grumbling stomach was just going to have to wait. To hold myself over, I used the coffee maker to brew another cup.

“Do you want any?” I asked and nodded my head toward the coffee station I was tinkering with.

“Sure.” Again his tone was cold, his face emotionless. Something was definitely wrong. I should have just bit the bullet last night; maybe he wouldn’t be acting like this if I had. Or maybe he would have reacted worse. Maybe he would have already cut me out of the mission if I had.

I swallowed hard.

We were quiet while I made two cups of coffee and passed him his. We moved over to the small table that sat in front of large windows that overlooked the ocean. It was already a beautiful day, and the beach was crowded. Part of me wished this was just a normal vacation so I could go park my ass on the sand like the rest of the tourists. I was going to have to ask Bob to let me take a real vacation after this was all over. If they didn’t close the field office here permanently, maybe I could get a transfer here. I’d have no problem living my hours off the clock in a bikini.

“So, about last night, give me the truth about who you are, why you reacted the way you did. Running head-first into danger is not normal for a civilian. Don’t feed me a bullshit line either,” he said. His eyes were hard, his jaw was set, and his shoulder muscles were tense.

He must know.

My pulse quickened, my heart beating erratically in my chest. I took a deep breath and then released it to try to gather

a bit of control. This went against everything I knew as an agent. I had never blown a cover before, but there was always a first for everything, and he wasn't the suspect. There were worse situations to be outed in.

"I am an FBI agent, and before that, I was briefly in the Navy."

I watched him closely for any signs of surprise or anger. There was no shock, no recoil; he gave nothing away.

He already knew. "But you knew that already, didn't you?"

"Found out you are an agent last night, after Jasmine and Jones cornered me in the lobby," he answered. His face remained neutral, and I had no idea what he thought about the news. "Had no idea about you being in the Navy. Now the tattoos make sense." He scanned my arms, looking at the ink again. He was still cold, but I thought that just maybe his voice was slightly less chilled. Maybe admitting the truth and sharing more than he had figured out himself helped the situation slightly.

His eyes left my arms and snapped back to my face, searching with a hard expression. "Why lie?"

Guilt wrecked me, and I swallowed it down. I would not cry for doing my job.

"My boss is Bob Dempsey. After my last assignment, in which I spent six months undercover, he had another assignment for me, and it was to be disguised as a vacation. He said that the new assignment wasn't on the books, so I took on the job. I wasn't lying when I said I was focused on my career. I am dedicated to my work with the Agency, and that includes following orders. Bob told me to create a cover and convince you guys to let me work with you but not to let you know who I was."

"Why would he ask that of you? I thought he trusted us. Didn't we prove ourselves in Vegas?" Adam asked. His Adam's apple bobbed. His fists were clenched at his sides, and I heard his teeth clash as he locked his jaw to stop himself from saying more.

“He trusts you, and he really wants you guys to succeed, which is why he sent me in the first place. Neither of us would be here if he didn’t think your team could handle this. Trafficking is my specialty. I don’t know why he didn’t want you to know who I really was. Maybe he thought you wouldn’t trust me or believed you guys would be insulted at my presence? All I know is that I was given orders, and I followed them,” I said. He would know exactly what that was like, to put on a uniform and do what you were told, even when you disagreed with the orders. If anyone could understand that, it would be Adam and his friends.

He was silent for a moment. His lips would part as if he was going to speak, then they slammed shut again. It took him four tries before he said what was on his mind. “Was any of it actually real?”

That was a loaded question, and my heart broke at the inference. It felt real to me, despite my lies. I was attracted to Adam, and in another life, maybe he and I could have been something more than a drunken hookup in paradise. I sensed that under his large and tough exterior was a sensitive man looking for a connection with someone who he could relate to, someone who wouldn’t be intimidated by him. I wanted to give him that, but I couldn’t.

“Most of the backstory was false, but I do know martial arts. That’s part of my training.” I swallowed hard, because I was about to make myself very vulnerable. “The chemistry between us, that wasn’t an act. That was very much real.” I laid my heart out on my sleeve, a heart that I couldn’t give away in the first place. I liked this chemistry between us, it woke up a part of me that had been dead for a long time, but I couldn’t give him my heart. It was battered and bruised and very distrustful.

His eyes searched my face still, and I could feel my eyes pleading with his. *I’m telling you the truth.* “You said you were in the Navy. Why did you leave, and why did you lie about that?” he asked.

For what felt like the millionth time, I swallowed hard. I nervously played with the ends of my hair as I answered.

“This is difficult for me to talk about, so give me a second okay?” Deep breath. “I’ll tell you because I realize I need to earn your trust, but this is heavy.” My mouth turned dry and my hands began to sweat. This happened anytime I was forced to talk about the abuse I endured. It had sent me into a deep and dark depression, and it took a long time to claw my way out to see the light. It didn’t matter that in my past undercover assignments I had been subjected to abuse; I was ready for it then. In the Navy, I wasn’t prepared. I was ready to take on the nation’s enemies, not its sexual predators and narcissists. The Navy made me into a cold and calculating person, but not in the way it was supposed to.

Adam’s hard expression turned slightly softer. He could likely see my turmoil. I was extremely uncomfortable with his expression of sympathy. After my lies, even ones made with good intentions, he deserved to know my truth—no matter how painful. I deserved whatever reaction he gave me.

“I was a Petty Officer Third Class, and one of my superiors, a Petty Officer First Class, took an interest in me. He was supposed to be mentoring me, but he did a lot more than that,” I said with a scoff. “He started with inappropriate comments disguised as flirtation, and when I rejected his advances, he became mean. I didn’t report him for fear of retaliation. We were trapped on a ship together, and there wasn’t much I could do to escape him.” In fact, there wasn’t much I could do to keep myself out of trouble. He was always finding a way to metaphorically keep his hand around my throat. Ironically, my throat felt like it was closing as I continued to choke out the story. “He threatened to destroy my career if I refused to fuck him. He said he’d ruin me or kill me in my sleep if I told anyone about what happened. A 1150 complaint wouldn’t look good on his record.” I scoffed again, because somehow his *needs* and career mattered more than my bodily autonomy and career.

“Is that a complaint for assault or harassment, like SHARP for the Army?” he asked. His eyebrows were knitted together with what looked like worry. I wanted to reach out and touch them, to soothe them back into place, but I held still.

“It’s a complaint made against a superior for any reason.”

I left the sentence hanging in the air; it would be easy enough to pick up where the rest of my story was going. I hoped that would be it, that it would answer all his questions and we could move on. He remained silent, and I could tell by his glassy stare that he wanted more from me. Despite the fact he knew where this story led, he wanted to hear it all. My story was the ugly side of the military that others refused to acknowledge. Yet he knew; I could see it. His hard demeanor was gone now, soothed by pain.

Something like hope fluttered in my stomach, forcing some of the guilt to leave. There was no judgmental hardness to his gaze; he wasn’t going to blame me for what happened, like others had.

“The blackmail, threats, and rape continued the whole deployment. He’d cover my mouth as I cried, when he did what he did.” I swallowed past the gagging reflex that threatened to take over as I imagined the terror and pain I felt in the moment. “It wasn’t consensual. I told him every single time that I didn’t want him to touch me, all he had to do was corner me near a closet, and it didn’t matter what I said. He did whatever he wanted to me. He’d be balls deep inside me and whisper in my ear all the ways he would destroy me if I exposed him.”

I stopped speaking again because it felt like my tongue turned to rubber. I was confident that I couldn’t speak another word without my voice cracking. My eyes burned with tears. I took a sip of my coffee to redirect my thoughts, a physical distraction to concentrate on. I needed a moment to just breathe without worrying about forming words. He silently watched as I attempted to pull myself back together. I was left with the impression that what I shared was stirring up harsh feelings in his own head, and I’d give a lot more than a penny for his thoughts.

It took a while, but I gathered up the courage to continue. “When the deployment ended, I took leave and went straight to my parents and told them everything. They were adamant that I finish out my contract and come home. The idea that the

nation couldn't protect me, despite my willingness to die for it, infuriated them. They convinced me to report the abuse, so that maybe others would also get justice. I went back to camp and reported him. I finished out the six months of my contract while under investigation. He made sure those six months were hell. He was under investigation as well, but the Navy didn't do much to punish him. It was his word against mine with *no evidence*," I said bitterly.

"Do you know where he is now?" Adam finally spoke. He cracked his knuckles. His tone didn't match his eyes. His voice practically vibrated with anger, as if he was seconds away from stealing a boat and hightailing it back to the States to track him down.

That wouldn't be necessary.

"Yeah, he died in the line of duty. It was some kind of training accident. To his family and the Navy, he died a hero's death, even though he was a monster hiding in a hero's uniform." I practically spat the words, I was so disgusted with the outcome. While he couldn't rape or blackmail any other sailors or women, I had never gotten my justice. I never got the validation of watching his career crumble, like he threatened to do to mine. His family would never know how he destroyed my life. They'd think fondly of him, instead of looking at his picture and seeing disgust. He took the easy way out instead of taking accountability for what he did. I had to hope he was burning in hell somewhere.

His face softened even further. "No justice," he whispered softly. He reached out and put his hand on my cheek. "I know that my words don't make it any better, but I'm sorry you went through that. I'm also sorry that I asked you for the full story and that you felt like you owed me the answer. You didn't." *Bingo, but the apology was nice.* "It explains your current profession," he commented.

"Yeah, I was recruited by Bob's predecessor. He was on his way out, and he wanted to leave Bob with a challenge, but also an asset. I already had the skills they were looking for, but I had something that couldn't be taught—determination—and I was floundering looking for my purpose. That's how I got

involved with the FBI. I was recruited by an agent looking for sexual abuse survivors from the military to make a great undercover team.”

“That’s a lot to take in and sounds pretty dangerous,” Adam said.

“Tell me about it. It’s been my life for the past six years, and sometimes I even have a hard time believing it.” It was hard to think about. Sometimes I felt so disconnected from my past that it was difficult to connect to my current life. I was a completely different person now, and I balked at the idea of letting someone do that to me. At least now when I was being touched by perverts, it was because I was laying the trap. I was the spider allowing the fly to land on my web, so I could devour them. Now I had the power and let my victims think that they did.

He gave me a look of determination and spoke quickly, like he was afraid he’d change his mind. “I’ve got one last question, and after that we can move on from this, no matter the answer.” I could handle one more question if it meant he’d forgive me for not being honest from the beginning. “I need total honesty. What was your angle in hooking up with me, and was it planned? Was the airport run-in or our shared flight planned?” he asked. “Were you using me?” The last words were slow and deliberate from his lips.

The air whooshed from my lungs.

That’s more than one question, but I understood the sentiment. He needed to know how much of our connection was real and if I’d been laying a trap for him, like I had for perpetrators. The questions were gentle and ruthless at the same time. He knew that he was stripping me raw, and this was how I’d atone for the hurt I had caused. I found myself between a rock and a hard place, and no matter what I admitted to, it wasn’t going to be the answer he wanted. Not if he wanted anything more from me than a casual romp between the sheets.

“God no. What happened between us last night was my drunk brain acting on the attraction and chemistry I’ve felt

from the first day. It wasn't planned, but I wanted it, a lot. The airport was a complete coincidence. Although I will admit I knew who you were when you bumped into me. I had looked up pictures of the whole group and your basic background before I left for my assignment. I was completely shocked when you bumped into me, and I couldn't believe my luck," I answered.

"And the resort?" he asked.

"That I did on the fly. I didn't book the room until we were on our way here, after you showed me your reservation." He looked a little hurt but accepted the answer. I was giving him the raw truth, which I realized was everything to him.

I stared at him for a moment. He didn't ask me for details on my assignment, which I was grateful for. I didn't have to explain the truth or lie about my real assignment, investigating the possible involvement of the local FBI office. I'd have a hard enough time earning Adam's group's trust now that they knew who I was and that I'd lied to them. If they thought the agency was untrustworthy, who knew how that could affect them and their work with the bureau in the future? I wasn't going to be responsible for that unless Bob's suspicions were true.

"So what's the verdict, judge? Can we move past this? I'd really like to help with your mission regardless of Bob's expectations. I have to remain ethical given I'm in law enforcement, but I'd like to help however I can within those limitations. My life's purpose is to put sick bastards away, and I'm sensing in a way it's always yours too with a recent refocus on who you punish. Can we work together?" My heart was beating like a bass drum in my chest, anticipation eating me alive as he stared at me. His eyes searched mine, looking for something.

"Yes, but first you need to make it through the jury," he said with a smirk. I was happy for the briefest of seconds before I registered the whole answer.

I was forgiven by him, but I still had to go through his friends... Fuck.

CHAPTER TWELVE

adam

If Abby wasn't an FBI agent, I would have worried about the interrogation my friends gave her. They were sort of ruthless, questioning her over and over on the reasons behind her lies. She remained almost stoic. The emotional Abby from earlier was gone. I could see it like a switch had been flipped off. If she was anything like me, she had likely compartmentalized her abuse and tucked it away in the back of her mind—that or she was a great actress. Definitely the latter, she already proved that she was a good actress. If it weren't for the fact that Jasmine recognized her face, she could have continued her lies for days until she felt guilty enough to share the truth. As my friends tried to pick apart her story, she didn't show them her vulnerable side. Granted, she didn't tell them about the abuse she suffered while in the Navy; I couldn't bring myself to ask her to share that with them. It was her trauma, and it would stay between us until she was ready to share it with them. Every superhero had their backstory, their past that pushed them to be better; but not every superhero flaunted it, nor did they need to. Anything related to Abby's work at the FBI was fair game.

I had to admit that I was relieved that Abby wasn't the heartless monster that my mind had made her out to be after Jasmine's revelation last night. I spent the whole night wondering if she had played me and if this was just a game to her. I couldn't help but think the worst about her, partly because she kept such a huge secret, but also because I'd been burned by women in the past. I had usually caught on before I developed any feelings, but Abby was different. While I was

still hurt by how I found out, I had to keep a level head. There would be missions I would never be able to tell her about, classified information I'd never be able to share with her. For me to become irrational over her following orders, that would make me a hypocrite, which was something else I despised. I had to suck it up and move on from it; I was going to have to learn to trust her, because we both had the same mission, just different ways of carrying it out. I had to trust the process.

When the crew stopped tearing into her and put this all behind them, she'd fit right in. I knew that Christine would develop a soft spot for her; they had something terrible in common. They'd both been terribly abused by a disgusting excuse of a man. They turned that abuse into something productive to save others. They rose above the terrible shit to make the world a better place, and that was what made them heroes. I could imagine Abby scoffing at the label, and I could see Christine roll her eyes. Jasmine would snort if I ever referred to any of the women as heroes, but that was okay; the true ones didn't wear capes or spandex. They hid in normal clothing behind normal lives.

“Okay, before we let this go, I've got to know, how exactly did you bring down that ring in New York? That's pretty high profile, and I have a hard time believing that one person was capable of all that undercover work and intel,” Jasmine said. There was no malice, only awe. Jasmine's fascination with true crime documentaries was shining through, and she had officially entered fangirl territory.

“Uh, I'll tell you, but I trust this stays between us. They are all still awaiting their trials, so technically this story is supposed to remain within the bureau until that time,” Abby said. She looked a little uncomfortable, like she couldn't believe she was about to share this with us. She was breaking the rules again, and we were lucky it was for our benefit.

“We promise,” Jasmine said and then pinned everyone with a look. Everyone nodded along their agreement at Jasmine's glare. *Sheesh, that woman is frightening.* As if Jones could read my thoughts, he grinned.

“We had an anonymous tip that there could be some trafficking going on in a high rise. Women are always going missing in the city, but there was an uptick, and the authorities were more concerned than normal. Several floors weren’t accessible to the public. Even people who lived in that building couldn’t access those floors. There weren’t many records pertaining to those parts of the building in the public records.” She paused to make sure that we were listening, and we were all hanging off every word. Jasmine hadn’t blinked since Abby started her story, and Christine sat ramrod straight, her knuckles white. Now I was really glad that Jones made Mary stay home; she wouldn’t have been able to handle this mission. I just knew that this story would have been triggering for her.

“The locals contacted the FBI. Bob’s specialty is trafficking, so he was asked to look into it. We started our own investigation and noticed that surveillance from across the street would black out at certain times of the day, and the owners of those cameras had no idea why. Their tech companies had been out to service their CCTV systems several times, and the problem was never fixed. At that point, Bob knew that this couldn’t be a coincidence. They were either running drugs or human trafficking out of the hidden floors, and I was tasked with going undercover to figure it out.” Her eyes met mine as she added, “It was a rabbit hole of fuckery.”

The guys were studying Abby, and I studied them. I noticed a twinkle in Yates’ eye; he liked Abby. I was going to have to put the fear of God in the little asshole. I wouldn’t put it past him to hit on Abby just to fuck with me. After all, he tried that with both Christine and Jasmine. It was like a funny rite of passage for him. I’d show him how funny it would be when he needed a prosthetic hand to match his leg.

The others were listening intently, learning from an experienced agent on how exactly she took down a large-scale trafficking ring. It felt like it could have been the plot to some crime thriller novel and not a real-life scenario. Abby was an asset, and I already knew the group would officially ask her to join our mission. Her lie was already water under the bridge, luckily for her.

“The first step to infiltrating their organization was to be brought into the fold, and that meant getting myself kidnapped. I got a job at the coffee shop next door just to get their eyes on me. It didn’t take long for them to take notice of a young pretty blonde. My tattoos made me exotic. Bad men would pay a lot of money for a woman who they thought looked like a hot slut.” She paused and winced at her words, like she forgot part of her audience. She shot an apologetic look at Christine and Jasmine before she continued.

“I knew I had my one-way ticket into their circle when the same few guys kept hanging out at the shop each day. They’d ask me a question and try to lure me into a false sense of comfort with them. I played the ditz so they wouldn’t suspect a thing. The dumber they thought I was, the better it was for me. All the while, I kept Bob up with my progress and started tracking the men in the coffee shop. I sent him the camera footage from the coffee shop each night. After two weeks, it was only a matter of time before they swooped in to kidnap me. My bugs and tracking devices were ready. Sure enough, after two weeks at the coffee shop, they kidnapped me as I was closing the store for the night. They put a bag over my head and everything.” Christine shivered at the words, but she refused to meet anyone’s eyes but Abby’s. Abby didn’t look bothered by the experience; it was as if this story wasn’t hers, but one she saw on a TV screen. I knew her attitude toward the experience was unusual. She had trained for this; it was just a part of the assignment.

“After that, I had to convince the traffickers I was valuable to them, that I wasn’t just merchandise for them to move. I had to prove that I wanted to be a part of their world, so I seduced one of the lower-ranking guys, slept with him. I gave him everything he wanted, and then he bragged to the others. I was a spider weaving a web to trap, and they fell for it hook, line, and sinker. After a couple of weeks, it became quite clear that I was something of value to them. I wasn’t like the others; they thought I wanted to be there. It was a novelty they had come to appreciate. They didn’t have to fight me to get what they wanted. A lot of women went off to *‘their new homes,’* but I

remained behind, their plaything. They trusted me enough to keep me around, even if it was just to use me.”

My hands were balled into fists. Not in anger at Abby, but at what she had to resort to. She’d survived enough abuse during her deployment, and then she faced it again during her assignment. She still spoke in that detached way. I couldn’t help but wonder how much her undercover work affected her. Was it as bad as the abuse in the Navy? Or did her focus on revenge save her, as her crutch? It had to be taxing on the mind to live in the enemy’s lair, even for the bravest of souls. Maybe Boss wasn’t a complete asshole when he suggested a vacation, even if it was just another assignment. Maybe he knew that we could help her through the trauma in a different way. I imagined the graying bastard sitting back at his desk smiling to himself, thinking he was clever by pairing us together.

“How many were there?” Christine asked.

“Well, thirty were arrested, but there were probably at least twice that many involved. They have warrants out for ten more, and those were the people I could identify. There were plenty that I couldn’t, but they’ll spend their lives cowering in fear that they will get caught as each one of their associates are brought to justice,” Abby answered.

“You went through all of that, and you are back to work so soon?” Yates asked. His twinkling eyes from earlier were gone. It wasn’t very often that he was serious without cracking a joke.

“Yeah, I take comfort in my work, in making sure those who do wrong are punished.”

“Well, then, I don’t think there’s any doubt that you belong here with us,” Wells said as he took Christine’s hand.

“I’d like that,” Abby said with a tight-lipped smile.

“Good, we’re going to need your help to catch this asshole. Did Boss give you any info on this guy before you left?” Garcia asked. The nerd had a pad of paper and a pen, scribbling notes.

“I think it’s funny you call him Boss. You know his name is Bob, right?” she asked with a chuckle.

“Yeah, when we met him, that’s what he told us to call him and it stuck,” Mendez said.

“He is my boss, and even I don’t call him that,” Abby said with a giggle. The rest of us smiled, and just like that, the intensity from her story was behind us. “The answer to your question is no, I don’t have any more info than you do. That Robbie guy that you busted is a real peach. I watched the video of his questioning. Jasmine, he’s really got it out for you.”

“Yeah, he’ll have to get in line,” Jasmine said with a snort. She leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms in front of her chest. She was proud of her list of enemies, and Jones nearly rolled his eyes out of his head. He was proud of his girl but probably a little concerned with the list of people who likely wanted her dead.

We brought Abby up to speed on what the locals told Jasmine and me the night we arrived. Then Abby and I told the group about the guy we patched up last night.

“So what do you recommend we do next?” Jones asked Abby.

“I think that there are a lot of us, and we need to use that to our advantage. Let’s divide and conquer. We can divide into teams with certain goals in mind. One thing that interested me is that most of the disappearances have happened on this part of the island. Has anyone else noticed that?” she asked.

“I did. I was actually going to bring that up. I put together a map of all the places that the missing persons were last seen,” Guy said.

“That’s great. Can we take a look?”

Guy pulled out the laptop and flipped it into tablet mode. Then he zoomed into the island. A vast majority were centered around the resorts we were in.

“I even color coded the dots to see if we could find a pattern based on how long ago the disappearances were. Red is

the oldest, around four years, and then purple is the newest, within the past few weeks,” Guy clarified.

“Holy shit, how has this not become an international story?” I asked. Our part of the island was covered in dots of various colors. The market was also clustered with multiple colors. The rest of the island was only dotted here and there, mainly between the resorts and the market.

There were so many missing people. Government officials for the island had to have taken notice of this. The question was, what was being done about it?

“They likely have the police paid off. Did you notice how no one came last night to the scene until you stepped in to help? I’m pretty sure the police station wasn’t that far from you. What if they didn’t respond right away, because they were paid not to?” Garcia suggested.

“You could be right. Once they were satisfied I knew nothing about how the guy ended up there, the officer stopped questioning me,” I added.

“I took it a step further and actually questioned him,” Abby added with a smug grin.

“I like her,” Jasmine said, stealing the same line Christine used when she met her. *Yeah, me too, and if I have my way, maybe I’ll get to keep her.*

“What did you find out?” I asked.

“He knows something about what’s going on. I started leading him through a fake theory, and he rolled his eyes at me like I was so far off base that he couldn’t be bothered to listen to me. You only do that if you know what actually happened, right? Otherwise as a police officer he would listen to what I had to say, for the investigation.”

“You’re right, that’s odd,” Yates said. He was the strategist of the group. I joked that Garcia was a nerd, but Yates was the real one. The man had studied military history like his life depended on it. He and Jasmine could have competitions on who out-nerded who in their prospective interests—which had some surprising overlap.

“So why don’t we divide into groups and canvas? We need to concentrate in the areas with the most disappearances. I’d also like to interview resort staff if we can. One of them likely knows something, or could even be working for the kidnapers. I worked at a coffee shop to get myself noticed, but what if traffickers worked there to scout tourists and have easy access to them? We might be able to pull HR files from the resort’s offices and see if anyone could be connected to this Ricketts guy,” Abby said.

“I like that plan. It’s very likely this guy has a network larger than we thought, especially since there are disappearances on other neighboring islands. It takes a lot of people to make something like this work. With more people, there’s a greater chance for a fuck-up. He could be running an operation larger than the New York one, and definitely larger than Robbie’s,” Mendez said.

“So first things first, let’s do some canvassing. Speak to the staff and see what they know,” Wells said.

“All right, everyone, couple up. Guy, do you want to remain behind and watch the computer?” Jones asked.

“Yeah, I’ll get the drone up and see what I can spot,” Guy answered.

“All right, let’s go get ready and grab the ear pieces,” Wells said.

“This is going to be an exciting honeymoon,” Christine said to him with a grin.

“You are weird if you are still calling this your honeymoon,” Yates said with a chuckle. “Most people want to fuck their spouse’s brains out and not leave their room.”

“First of all, who says that isn’t happening when you aren’t around, you perv? Second, we’ve all known from day one that I was weird, and look where it got us. I’m the vice president of an international company, and I paid for all of the expenses for this trip. Meaning that bounty hunting money we get gets divided between us without expenses eating into your profits. Shut up and be grateful, peg leg,” Christine said with a smirk

and a wink. We all busted out laughing again. Yates took it like a champ and only resulted in sticking his tongue out at her. It was impossible to be mad at Christine; she was the group's sweetheart.

“Are you done eating?” I asked Abby. I looked down at her plate, and it looked like she had only taken a few bites of it. I could see where she pushed the food around on her plate.

“Yeah, I’m done. I lost my appetite,” she said with a shrug and then picked up the tray and dumped the food in the trash.

“We can get something to eat if you get hungry again while we’re out. I think it goes without saying that you’re my partner,” I told her as I nudged her arm with mine.

“Good, I wouldn’t want it any other way,” she said with a small, reassuring smile. She tucked her hair behind her ear and then looked away.

“Me neither,” I said as I grabbed her hand and gave it a light squeeze. She smiled again and squeezed back. All of the drama from last night and this morning was behind us.

I couldn’t wait to see Abby in action.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

abby

“Anything yet?” Christine asked through the radio.
“Nothing of interest,” Garcia answered back for his team.

“We may have something,” I said. I watched as the sniffing housekeeper walked down the hallway. My heart ached for her.

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?” Yates asked. I could tell he was smirking as he said it, and I wondered what for.

“We ran into a housekeeper who seemed a little distraught. Abby asked her if she was okay, and the woman burst into tears. Her daughter recently started working at the resort and went missing two nights ago,” Adam said.

“Oh, that is something,” Jasmine replied with concern. “Does she have any info for us?”

“No, she mentioned that her daughter was going to quit, but she went missing before she could. A manager was harassing her, and she didn’t like the advances,” I added.

“Any chance she name-dropped the manager?” Guy asked.

“No, she wasn’t sure which manager. This was the last conversation she had with her daughter, and it wasn’t a long one. Guy, any chance you can try to hack the employee records and figure out a list of managers? See if you can track time cards and find which managers she would have worked with. The resort is massive, so I’m sure there might be quite a few managers,” I suggested.

“I’ll see what I can find,” he answered. “I’ll also see if I can find a new missing persons report and add her to the map.”

“Perfect. In the meantime, I wonder if we can do more research on the local missing persons to see if any of them have shared connections. Maybe they all live in a neighborhood or certain part of the island,” Jasmine suggested.

“That’s a great idea. We are going to need to figure out this guy’s pattern. I think ultimately the goal would be to catch him or his people in a kidnapping and follow them to their base of operations,” I said. It would sort of be like how we built my New York case. The agents on the outside were able to obtain video of people coming and going from the building for weeks. They put together a list of tenants, and those who weren’t on that list were closely monitored. They caught them doing all kinds of shady things, and those charges were added once they were arrested.

“Exactly, we need to get his pattern on lock,” Christine said.

“What do we do in the meantime?” Jones said.

“I think we need to look into this new missing person and wait for Guy to hack the HR records. If we can find this manager, that will be our first major lead, and we can explore that,” I said. “We can’t go guns blazing around the island. We need to make everyone around us believe we are just tourists. We’re going to have to blend in and do touristy shit,” I said. Just like I had to in New York. I wore a low-cut shirt in the coffee house, played the ditz, and flirted a little. My kidnappers had no idea they had taken an undercover FBI agent.

“So we need to do touristy things, like swim with dolphins and go shopping?” Mendez asked.

“Exactly. Most of my time undercover wasn’t spent following up on leads. I spent it doing what was expected of me. However, I listened and observed while I followed orders and slept my way through their ranks. If we keep our cover as tourists, eventually someone is going to slip up. Hopefully that is the manager, if Guy can find him,” I added.

“Say no more. I don’t need to be told twice to go shopping. I’d like to buy some things and send them home back to some of the therapists I work with as a thank-you for all their help. Some of those women and children we rescued with Mary are really making progress,” Christine said.

I felt a pang of respect for Christine. She wasn’t just some rich heiress. She was a rich heiress who put her money where her mouth was, and that was something else. I could have used a friend like her when I was discharged from the Navy. If we had been friends, she wouldn’t have let me fall into depression. She would have hauled me out by my bootstraps.

“So we’re done for the day?” Wells asked.

“You are. The girls are going shopping,” Christine said.

“That means the boys are getting a beer,” Yates said too loudly into the radio. I winced.

“We can have one beer, but we need to remain near the women,” Wells said.

“Actually, I think we should go on our own,” Jasmine said.

The comms were silent for a moment.

“I can feel everyone’s unease at that statement from here,” I joked.

“Hear me out. We are more likely to witness something as a group of women. If the men are there, everyone will avoid us. Three women aren’t intimidating like a large group of hot, jacked men. One look at you says ‘prior military.’ No offense,” Jasmine said.

“None taken,” Strong said with a laugh.

“Are you sure you can handle that? I mean, you haven’t been training that long,” Jones said, his statement directed to Jasmine.

“We’d be going with an FBI agent. She won’t let anything happen to us, will you, Abby?” I could feel her *go-with-it* eyes from here.

“I won’t let anything happen to them,” I promised.

“See, we’re all set,” Jasmine said in what sounded like scaled-back excitement.

“Speak for yourself. Jake is going all caveman on me,” Christine said and then snorted into the radio.

“I can handle myself. Would you like to look at my arrest record? I can take down a man Strong’s size if need be,” I boasted.

“Oh yeah?” Adam asked. I didn’t think my use of his last name went unnoticed. I was just trying to fit in with his friends.

“Yeah, I’ll show you some time,” I said with a wink.

“Okay, stop the foreplay over the radio. I’ll let her go with you, as long as you three have trackers on you,” Wells said.

“I can live with that,” I commented. By the sound of Christine’s squeal, she could too.

□

“Okay, so maybe going off on our own wasn’t the best idea,” Christine whispered to me as we browsed the sundresses on a rack.

We’d been walking through the outdoor market now for half an hour. When I’d look up from an item, I was usually met with a nervous glance from one of the girls. They watched my back and I watched theirs. So far, I had seen several men who seemed suspicious. They tended to follow us from a distance through the market, and when we moved on from a store, they did too. They never bought a single item, and that’s how I knew they weren’t shopping; they were scouting.

“Nonsense, I feel their eyes, but this could be a good thing. They think we are easy prey. I don’t know about you, but nothing about me is easy. You are both fighters. We’ve got this,” I told them.

The last thing I needed them to do was get scared and blow our cover. Normal tourists wouldn’t be scared; they wouldn’t know anything about all the disappearances or the few that had happened right in this market.

“You’re right, let’s just get what we came here for, chat with a few locals to solidify that we aren’t scaredy cats, and then get back to the resort before anything bad can happen,” Jasmine said. Her change of heart would have been funny if the situation were different. Bob shared that Jasmine was brave when facing Robbie. She even took a round in her vest to save her friend. Right now I wasn’t seeing that same brave woman, but maybe that scenario gave her a healthy sense of fear. That was good, because without it, most people were cocky and made stupid mistakes.

We paid for the two large bags of souvenirs that Christine picked out, and I sent Adam a quick text.

Me: Get a drone up in the air and in our location. We are being watched, and I think it may be by scouts.

I pocketed my phone. That would be enough to alert them. I needed to keep my attention on my surroundings and on Jasmine and Christine. I promised I’d protect them, and I meant it. I’d face off against anyone to make sure that they got back to their men. *Yuck, I sound like a man...their men.*

We exited the store and began walking back through the market when I heard the whispers: “She saved Jeremiah.”

“They can’t have her. She saved an innocent.”

The whispers continued, and I was on red alert. I did my best to remain cool on the outside and to stick with my training, which hadn’t failed me yet. However, that didn’t stop the chills from climbing up my spine.

They are talking about me. I recognized some of the people who watched from the edges of the path as those from last night. The ones who had gathered around while I kept that man from bleeding out. These people had a lot more knowledge than they let on when we tried to interview them. Clearly they knew that I was being watched by traffickers, and they were whispering about it. Their whispers reassured me slightly; at least they were on our side and wanted to help me

somehow. I could have cried. It was my job to protect them, not the other way around.

Motion out of my peripheral vision drew my attention, along with the goosebumps that instantly broke out on my arm. *Shit was about to get real.* Three men approached us from the left side, near the entry to an alley. The one in the front held out a knife and called out to us. “You three, come here.” He wasn’t very large and didn’t look any older than thirty. The knife he held shook in his hand, as if he was nervous. I could smell the liquor on him from here; it was as if he bathed in a bottle of whiskey. His clothing was dirty, and his skin didn’t look much better.

Behind him were two very large and angry-looking henchmen. They wore matching black wife-beaters and black cargo pants. They had black ski-masks over their faces, keeping me from seeing their identities. They must have been henchmen for the traffickers. But what about the drunk guy? What was he if he wasn’t covering his face?

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jasmine lift her right foot. She didn’t stand a chance against one of them. Three-on-three chances weren’t great for us, not when two of them dwarfed our size. “Don’t even think about it,” I told her. She had no business trying to be the hero.

I took a step closer to the man in front and pushed Jasmine and Christine behind me. The man lowered his knife, because it looked like I was complying with his demand. His henchmen remained in place with their arms crossed, just watching. The closer I got, the more apparent it was that the front man was drunk and had a violent past. He had scars all over his arms and one along his face that went from temple to the corner of his lips. He stank, and even the smell of alcohol couldn’t cover it. I spent seconds just trying to figure out the best way to take on all three of the men myself and give my friends a way to escape. If I could even the odds down to two on one, then I could make it out of the market okay.

“The drone,” I heard Christine whisper behind me.

If they saw the drone, then that was good. It meant the guys were on their way. They would come rushing in, which would be good for me but bad for our mission. The last thing we wanted to do was make a scene and have the traffickers identify us all. It would make it impossible to hunt down the trafficking ring if they were watching us.

“Run toward the resort. They’ll find you on their way here,” I mumbled to the girls.

“No, we won’t leave you,” Jasmine said.

“If you want to help me, you’ll make it so I don’t have to worry about protecting you. You’ll let me distract them so I can make my own escape. Got it?” I demanded.

I felt them squeeze my arms.

“Go now,” I whispered harshly. I could see that all three men were losing their patience with us. Their body weight had shifted, and one of the men clothed in black cracked his knuckles anxiously.

The girls took off running down the path, back toward the resort. I prayed they’d find the guys quickly and no one would try to grab them on their way.

“Hey, come back, now!” the man with the knife called. He took a step onto the path like he was going to chase them. The two mountain-sized men behind him also took steps toward the girls. I couldn’t let them go after them.

“No, you don’t, big guy,” I taunted and kicked the first half-giant in the balls. He keeled over and I slipped behind him, barely avoiding the hands of the second mammoth-sized henchman. I wrapped my arm around the neck of the guy bent over holding his goods. I squeezed with as much pressure as I could manage and then jerked his head hard to the right. I felt his body go instantly slack; the timing was phenomenal, because now henchman two had his hands on my waist, trying to lift me over his shoulder. His left had captured both of mine, and he slammed me up against a wall, hard. My head bounced off the stucco surface, and I saw stars. I managed a deep breath and tried wrenching my hands free. I gained a small bit of

leverage. I could feel his fingers slip some, so I tried over and over to escape. His right hand left my waist and joined his other hand at my wrist. That left me in total control of my lower body, his mistake. I jumped up off the ground, trusting that his hands were going to support my weight. I kicked out with both feet, placing one in his chest and one in his balls. He lurched forward, and his hands released me out of reflex. I swung out and punched him hard in the temple, which knocked him out cold. He fell to the ground in a large heap of muscle.

I turned to the last guy, the only one who had been armed. If he had been smart, he would have attacked me while his friend had my hands pinned, but it was obvious he wasn't smart. I wasn't sure if his IQ was naturally that low or if it was the whiskey. He had positioned himself between me and the exit to the market. I took a running leap and kicked the knife out of his hand. It stuck into the wall of the building beside him. His nose flared, and his eyes nearly popped out of his head. *That's right, I'm not going down without a fight.*

"Oh, you've cost me a pretty penny. You'll pay for that little devil, even if you did me a small favor by getting rid of my babysitters," he taunted. His teeth were crooked, and one was turning black as he gave a nasty, predator-like grin.

"That's right. I am the devil, and you're about to see my horns," I taunted with a sadistic smile. This might be my favorite part of being law enforcement, aside from locking sick fucks up—beating the shit out of them. It brought me my fair share of joy, even when the justice system sometimes failed its job. Some of the men I arrested would see the outside of a prison eventually, but they'd never forget getting their ass handed to them by a woman they wanted to screw. That knowledge brought me much gratification, just like this fight was about to.

I kicked him square in the chest. He saw it coming and grabbed my ankle before I could use any force. I pushed against his chest with that foot as hard as I could and swung my other leg off the ground and kicked him square in the head. He fell backward, and his head snapped hard against the

pavement. A pool of blood formed on the pavement from his skull cracking open. His eyes were empty as he stared up into the sky.

“Rot in hell,” I said to the dead man.

“Go, child, go before his boss sees this. It’s not safe for you to come back here. I’ll hide the body. Thank you for saving Jeremiah,” the woman from last night said. I recognized her as his employer.

“Of course. Did my friends make it out of the market okay?”

“Yes. If they hadn’t, they would have been dragged back through here by their hair. Now go,” she ordered.

I wasted no more time. I grabbed the knife from the wall and took off in the direction of the resort. I didn’t miss the way the drone followed me the whole way. Halfway between the market and the resort, I found the group standing there, waiting for me. My heart tugged at the sight.

“There you are,” Adam said with relief in his tone. He wrapped me into a hug.

“Here I am,” I said with a tight-lipped smile. The embrace we were in felt too good. I couldn’t let myself get used to this. When the mission was over, I’d go back to my field office and these guys would be up to something else. I couldn’t put my heart through that kind heartbreak.

“Are you okay?” Garcia asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Those men aren’t,” I said.

“Dead?” Strong asked.

I nodded. “Two are. One is going to wake up with a stellar headache.”

“Then let’s get you out of here before he wakes up,” Mendez said.

We walked the mile back to the resort in a comfortable silence. We didn’t want to bring any attention to ourselves by moving any faster than a brisk walking pace. Wells had his

arm wrapped around Christine, and she leaned into him. Jasmine and Jones were holding hands, and they whispered. I'd never wanted a boyfriend before, but these two couples made me feel like I was missing out on something. I glanced over to Adam, and he was watching his friends too. *I wonder if he feels jealous of them or if he is glad to be single?*

For a moment, I had a vision of us as something more. Of me becoming a permanent member of their team. We'd travel together and continue to track down sick bastards, living as one big family. I quickly shook my head. Those kinds of thoughts would only set me up for disappointment.

That wasn't what I needed. What I needed was to put douchebags in jail and advance my career. I wanted to be a deputy director one day.

"You okay?" Adam asked me.

He must have noticed me trying to clear my thoughts. I needed to do a better job of keeping a poker face. It was too easy to open myself up to Adam and his friends. If I wasn't careful, I'd get sloppy, and that was hard to come back from.

"Yeah, I'm good," I said and shot him a tight-lipped smile. He must have been satisfied with that answer as he went back to watching his friends. I didn't miss the quick expression of longing before he caught himself. He definitely wanted what his friends had. I felt a pang of guilt, because maybe he wanted that from me. That was something I would never be able to give him. My career was too important to me to give up. What kind of relationship would it be if we spent months separated at a time while I was undercover and possibly sleeping with other men to get information I needed? It wouldn't be a good one, and it wasn't fair to drag anyone through that.

We made our way to our guest room hallway. By now most of Christine and Wells' friends and family had checked out, so there wasn't much activity here, aside from us.

"Whose room?" Jones asked.

"Mine," Guy said as he opened his room door.

We all stuffed ourselves into the tight space, like sardines in a can.

“That was a stunning maneuver,” Guy said when he saw me.

“Thanks,” I said with a blush.

“Did you record it?” Yates said in an excited rush.

He isn't normal.

“I did, but it’s going to be conveniently wiped in about five minutes. We don’t ever need this to get away from us and be evidence in a murder trial,” Guy said as he pulled up the video on the TV and then hit play.

I watched as Christine and Jasmine ran away. I didn’t miss the way that they looked back at me several times. They really had struggled with letting me handle the situation by myself. I felt touched by their concern for me. I’d only known them for such a short time, but they were willing to have my back, even though they were scared. Survivors of abuse stuck together; it was something hideous that bonded us together.

I watched the screen as I took down the two meatheads and kicked the knife out of the drunken asshole’s hand. The view was similar to a shot I’d seen in action movies, with a great aerial angle. If Guy ever left this whole bounty-hunter gig, he could go work in the film industry as a camera drone operator.

The knife lodged into the wooden exterior of the nearby building, and I kicked out with my dominant leg, only to have him grab it. I lifted my other foot off the ground and brought my foot to his head in a hard kick that snapped the guy’s head back before he fell backward head first. I landed in a crouched position overtop of him, and then the local woman approached me.

“Holy shit,” Yates said. “I’m so turned on right now.” He practically looked at me with heart eyes, and I had to muffle laughter. I knew it was his weird form of a compliment, and I didn’t mind it too much. I’d much rather be appreciated for my skill than my body.

Adam looked like he was two seconds from knocking Yates out. His fist was balled tight, and the knuckles were white. “Yates,” he said in a low warning tone.

“Thanks, I think?” I said with questionable laughter. I grabbed Adam’s forearm softly. He released his fist and looked down at me. His face softened some.

“That really was impressive. You are lethal,” he said.

“Now that was a compliment, thank you.” I grinned, because I could see the calculating appraisal in his eyes. I could practically see where his thoughts were going: the bedroom. He and Yates weren’t all that different after all.

“Okay, so clearly you are skilled in hand to hand, which is good to know,” Garcia said.

“I’m skilled in a lot of things,” I said with a suggestive wink. “But that’s beside the point. Did you tell them what we discovered while we were in the market?” I asked Christine and Jasmine.

“No, we haven’t had the chance yet,” Jasmine answered.

“We were being watched. I was wondering how the missing people were selected. Was it random, right place at right time? Or are they watched and specially selected—taken when the time is right? Now I think it’s the latter. We were watched for probably thirty minutes before anyone made a move. When they tried to corner us, the locals were whispering that the men couldn’t have me. That I had saved innocent,” I recounted.

“So the locals know a lot more than they originally let on,” Adam commented.

“Yeah, at least some of them do. I think they were ready to have my back, to try to help me discreetly, but that ended up not being necessary.” The shopkeeper that knew the man we helped had been holding her broom handle awfully tight, like she could have swung it as a weapon.

“What did they mean by saving an innocent?” Garcia asked.

“I don’t know. I’m assuming the guy I saved yesterday. Seems that his name is Jeremiah. I’m not sure what referring to him as an innocent means,” I answered.

“Do you think we should try to find him and see what we can learn?” Jones asked.

“He’s our next best lead, assuming he’s alive. Why was he shot in the first place?” Wells added. “It could be related to trafficking, drugs, or some other form of illegal activity. The possibilities are endless.”

“That seems to be our next question and hopefully not a waste of time. Guy, did you locate the HR files?” I asked.

“No, they aren’t digital. For some Godforsaken reason, everything must be paper. I did discover that several of the resorts have the same owner, some shell company,” he answered.

“A shell company sounds like a promising lead. We need to break into the HR office for each nearby resort to find those records.” I paused for a moment, thinking through the options. If we did them one at a time, surely the other two resorts would put tighter security on their records or, even worse, destroy them. We couldn’t take our time with this. “I think we need to break into the offices at the same time. It’s not unheard of for resort workers to work at multiple resorts, right? This resort and its two neighbors have the highest concentration of dots on the map. They should be our focus.”

“I would think not. If we can find someone who works at two or more resorts and is a manager, that person should be a person of interest to us,” Wells said.

“How are we going to do this without tipping anyone off or getting caught?” Adam asked.

“We divide into teams and grab the records at the same time,” I offered.

“A triple heist,” Yates said, his eyes lit up in excitement. *Do we have the same favorite TV show?* If I said *nine-nine*, would he repeat it back to me with a grin?

“Yes, a triple heist,” I said with a laugh.

Things were going to get interesting.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

adam

“Are you sure you are okay with flirting with the guy?”
I asked Abby.

“Of course, I’ve done a lot worse for the sake of a mission. It’s much easier for a pretty girl to keep a male’s attention than a big, intimidating dude, unless we have him pegged wrong and he swings the other way,” she answered with a smirk. I was left with the impression that she was putting on a show for me, and I didn’t like that. I wanted her to be real, honest, even if it meant admitting to fear. I bet even Evel Knievel felt fear before his stunts; it was a natural human emotion. Hell, it was an evolutionary trait designed to keep us alive. Nature’s way of saying, “*Fuck around and find out.*”

I still hated that Abby had to use her body in unpleasant ways while she was undercover. It didn’t make me think any less of her, and it definitely didn’t make her a slut as she had implied. It drove me mad that someone would have to go to those lengths to bring the perverts to justice—that perverts were smart enough that we had to use elaborate traps to catch them. I wished regular, old-fashioned police work would be enough.

All three women were going to play decoy while we got in and out of the offices with what we needed. There were just some things that women would always be able to do better, like the art of seduction.

“Let’s get into position,” Abby said into her mic.

“Ladies, you have two minutes to find your targets. Go,” Guy ordered into the radio.

Abby went and knocked on the door of the room that we had identified as the HR office. It was kept under lock and key, and it also had cameras. From around the corner, I watched as the door opened and a guy in his mid-thirties peeked his head through. He caught sight of Abby and opened the door a little more. I could see his immediate interest in her, and I clenched my fists in repressed annoyance.

“Hi, I’m terribly sorry for interrupting you. I was hoping that someone could help me. I came across one of the public restrooms, and it looks like a guy with a missing leg fell in there. He mentioned something about suing,” she said.

“Where?” the guy asked. His spine straightened, and his eyes got large with worry.

“First-floor lobby bathroom,” she answered. She put her hands on her hips and stared up at him, blinking her long lashes.

He took notice of her beauty for a brief moment before he shook his head. “Was he okay?” He shut the door and locked it behind him.

“No, he blacked out at one point. He said something about a wet floor and no wet floor sign. He sounded like he was in a lot of pain,” she said, laying it on thick.

“Thank you for reporting it, Miss,” the man said with one more appreciative glance her way, then rushed to the elevators.

“I’ll keep an eye on him and give you a two-minute warning,” Abby whispered into her mic. She then stopped his elevator doors from shutting and entered. The doors closed, and I sprang into action.

I got to work with my lock-picking kit.

“Where are we on our wager, gentlemen? I’m already picking my lock,” I taunted.

We had decided to make this into a friendly competition, who could get in and out with what we needed without getting

caught first. It raised the stakes, increased my adrenaline, and pushed us to be faster. With men, everything was better as a competition, and our group was no different.

“My girl just got her target to leave the office. I’ll be working on my lock in seconds,” Jones said. His choice of words weren’t lost on me: *my girl*.

He didn’t say that often, so he likely chose those words to muddle my thoughts. He knew what I wanted, a relationship, and he was not above trying to distract me with jealousy or wandering thoughts. I wouldn’t let Jones’ words get to me. The man played dirty, because he needed the extra help. He was good at charming women and throwing a football. I was strong, and good at stealth, despite my large size.

“Well, my *wife* got her target to leave a minute ago, and I’ve been working on the lock since then, almost in,” Wells taunted. *Damn them and their titles, assholes*.

I continued to work the lock and almost let out a cheer when the lock gave way. I swung the door open. I didn’t bother giving them an update. I wanted them to have a false sense of security at this point.

I quickly found the filing cabinets that had personnel records as well as management documents. I took a photo of the business information and then started taking photos of the cover pages for each employee file. I made quick work of removing a stack of files, photographing the inside cover page, and then moving onto the next.

In fifteen minutes, I had all the cover sheets photographed except for the last handful.

“Adam, he’s on his way back now. You have likely a minute before he reaches you,” Abby said into the mic.

“I only need thirty seconds,” I said. I snapped the last few pictures, shoved them back into their place in the cabinet, and shut it. I put the USB drive that Guy gave me into the USB port in the back of the desktop, where it would remain. It would allow us to download information from the computers

discreetly, and if we needed to, we could use it to cause a distraction.

I grabbed my phone, exited the office, and twisted the lock on my way out. I got just around the corner and ducked into a housekeeping closet when I heard the manager's footsteps heading toward the office. Once I heard the door shut behind him, I quickly made my way back to Guy's room, where Abby would meet me.

I stepped into the room and spoke into the mic, "First one done, bitches!"

"I legit just locked up my office," Jones said with the slightest tone of annoyance.

"Too bad, I'm already in Guy's room, phone in hand," I said.

"And you planted the USB?" Wells asked.

"Of course," I retorted.

"Fuck, go ahead, Guy, call it."

"By a landslide, Strong and Abby won," he said with a smirk.

"My money was on you two. Abby, you had the best distraction out of all the teams. Getting Yates to actually fall on the floor was the perfect touch," Guy praised Abby.

"What can I say? It all comes down to training," she said with a mischievous smile. She seemed to be just as competitive as we were. She enjoyed this competition a lot, almost too much.

We waited for the other two teams to rejoin us, along with the others who were out getting supplies. It was going to take a couple of hours for Garcia and Mendez to return. We decided to hold off on reviewing everything until we were all together.

In the meantime, each team broke off to do their own thing, to keep up appearances that we were tourists. We needed that extra bit of cover, and time away from the resort, especially after placing ourselves under the noses of management. Abby followed me back to my room.

“Well, that was exciting,” she said. She looked energized, like she could go compete in a triathlon.

“Yeah, it was. It’s always a thrill breaking and entering like that, wondering if you are going to get caught,” I said. I was an adrenaline junkie, which most people wouldn’t be surprised about when they saw all my tattoos, but I thrived in stressful situations. It was a part of why I chose a special forces contract. My original contract as an infantryman wasn’t enough; I needed more thrills, more danger, more pain.

I watched her closely, and she noticed. She licked her lips, and I physically felt the atmosphere of the room change from excitement to something more sizzling. “You knew you wouldn’t get caught,” she said as she took a step toward me.

“Absolutely, I have many skills, and that kind of job is one of them. Jones likes to think he’s the best thief out of us, but I just let him think that,” I said with a smirk. I let the guys think a lot of things, and sometimes they weren’t always true.

“I’m sure you’re skilled at many things,” she said. It was the same thing she implied about herself earlier, but I liked it when she implied it about me. Her eyes turned into bedroom eyes, and they said, “*Fuck me.*”

“I am. Would you like a demonstration?” I asked. My voice was deeper from the growing need that I had for Abby. I was desperate to finish what we had started. I took a step toward her, and she took one backward. Her eyes told me she craved my touch, even though she tried to maintain the distance between us. She was going to make this into a chase, and I was the perfect predator.

“I thought you’d never ask,” she said. She stopped walking backward, right as she reached the wall. She reached forward and grabbed my hand and then placed it on her left breast. That was all it took for the oxygen in the room and for me to succumb to lust.

I grabbed her shirt roughly and tugged her toward me. Her body slammed against the front of mine, and I brought my lips to hers in a rough kiss. My other hand wrapped around the back of her head and tugged on her hair. She moaned into my

mouth, and the sensation and the sound nearly drove me mad. I pulled away slightly and tugged on her hair again so she glanced up at me. Her lids were heavy with lust, and she quickly closed them again as I brought my mouth back down to hers. I bit her lip, and she squealed in surprise. A smile tugged at her lips, and then I kissed it right off.

Abby was a fucking siren, too sexy for her own fucking good. She used her sex appeal like a weapon, and I was more than willing to throw myself on the blade, as long as I got a taste. I was like a sailor from the wise-tales, lost to a siren.

Her hand reached forward and grabbed me over the denim of my jeans, and I had no doubt she could feel my body's reaction to her. It was almost painful to be restricted by the pants, but I groaned anyways. I enjoyed the pain.

She unbuttoned the jeans as I brought my hand down to rest on her perfect ass. I squeezed hard, and she tweaked my nipple with her other hand. She was already driving me wild and we had hardly begun. There was no way in hell I'd allow any distractions this time. We had hours until the others were due back, and I felt like a teenager who was excited to get to second base. If she got a phone call, I'd just have to restrain her. I had a feeling by the challenging look in her eyes that she'd like that. I couldn't wait to discover her kinks, to improve upon them.

She unzipped my fly, and I swore I could feel the sensation of each zipper tooth releasing. She had me so horny that I was reactive to every touch and every movement. When the zipper stopped moving, she shoved down my jeans, and I nearly groaned in relief. I was free and less a barrier between me and what I wanted, her skin on mine.

I lifted the hem of her shirt up and over her head. Her perfect breasts were right there for the taking. I pressed the lace down so that her nipples were exposed, and it looked like they were happy to see me. They were already pebbled and begging for my attention. I brought one into my mouth as she grabbed me beneath my boxers. She quickly pushed me back and onto the bed, fighting for control—something I never

liked to give up. I reached out and grabbed her by her hair, pulling her on top of me.

She pulled at the waistband of my boxers while I tried to unclasp her bra. I was successful and met with a face full of beautiful tits. I quickly unbuttoned her denim shorts and slid them off.

She slid down my front until her face was level with my cock, and I could feel her hot breath against the skin. She made a show of grabbing my length and inspecting it—to drag this out, to tease me. I wanted to groan in protest, but I didn't make a sound. That would only encourage her to continue this slow torture. I wanted to be buried deep inside of her, and she was going to prolong my release if I showed her how much I wanted it. She seemed to be the sadistic type, like me. I was going to punish her for teasing me later, and she'd enjoy it. I'd be dominating but very giving. I'd be better than any of the sick fucks that she entertained. I'd show her what sex should be like, without her life hanging in the balance—just her pleasure.

Her lips wrapped around my cock, and I almost lost my load right there. There was just something so sexy about her lips wrapped around me and her eyes watching me. I groaned in ecstasy. Her tongue flicked back and forth, and I tangled my fingers into her hair. I used my hold on her locks to guide her pace.

I had to slow her down to make this last as long as possible. I couldn't have her thinking that I was a two-pump chump. I wasn't, at all, but with the combination of wanting her so badly, her rocking body, and her skill, she was going to make a liar out of me.

“No, you don't,” I said as she began to deep throat. She was purposefully playing games now, to see what she could do to drive me crazy, and all of it worked. I didn't want to finish in her mouth; I wanted to finish in her.

I pulled her head up, and she smiled at what was likely a wild, desperate expression on my face. Her hair was a mess,

she had drool on her chin, but she was as beautiful as ever, because she was letting me control this, just barely.

“Lay on the bed,” I demanded.

“Yes, sir,” she said with a siren-like smirk. She had me wanting to spank her. *Sir. I could get used to that.*

She laid on her back with her ass hanging off the side of the bed. I pulled off her lace panties and tossed them across the room. I lifted her thighs and bent her knees so that her feet rested on the edge of the bed.

I brought my lips to her sensitive skin and teased her like she had me. Then I touched my lips to the warm skin and began to suck. She started to squirm beneath me, and I grabbed her legs to lock them in place. She moaned, and I swore I heard my name whispered between the pleasure-filled sounds. Her fingers grabbed my hair, locking me in place like I had her. Her hips thrust as she tried to push herself closer to her climax. I pulled away slightly to draw out her release. I was going to have to prepare her for what I was about to do. I was not known to be gentle in bed, unless it was specifically requested. Abby didn't look like the kind of woman who would ever ask for soft-and-gentle sex. She was rough around the edges, fiery, passionate, and controlling. That didn't mean that sex with me wouldn't hurt her, even if she liked it rough; I was well endowed.

I stuck my finger in her, and she let out a loud whimper. I looked up from her pussy and watched her face. Her eyes were closed, her fingers were on her tits, and she had her bottom lip between her teeth in a seductive manner.

“More,” I heard her beg.

I stuck a second finger in, and her whimpers got louder. My cock was throbbing with need, and it might explode if I didn't enter her right this minute, but there was something important to address.

“Birth control?” I breathed out.

“Yes, and I'm clean,” she said breathlessly.

I trusted her to give me the truth. It was weird how much I trusted her despite her previous lies. I went with it anyway, determined not to waste any more time. I pulled my fingers out and lined myself up at her entrance.

“You better brace yourself. This is going to hurt,” I warned. It went without saying that while I was large, she was small. She was going to have to adjust to my size.

She had enough time to take a deep breath before I plowed into her, and I let out a low, drawn-out groan at the feel of her surrounding me. It was everything I had imagined and more, and we hadn’t even started yet.

She fisted the sheets beneath her, her knuckles white. I gave her a moment to adjust around me before I started to slowly thrust in and out. While my speed might have started out slow, I was far from gentle. My thrusts went deep, and Abby took it all. Her own sounds of pleasure became louder in volume. There was a good chance that whoever we shared a wall with heard us. I was pretty sure that it was Yates, and I had to erase the mental image of him with his ear to the wall like a pervert.

I picked up my speed, and Abby continued to fist the sheets to keep herself in place; otherwise she would have slid across the bed with the force of my thrusts. I grabbed her thighs to keep her close to me.

All too soon her moans and groans reached a crescendo, and she rode out the wave of an orgasm. I fell over the edge too. I was sweaty, breathing heavily, and feeling the after-effects of great sex. Abby looked up at me, and I could see she felt the same.

I was about to tell her about how awesome that fuck was when there was a knock on the door. At least the interruption waited until after we were done.

“Keep it down, will you?” someone shouted.

Abby started to giggle, and I couldn’t help but laugh too.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

abby

“O kay, so let’s compare notes, shall we?” Guy asked. He started tapping away on his keyboard. He reminded me of an analyst that I knew back at the office—computer whiz and hard worker. “I’m creating a spreadsheet to organize the data. Names of owner and manager groups first.”

There was a connection through all three properties by the shared owner and the shared concentration of disappearances.

“This looks like a shell company. They’ve done some work to hide who they are. I’ll make a note to come back to this,” Guy added. I had a suspicion that if we put in enough time and effort, we would figure out that the Ricketts asshole owned the resorts. He had so much money that he didn’t know what to do with it all—at least that was what I gathered from the articles I found on him. He never gave interviews, and he kept to himself, which was highly unusual for someone with clean money. Which only led us to the assumption that his money wasn’t clean, and his investment in real estate was a cover for the large amounts of cash he raked in. It would bring some clarity to the reason for co-owners on so many of these properties. They could handle financing, with legal jobs to base their loans on, and Ricketts could provide his dirty money as collateral for these deals. He got somewhere *legit* to put his money, a larger investment portfolio to hide his finances behind, and the co-owners got a vacation home or means to expand their own wealth. But did they know the source of Ricketts’ wealth? That was my burning question. All of his co-

owners would need to be questioned, and that could take months, if not a year.

“Let’s compare names,” I said, changing gears. Focusing our attention on the ownership would get us no closer to what we really needed, to find the kidnapped women and arrest all the players involved, including the FBI agents, if they were in fact dirty. The manager was going to be our next lead, if he in fact kidnapped her. I suspected he did; working at a large resort like this seemed to be the perfect spot and was definitely worth looking into. The lodging industry had seen a large uptick in trafficking, and it would make sense for it to occur here if Ricketts owned it. A safe harbor for criminals, so to speak. If we were able to make a connection between a manager and the trafficking ring, then I could interrogate him myself, to see if he had any contacts at the FBI or heard anything about them.

We went through our list in the best way we knew how; Wells and Jones raised their hands when I read off a name on my list. When we made it to the end of the file, there were three managers who worked at more than one resort, which wasn’t unusual since the properties had the same owner. Were these people involved in the kidnapping and trafficking of others, or was it all just a giant coincidence? After everything I’d seen in my line of work, I didn’t believe in coincidences.

“Can anyone speak to the housekeeper again? Maybe if we can read off the names she might tell us if one of them has a reputation or if she knows any of them personally?” I suggested. It was good to use a source any way we could.

“Yeah, we’ll go ask her. Be right back,” Christine said. She, Jasmine, and Jones left the room in a hurricane of shuffling flip flops and whispers.

“We’re going to need to tail all three of the managers, just in case. It might not just be one of them. It could be all,” I suggested. What I really needed was to get a jump on identifying the manager so that I could interrogate them, privately. I was all for helping the group find their suspect if it meant furthering my own mission, but I couldn’t focus all of my attention on theirs. If they busted the ring before I had the

evidence I needed to link the local FBI office to this ring, then I would never find it. They'd destroy it all and tie up loose ends before the first suspect was transported off the island.

“Agreed, they are all suspects, and we need to treat them as such. We need to treat the unknown owner the same way as well. I will get more info on that,” Guy said, and he started tapping away on his computer.

“Let's also keep a close eye on the camera footage you are downloading,” Adam said. “I'm sure we will find something in there. They have no idea they are being watched. They'd have no reason to erase their behavior. Especially if the owner is involved and they don't need to hide in the first place.”

Something about his statement bothered me. There was a nagging sensation in my gut that told me that our work in the market wasn't over. Maybe it was the fact that it didn't have cameras. If traffickers were comfortable kidnapping with cameras watching their every move, what were they comfortable doing while hidden in a large crowd at the market? I got chills up my spine. I was going to have to go back there at some point. Not only did I want to get to the bottom of the disappearances so far, I wanted to know why the people in the market whispered about me. What did the whispers mean? Who wasn't allowed to take me? Why wouldn't the locals trust me enough to tell me what was going on? Maybe the one woman had tried, the best that she could, but that wasn't good enough.

I wished I could use the same tactics I did in New York, but I didn't know if it would work again. I had years with the FBI prior to going undercover. I trusted Bob and the other agents around me. I'd seen their competence and skill demonstrated over and over, so I knew they'd have my back when I walked into the lion's den—or allowed the lions to take me. I barely knew this group, their rap sheet was impressive, but I hadn't seen what they were capable of in the civilian world. Their only takedown of a trafficking ring was partially dumb luck and a moronic suspect. If I let myself be captured to find where all the victims were taken, I wouldn't be able to investigate the local FBI office. This was going to be

overwhelming if I allowed the group to sidetrack me from my own mission, not that they knew I had a different mission.

“While you guys focus on watching the suspects from afar, I’m going to try speaking with them. We need to understand what they are capable of, and I want them to slip up. I have some...unusual tactics for questioning,” I said. I tried not to smirk when I thought of the last time I questioned a suspect. He was into rope-play, and I was into getting answers. He had no idea that he was being interrogated, even though I was the one bound.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? If they realize what you are up to, they could tip off who they work for,” Yates said. All his earlier humor was gone; he was focused now, something that I could appreciate since he was the self-proclaimed strategist of the group. The group needed him to think through their possible courses of action.

“I’m positive I can handle it. I’ve seduced plenty of secrets from grown men’s lips, and they were none the wiser that it was even happening.” I smiled. “I was trained for this.” I’d get the answers to my questions and then the answers the group was looking for.

Yates looked at me thoughtfully for a moment. “That’s the reason for your siren tattoo, isn’t it?” he asked as he pointed to my arm. “You distract them with your beauty, and then you show them your teeth.”

I nodded my head. “Yes, it’s a warning for anyone smart enough to pay attention,” I said with a wink.

“I say we let her do her thing. We can’t just tell her she can join the team but then can’t do what her training tells her is necessary,” Garcia said. I liked this man, he seemed sincere and sure of himself, and I liked his confidence in me. I knew that I was still new to their group, and I had to prove myself to them—on top of redeeming myself from lying. Garcia seemed like the quiet but confident type, and I liked that. If I wasn’t so attracted to Adam, I might have considered getting close to him.

“Are you sure you are okay with that? Using your body again to further our agenda?” Adam asked me. Bless him, he was still asking, as if he thought that the question might convince me to change my mind.

I gave him a small, soft smile in response. “I can handle it. Can you?” I asked in challenge.

“I’ll manage as long as you can handle it,” he answered, his voice becoming slightly more chilled. Maybe challenging him was the wrong move. I had enjoyed his soft and caring side from before, not the show he was putting on for the others or himself.

“Good, then I’ll start working on that.” I was going to have to find time to do that and then sneak off resort property to start snooping around at the bureau.

“What I’m concerned about, and I don’t quite understand yet, is how these trafficked people are transported off the island. I think that if we can identify points of transport and watch them, we might be able to catch them in the act. We could spend a lot of time tailing individuals and instead find groups,” Yates said.

The point was valid. If we could catch the traffickers at the points of transport, then we’d choke the operation. They wouldn’t be able to leave with those they were trafficking, and eventually they’d slip up while trying to figure out something else. However, we couldn’t just ignore our suspects either. Both strategies had their merits and disadvantages.

“Yes, and we could waste a lot of time doing that. If we do have the right suspects and ignore them, we could miss the clues we need, or they could kidnap someone else right under our noses,” Adam said. My heart skipped a beat; he was defending my idea to his friends.

“Yes, but think about how many transports we could miss while watch individual suspects?” Garcia asked. I knew that they were just talking through all the options, but I felt like my methods were being questioned. It wasn’t something that I was used to. We didn’t have a whole agency worth of resources to utilize. We were going to have to map out a clear course of

action, and we couldn't explore everything. There weren't enough of us for that, even if we did divide and conquer.

"I'll be honest, I'm not used to even having to explain my reasons to anyone, so I'm sorry if this comes out wrong. We don't have all of the resources we'd need to cover all the ports and ways of transit off the island. There are planes, cruises, commercial and residential boats, and who knows what else? There aren't enough of us to spread out and cover everything, but there are enough of us to keep a constant watch on the suspects we have. If you are telling me that you think that watching the ports and the airports are the way to go, then feel free to take that on. I'm going to question our suspects, and we can meet up later to exchange info." I did my best not to sound like a raging bitch, but I knew what I was doing. And I couldn't learn anything about the FBI office if I was watching some old marina.

"We're not trying to insult you, but our training has taught us that the more we know about entering and exiting a location, the better off we are. Some of us will identify those points and watch them, and a couple can be free to watch the suspects," Mendez said, trying to find the middle ground.

"Sounds fair." I couldn't blame them for relying on their training; I was doing the same. The problem was none of us had all the resources we had at our disposal while we were being trained. We'd just have to make the best of what we had and hope we made the right choices.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

abby

My phone rang. I recognized the vibration pattern against my leg.

“Do you need to get that?” Jasmine asked.

I nodded in response.

“It’s Bob,” I added.

“Go ahead,” she said. Her eyes lit up at the mention of him, and I wondered why exactly that was. There was certainly more to the two of them than either of them let on.

“Hello?” I answered as I accepted the call. I put my finger to my mouth, letting them all know to be quiet. Bob didn’t need to know that they were listening, that I had already blown my cover. He might be concerned about my ability to do my job if he learned that a bunch of bounty hunters figured me out in less than seventy-two hours.

“Brookes, I’ve got some updates that I thought you might want to hear from your NYC case.” *He used my last name. This isn’t going to be good news.*

“Oh yeah?” I asked. I steeled myself.

“Yeah, unfortunately, it’s not one you are going to like,” he said. His voice tapered off. I mentally braced myself because Bob didn’t get soft on me too often. He liked his rough-and-tough exterior too much for that.

“Out with it, then,” I said with a sigh.

“Some of the girls you were held captive with, their bodies washed up in the bay yesterday morning.”

“Wait...wha...what?” I stuttered. It was hard to concentrate on creating words when my mind was still trying to make sense of his. Dead? Who? My mind flashed to all of the faces ingrained in my memory. I had been determined to track them all down before Bob’s new assignment distracted me.

“I’m so sorry, Abby. One of them was that Lilith girl you mentioned. We matched her DNA this morning...”

I was silent for a long moment before a burning rage began to bubble up inside of me and threatened to blow me open like a violent volcanic eruption. Call me Mt. Saint Helens, because I was about to blow my lid. My vision was red, my hands began to shake, and I struggled to take in a solid, non-gasping breath. I felt the eyes of Adam and his friends, but I couldn’t focus on containing my response, not when the sweetest soul I had ever met was fish food.

“That bastard promised me that he would give her to someone who would keep her safe...alive,” I said. My voice was so low and growly that I didn’t even recognize it. It could have belonged to a lunatic for all I knew. I could hear my own pulse in my head, and my skin was flushed red when I caught my reflection in the window. My hands were still shaky, and I looked like I was about to go off on a murdering spree.

I thought I had influence in the high rise. I had been negotiating deals, trying to get girls sent to *clients* who were more civilized, who wouldn’t be brutal on them. I was wrong; instead they were murdered. I couldn’t help but wonder if that was done to teach me a lesson or if it was just a coincidence that the girls went to some cruel bastard.

“You know how they lie and use, only do what’s best for them. We sent the bodies for an autopsy.” I wanted to cry at the thought of how she died. I hoped for her sake it was quick or peaceful and that the dumping of her body only happened after.

“Has her family been notified?” I asked. My voice cracked as I did my best to keep the hot, angry tears of rage and overwhelming grief at bay. I wanted to open my lips and let out a wail but didn’t have the ability.

“Yes, and they are heartbroken,” he said. His words were gentle in a way I had never heard from him before. It made me want to cry even harder. He knew how hard this was for me, and I wondered if he could feel my guilt from the other end of the phone.

“Send them flowers, from me, personally,” I said. “Peonies, they were her favorite. Let them know that she had a friend during some of the worst days of her life...and I looked out for her as best as I could while I was there.” I choked back a sob.

“Of course. I’ll give them your work email, if you want. Do you need to come home?” he asked. His voice was still gentle, and my respect for the man somehow skyrocketed higher. He was willing to put my needs before the mission, and I loved him for it. It made me only want to work harder. I needed to find out if members from my agency were helping other monsters do the same thing that happened to my friend. It felt like a form of justice, and I was going to chase it.

“Yes, please give that to them, and my number.” I paused for a second, as if I was considering my options, even though my mind was made up. “No, I’m not coming home. I’m going to put another sick bastard in jail where he belongs, so that more women don’t end up like Lilith,” I said. The fiery anger was back; it suppressed the grief, for now. I didn’t dare bring up my private mission.

“That’s my girl. You call if you need anything, okay?”

“Okay.”

“How’s the mission going?” he asked.

“I’ve got to go,” I said and hung up. I had made the mistake of putting the call on speaker when I answered, and the looks I was getting from the group stirred up things I didn’t want to feel. I could see the pity in their eyes, along

with looks of concern. I had to hope they would think he was checking in on their mission, not mine.

“Abby,” Christine said softly, and she reached for me.

“Don’t. I...I...I can’t do this right now,” I said and made a mad dash for the door.

“Abby, come back!” I heard Jasmine call.

Fat chance of that. I wouldn’t let anyone see me fall apart. I wasn’t like them; I wasn’t all in tune with my emotions and okay with others comforting me. That was never something that I could handle. When I got stressed out or emotional, I worked out until I couldn’t move, until I didn’t have any energy to dedicate to whatever caused my outburst in the first place. That was exactly what I was going to do now, and I hoped no one would follow me.

I made a mad dash to my room to grab my sneakers and slipped them on my feet. With my phone and earbuds in hand, I took the stairs all the way down to the lobby two at a time. I raced out the front door and received a lot of strange looks from other guests, but I didn’t care, not one bit. I didn’t even bother to warm up; I just took off at a sprint and focused on my breathing.

Lilith couldn’t be gone; she was a ray of sunshine on this shithole we called Earth. Her pleasant smile had been exactly what attracted the traffickers to her. She was taken from Central Park and brought to the high rise only days after I arrived. We spent our first days just trying to survive. She was terrified, and I felt protective of her. Sometimes there was nothing to do but talk about our lives and what we would miss about them. We spent days locked in a dark room with the other girls, and they clung on to our every word. The room we were held captive in stunk due to the buckets of shit and piss we were trapped with—sometimes it was so bad we couldn’t help but gag or puke. There wasn’t much for comfort, only a few blankets and pillows—but we had each other. We pretended the darkness was from a new moon, and we were basking in the darkness on a beach in paradise. She’d never get the real experience; she was gone.

I ached to punch something; I eyed a palm tree like it personally wronged me, but I didn't go for it. I didn't want to break my hand and set the mission back, even though physical pain was the only form of release I craved. Call me fucked up, I didn't care. Pain was better than mental anguish; it was gone a lot sooner. Physical wounds always healed faster, with less scarring.

My mind flashed back to the high rise. I planned to sneak Lilith out in the middle of the night once I had the full trust of the leadership. I was going to drug the night-shift guards and get her out the back door, but the assholes sold her before I could. I barely had enough time to say goodbye to her; I had to fight to make sure she didn't go to one of the bad clients. She clung to me, tears streaming down her face. Her body trembled, and she wouldn't stop sniffing when I told her how brave she was and that I'd find her one day. I promised we'd have a drink on the beach and we'd make our captors pay. She put on a brave smile and had been ushered out the door with a bag over her head. It was the last time I saw her, and now I'd always remember it as the day I couldn't fulfill my promise.

A bright ray of sunshine was snuffed out, and it just made me want to lash out, snap a neck, and fall to my knees. I wanted to scream, cry, and never speak again, all at the same time. There was nothing that would ever make this okay. I didn't know her for very long, but that didn't matter. She became my sister the night I held her while she cried herself to sleep.

I failed her.

The guilt felt like a giant anchor sitting in my gut. If only I had acted sooner, or if I was a little braver, maybe she'd be alive. I hadn't even bothered to ask Bob how long they thought she'd been deceased for.

My feet pounded against the pavement to the beat of my music. It was something to distract me, something to help me push myself until I break, so that I could pull the pieces back together again. I concentrated on the rhythm of the drum and synched my breaths.

One thing was for sure, I wasn't going to honor Lilith's memory by crying or breaking my hand. I'd honor her memory by saving others like her, those who were currently scared out of their minds, wondering what would happen to them. I did my best to push Lilith from my mind to do just that; she'd understand. When I finished this mission, I would find the asshole she was sold to and kill him. I didn't care if I could lose my job or go to prison. I'd go full Dexter on his ass and grin while I did it. I'd enjoy the way the coward begged for mercy, and he'd get none.

Bob would say, "That's not the way we do things," but I was sick of that shit. The way we did things was the reason Lilith was dead. We had to follow procedures and get warrants when we should have been busting down the door of every single person who was in the small records book that the trafficking ring had kept. If so, we might have caught her buyer sooner. We might have found her before it was too late. I held back a sob at the overwhelming amount of guilt I felt.

The predators needed to know that they weren't safe, not by a long shot. Our policies and procedures gave them something to hide behind. It gave them time to dispose of evidence and move their victims around. Procedures shouldn't have mattered when lives hung in the balance. Those predators were going to be mine to do what I pleased. I was a fucking savage, and I wouldn't hold back. There was a world of illegal and shady dealings, cruelty and deceit, yet the bureau was only able to scratch the surface of it. There were so few agents like me that were ever able to dip their toes into this market, and I was going to have to work that much harder at it since I'd been exposed in newspapers.

I ran for miles and miles until I started to feel pain in my shins and my knees. My lungs felt heavy, and I was covered in so much sweat it looked like I had gone running into the ocean. I actually considered doing just that to cool off, but I didn't trust myself to not hold my head under the water until I drowned in my guilt, so I refrained.

I felt the sensation that I was being watched. The hair on my arms raised, even though they were soaked in sweat. It

made my skin tingle. I balled my fists in anticipation of a fight as I looked around.

Above me, there was a drone. I rolled my eyes. I should have figured that they wouldn't let me go out alone, well, not completely. I pulled my headphones out and looked back up at the device. I wasn't sure if it had a mic or not, but I took a chance on looking like a crazy person.

"You assholes don't have to follow me. I can handle myself!" I called out to the camera. Its blinking red light continued its flashing.

"I know you can," a voice said from behind me, and I jumped. *Goddamn it.*

I spun on my heels. "What the fuck?" My heart beat fast and hard from the scare. "Did you follow me all the way out here?"

Adam stood behind me. He was covered in just as much sweat as I was. He'd likely been following me the whole run.

"You are fast as hell, do you know that?" he asked. He was panting, and I took a little pride in how hard he had to work to keep up. I also felt bad that he was in this position because of me.

"Yeah, I ran track in high school and college, but that's beside the point," I argued.

"What's the point?" he asked as he pulled his shirt over his head and used the cloth to wipe the sweat from his face. Just like that, I was distracted from my thoughts by his body. The man was so sexy, I was honestly surprised that a group of desperate women didn't immediately start running in his direction.

"The point is that's an invasion of my privacy," I countered.

"No, an invasion of your privacy would be to ask you what happened or to call Boss to find out what happened. Instead I simply escorted you on your run from a distance, to make sure you didn't do anything that couldn't be undone."

“I’m not suicidal,” I challenged.

Were my thoughts really that transparent? If so, I wasn’t going to be able to go undercover again. If I lost my edge, I would be devastated. I wasn’t cut out for desk work; I needed to be in the action. I needed to be the one who did the legwork to lock up sick bastards. If I didn’t have that, then I had nothing.

“I didn’t say you were, but trust me, grief has a way of making people do things they never thought they would,” he said. He was right, but not about me. I knew I had a greater purpose; I was going to fill the jails with perverts and human traffickers. That was my mission and all I cared about. I’d do what I had to make sure that I remained an undercover agent. I’d shave my head and have my tattoos removed by laser if I needed to. I had dark thoughts, but I had the power to see through them. I had the power to overcome them.

I stared at him as he took in my appearance. If I was a gambler, I’d put money on my eyes being red and puffy. My hair was probably a wild mess and my mascara smeared below my eyes.

“I’m not going to ask you if you are okay. I don’t want to be lied to. Instead I’m going to ask, is there anything I can do to help you? Do you need to talk? Do you need a distraction?” he asked as he took a step closer to me. I saw his fingers twitch, like he was dying to reach out and touch me but thought better of it.

I shook my head. “I just need time and space. I need to lose myself in something. My head is just swirling with grief and anger, and it’s hard not to focus on that.” The words left my lips before I could stop them. I was surprised that I shared even that much, but I trusted Adam. I trusted him not to let this cloud his judgment of me. I held on so tightly to my reputation of being a badass, I used it like a shield. This was the first time that I willingly let that slip, even for a minute. It was the first time I admitted that I felt real emotions since I became a federal agent.

He nodded, like he understood that. “Let’s go back to the resort. You can throw yourself into your work. If you need anything else, you let me know, all right?”

“Okay,” I said with a sigh. I needed to focus on getting to the bottom of this, to keep Lilith’s fate from happening to others. When everything was said and done, I’d go home and take a long weekend to process my emotions when I could be alone. Then I’d hunt down Lilith’s killer.

“I am sorry for your loss,” he said with a regretful expression.

I was too, and I’d forever feel guilty over it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

adam

We didn't force Abby to talk about what happened, not that she would have talked to us anyway. Even I wasn't close enough to Abby for her to feel comfortable confiding in. However, I did force her to take a personal day. Abby put up a big fuss about it not being necessary, but we wouldn't have that. Christine paid for Abby to go snorkeling, and Jasmine ordered her to go. She wasn't allowed to come back to the team and work on the mission until tomorrow.

"Go do something your friend would have wanted to do. Go do it for her," Jasmine said, ever the master of manipulation.

"When you put it like that..." Abby muttered, not looking at all excited.

I called and scheduled a snorkeling tour for her and then sent her off to meet the boat at the dock. I hoped she'd have fun, but I recognized that was likely impossible. Instead I hoped she'd find it peaceful. I hoped it would give her a tiny bit of healing energy and strength to continue on with her mission, and a clear head. She marched off in her bikini, denim shorts, and flip flops. I wished I could have joined her, but I didn't need the break, not like she did. She told me she needed time and space to get through this, and I'd respect that. I knew my presence couldn't fix those thoughts in her head. I knew from experience sometimes you had to spend some time in your head to truly escape it. She'd have peace and quiet except for the woman who led the private reef tour.

While Abby was embarking in some underwater therapy, we were moving ahead the best way we knew how, identifying the weaknesses and strengths of the area. The most likely way to get victims off the island would be by boat or small private planes. It wasn't impossible for victims to be moved by commercial planes, but it was less likely. Too many eyes on their victims would make the traffickers uneasy, and it was very risky. Boats were the most likely culprit, and with this being an island, there were lots of waterways to be traveled and too many individual boats to track.

"I'm at the marina. All I see around is a bunch of large boats and larger houses," I said as I looked around me. The water was calm, reflecting the sky back at me with minor ripples in the surface. This part of the island was owned by wealthy fucks. Everywhere I looked, I saw large houses, luxury boats, expensive cars, and perfect landscaping. It was something that Christine's family might own, if they had the time to actually keep a residence outside of the States.

"Does anyone see a good setup for transporting?" Jones asked through the radio.

We were spread out all over the island, canvassing.

"I mean they all do," I quickly retorted. "They all have access to the water, there are plenty of large boats around, and the small private airport is a quick drive away. The traffickers could easily use this marina and never be noticed."

"Doesn't that asshole own several houses in that marina?" Jasmine asked.

"Yes, but he owns houses all over the island, including Clifton Bay and South West Bay," Garcia commented, reminding us just how large we needed to cast our net. My friends had done extensive research on Ricketts' real estate holdings in this area while I followed Abby after her phone call. Guy wasn't finished with his research on the corporations that owned the resorts; so far, those companies had similar names to those that were traced to Ricketts. It was a good sign that he at least partially owned the resorts.

"What about you, Garcia? What do you see?" Jones asked.

“About the same thing that Strong sees. Houses with good access to water. Again, not too far from the airport.”

“This is frustrating,” Jasmine said into the mic. “Maybe Abby was on the right track. There are so many good avenues for transport here, we could waste a lot of time trying to explore them all. They don’t necessarily need a large marina if they are using smaller boats.”

“Jasmine, it’s been an hour. You know it’s important to sit and wait. We blend in and let life go on around us. Abby is the best equipped to speak with the suspects, and that’s the only other option right now. Abby is busy grieving, and when she’s done, she will get to work on information extraction. This is not wasted time yet,” Wells said, barely covering his annoyance with her. He was lucky she and Jones were on a separate part of the island, or she might have lit him on fire with just her eyes.

“You know I’m not a patient person,” she replied bitterly.

“We know,” all of us said at the same time. I tried not to snicker but was unsuccessful.

“We’re on an island, for God’s sake. There are so many possible escape routes. We can’t possibly watch them all. It’s also not safe for us to all split up and be alone at night,” Christine said. Eventually night time would roll around and we’d have to make a call. Unfortunately, that was when the traffickers would most likely move their victims.

The women had a point.

“Okay, I admit it. It’s a stretch. I had hoped to find warehouses or houses with their own airplane hangar or some shit,” Yates said. I couldn’t blame him for that, it worked for us in Vegas, and he was likely hoping we’d get lucky. Even a four-leaf clover ran out luck, and we couldn’t expect ours to continue forever.

“I think we all hoped for something like that,” Guy mumbled.

“So what now?” Mendez asked.

“Now I think we need to put some cameras where we are at, to at least keep an eye on the waterways that exit to the ocean. If we see anything unusual, then at least we will have an idea about which general area the activity is coming from,” Yates said. The island itself was full of water channels and bays and marinas. We’d have to be strategic about where we placed those cameras to give us the best view, because we didn’t have that many.

The cameras were a good idea. Guy could set them to record when they sensed motion.

I took a few minutes to place the cameras facing the exits of the waterways. But once they were done, we had no other option but to return back to the resort and continue to blend in.

□

Six hours later, a relaxed version of Abby re-entered the resort lobby, and I almost didn’t recognize her. She wasn’t the high-strung version that had taken residence since we discovered that she was an FBI agent. I wouldn’t dare say that she looked happy, but she looked different.

“How was the swim?” I asked as she approached me in front of the elevators.

“Beautiful,” she said with a small smile.

“Feel any better?” I asked.

“A little.” I could sense the lie, but I couldn’t blame her for this one. It was obvious she didn’t want to talk about her feelings, and I wasn’t going to push her. I had plenty of friends who passed onto another life that I wouldn’t want to discuss.

It was always the same routine. When a brother of ours met his maker, our whole group would attend, and we’d sit together in silence. We’d give our best to the widow, do one round of shots for our fallen friend, and then we’d pretend as if it didn’t happen. We wouldn’t discuss it, we wouldn’t vocalize our feelings—but we didn’t need to. We all felt the same. Who was I to force her to talk about her feelings when my brothers and I couldn’t do the same? I had a feeling that she would

have fit right in with our team, if she had joined the Army and they allowed women on our teams.

“I’m glad.” I gave her a soft smirk as I asked, “Do you think saying, ‘I told you so,’ to the others will make you feel better?”

Her eyes sparked with a little something that helped soothe the frustration I felt at our lack of results. At least the sunburn wasn’t for nothing. I hadn’t known Abby for long, but there wasn’t much I wouldn’t do to see her smile or lick her lips with hooded eyes. “We didn’t see anything unusual and they realized just how hard it will be to keep an eye out for these guys. The traffickers have endless possibilities for escape routes. There are only so many of us to watch the whole island.”

“Finally, some good news. I’ve been waiting to say those words all day.” Her smile became genuine. On the outside, she appeared to be coping with the loss of her friend. Her skin was tanned, and her hair was wavy from the salty water. Her back wasn’t nearly as rigid, kept straight by the crushing weight of attention and expectations. Her eyes were white—not red. She was able to look me in the eyes, which was a step in the right direction.

She looked like a tourist enjoying her time on the island—a tourist I wanted to enjoy my time with upstairs, behind closed doors. It didn’t matter that I saw her at what she probably thought of as her worst. All I saw was a woman with a fierce protective streak, more than capable of protecting herself. It drew me in like a fly to honey, and I didn’t care if she trapped me. I’d willingly allow myself to drown in her—she was just that good. I’d feast on her as if she was my last meal.

“First, let’s go to your room so you can change,” I offered.

She looked down at her still slightly sandy skin. “Good idea.”

We took the elevator up in total silence. There was a comfortable silence that felt slightly charged with lust. It wasn’t blinding and all consuming, but it was still there, like a

fine mist coating my senses. When we got to her room, she slipped out of her bikini right after she made it through the front door, trusting me to block the view to anyone in the hallway. Her swimsuit laid on the floor in a heap, and I kept my eyes on the wet fabric. She stood naked in front of me, and I did my best to keep from taking advantage of her vulnerable state. It took everything in me not to pounce on her and lick the salt off her skin. Every time my eyes landed on her naked form, I had to fight back a raging boner.

Then she doused water on the mood. "I started questioning some police officers, and they might be a little pissed." She was casual about it, as if she were telling me about her swim.

"You what?" I asked, my eyes nearly bugging out of my head.

"Well, I ran into one on my way back." She shrugged her shoulders, as if to prove it really had been a coincidence. I wasn't sure if she was completely telling the truth. "I questioned him about Jeremiah. I wanted to know if he is okay and where he is now. I want to track him down and speak with him. I have a feeling he's related to this all somehow." Her eyes twinkled with mischief, and any bit of frustration I had faded away.

"You are going to drive me crazy. We told you to take one day off." I tried to be stern, but I was positive I wasn't stern enough.

"It's my superpower, driving others crazy," she said with another shrug of her shoulders. My eyes traveled down from her shoulders to her perfect tits. I wanted to reach out and palm them, massage them until her body was soft putty in my hands. Then I wanted to tease her, drive her wild in punishment for the way she got under my skin.

"I'm two seconds away from spanking you," I warned as I took a step toward her. The topic of police officers was temporarily forgotten, as well as the reason she needed a personal day. It was just her and me, and this strong physical pull that we felt toward each other. We didn't have to discuss it to know it was there. It was something neither of us could

ignore, and right now, I didn't want to focus on anything else but satisfying it. Surrendering to her body was the only thing I'd ever surrender to.

“Do it, I dare you,” she said in defiance. Then suddenly, an image of her surrendering to my firm hand flashed through my mind, and I wanted it even more. I could see the need in her gaze—maybe she needed this form of distraction even more than I did.

I took another step closer and placed my lips on her shoulder and ran my tongue over the skin. I could taste the salt of the ocean and smell it in her hair—at least she actually went snorkeling. The brat.

“You may not know this, but I don't back away from dares,” I whispered. I felt my lips twist up into a smirk against her skin, and then I lightly bit her shoulder. She shuddered in my arms. I had her hook, line, and sinker.

“I wouldn't expect anything less,” she said in her own whisper. Her head tipped backward, exposing her soft neck to me. I ran my tongue upward toward her jaw. She let out the tiniest of moans, and I could no longer hold myself back. I needed to hear her screaming my name as I buried myself in her.

I grabbed her arms and spun her around. I pushed her face into the bed so that her ass stuck straight out. I ran my fingers up and down her seam, and she let out another soft moan. I let go of her head and said, “Stay there, or you'll regret it.”

“I wouldn't dream of moving and missing out on this,” she spoke, and I swore her words were like a caress to my dick. It wanted to jump straight out of my pants and into her mouth.

“We've got exactly five minutes until the guys are expecting me back, so this is going to be quick,” I said.

She simply nodded into the bed and spread her legs a little further apart to help with balance. I pulled my cock out of my fly and quickly spit on it. After a couple of pumps in my hand, I lined it up with her opening, and then I plunged in. She groaned loudly, and I grunted. She felt perfect, like a home I

never wanted to leave. I gave her only a second to adjust to my size before I started thrusting into her fast and hard. She reached underneath to play with her clit, but I smacked the hand away. I placed my finger there and massaged the bundle of nerves in a circular motion.

Her body tightened underneath mine as she worked her way toward her orgasm. Her breath was short and ragged. Her fingers fisted the sheets, and her back arched. I covered her mouth when her lips parted to scream. We didn't need to be called out for loud sex two days in a row. She bit into my hand as I felt her clench around me. She cried out into my hand, the sound muffled, but still sexy as fuck.

Three more thrusts and I felt my toes curl as a wave of pressure was released. I pumped a few more times, determined to leave her with everything I had, and she sat there and took it like the good girl she was. I pulled myself from her with a groan, and she giggled as I left her on the bed with her ass up in the air.

I went to her bathroom to wash myself off, and when I came back she was already dressed. Fuck, she was fast.

“Am I lifted from my mission-related banishment now?” she asked as she slipped into a pair of sneakers.

I couldn't deny the fact that she looked much better. I knew better than anyone that appearances could be deceiving, but if she could put up a front, then she could handle another distraction. “What the hell, why not? You already fucked that up,” I said, and then she shot me a shit-eating grin.

We left her room and met in Guy's room, which we had turned into our meeting spot.

“What's she doing here? I thought she couldn't come back to the mission until tomorrow,” Garcia asked.

“What's wrong? You weren't prepared to tell me I was right until tomorrow?” Abby teased. I loved just how mischievous she could be. She was the kind of person that would keep life interesting. I needed that level of excitement in my life, and it made me realize just how badly I didn't want

to finish this mission, if it meant we would eventually part ways. I instantly felt guilty for the selfish thought. There were women suffering at the hands of traffickers and abusers, and I was worried about the new cool chick leaving. Pathetic.

“You told her?” Garcia asked me, his eyes narrowed. His tone was accusatory, but I could see right through him; he wasn’t mad.

“Duh, she was going to find out tomorrow anyways, but she broke the one rule we gave her before I even told her about today’s reconnaissance. I brought her up here so she could share what she discovered.” I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

“I had started to tell Adam about my encounter with the police,” she announced.

“God, woman, what did you do?” Yates asked as he slapped his palm to his forehead and slowly shook his head. He was so dramatic sometimes, but it was part of his weird charm.

“Nothing illegal. Cut me some slack, I’m an FBI agent who is really proud of her job. I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize that.”

“Ignore them. Get to the part where I get annoyed,” I demanded, because we both knew I’d end up that way. She said it before, her superpower was getting under my skin.

She shot me another grin before she continued.

“Well, I started asking about the guy that Adam and I saved, Jeremiah. The police didn’t seem too happy that anyone was asking about him.” Her eyebrow raised, as if she was challenging us to guess what happened next.

“Not happy... How exactly did they leave you with that impression?” Jones asked.

She shook her head in disappointment. “They asked me how I knew about that, and I told them I helped save his life, and I wanted to know if he had survived so I could check on him. They tried to beat around the bush, lots of hemming and hawing. They didn’t want to give me any answers. It was like pulling teeth to get any sort of details. I asked if they had any

idea who had shot him, and they became flustered, just like I wanted. Eventually one of them told me that Jeremiah died and they chalked it up to an accident. His eye twitched, as he avoided mine, and he nervously played with his belt buckle.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Why would they lie?” Wells asked.

“If he was gone, they would have had no reason to lie and would have just said so from the beginning. He’s alive, I just know it. They figured I’d probably just give up and leave them be if they told me he had passed. They underestimated...”

“Your level of crazy,” I finished for her with a shit-eating grin.

“Exactly. Jeremiah is our next lead. I just know it.” She began to excitedly bounce on her toes, and I somehow found myself even more enthralled by her energy. “If he shares what exactly got him shot, and if it’s related to the trafficking, then he may be able to confirm or rule out our suspects and hone in on a better trail to follow,” Abby said in an excited rush. Didn’t she need to breathe like the rest of us?

“All right, we tried our way and it didn’t pan out, at least for now. We put cameras at the waterways around the island, so we will see if anything suspicious occurs. For now we’ll follow your lead. Do you need help calling around to hospitals to track down our new person of interest?” Garcia asked.

“That would be nice,” Abby answered sweetly. She was going to drive us all insane if she was going to be right all the time.

“All right, everyone, start searching hospitals,” Christine said with a clap of her hands.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

adam

“**A**nd you’re absolutely sure it’s him?” Abby asked.
“Mhm, mhm. When are visiting hours?”

The others fell silent so she could finish her conversation. She found him, and it sounded like he was still alive. Abby’s instincts were hard to argue with, she might just elevate our group, and I became excited just thinking about all the good she could help us accomplish.

“Perfect, thank you.” She hung up and looked at us. “Well, I found him. He was taken to Princess Margaret Hospital. It’s not far from here, and visiting hours are over in an hour. I’m going to go talk to him.”

“Do you need back up?” Mendez asked.

“No, I don’t want to scare him, and I don’t want to draw attention to the fact that he’s still alive. Someone tried to kill him for a reason, and I’m going to find out why and if it has to do with our mission. If so, we are going to get him justice, and I hope that’s the incentive he needs to start talking. The idea of seducing him just feels wrong.” She paused and shook her head as if she couldn’t believe she had the thought. “What I need help with is the schedules of the three managers we named as suspects. I’m going to need to work on them as soon as I get back.”

“I’m coming with you,” I told her.

She rolled her eyes. “All right, big guy, let’s go.” If I were a bird, I would have preened at the name. It reminded me of the nickname for a superhero, who was also very jacked, and I

couldn't help but tuck that bit of knowledge away for later. I wanted her to say it in the bedroom as I plowed into her.

"Stay safe!" Christine called out the door as we exited the room.

I didn't miss the way that Abby smiled when she heard the words.

"You like them, don't you?" I asked her quietly, suppressing a knowing smile.

"Maybe I do, maybe I don't," she said with a noncommittal shrug of her shoulders. She was trying to be nonchalant about it, but I could see right through her. She did a lot of her undercover work alone or with little interaction from the outside world, but this was different. She had a whole team she was working with, and we were undercover together...in a sense, anyways.

"It's okay to admit it, you know. They like you back." I liked that my friends liked her. I wanted Abby to be a part of our team, and I wanted her to become a more permanent fixture in our lives...my life. I knew I'd only known her for days, but I was a firm believer of *when you know, you know*. Right now, I was getting those "*I know*" vibes.

"They do?" she asked curiously. She gave me the side-eye as we walked through the hall.

"Yeah, they do. Christine bought you a snorkeling excursion because she thought you could use the break. People don't just do random things like that for people they don't like," I said.

"Okay, you have a point. Fine, yes, I like them, but I'm trying not to get too attached, okay?" She sounded slightly flustered. I felt thrilled that I had the same power to get to her that she did to me, but I also felt slightly anxious at her response. No one wanted to get attached if they planned on leaving. My stomach bottomed out, but I did my best to ignore it.

The elevator doors closed in front of us as we headed down to the lobby.

“Why not?”

“Because eventually this all has to come to an end. We will get our guy, and I’ll go back to the Bureau. You and your friends will continue on to the next one, and life will go on.”

“You don’t want the heartbreak that comes along with saying goodbye,” I said. The saying, “You can’t miss what you don’t have,” was a cruel one. I was a firm believer that it wasn’t true. You could certainly miss what you couldn’t have, especially if you’d had even the tiniest taste of the real thing. She’d been accepted into our group whether she liked it or not. She’d had the taste, and she was going to miss us after this was all over, regardless if she admitted it or not.

“Maybe...” she said with a slight hesitation. I didn’t miss the sadness that suddenly seemed to set in. She was already missing us and hadn’t even left yet.

“Hey, I don’t blame you. But you know you are welcome to join us, right? I know that we’ve hooked up and all, and this may be a little awkward to talk about, but I like you, Abby. I think we are very similar, and the sex is fucking fantastic. If you wanted to stick around, if you wanted to take a chance on me and my friends, I wouldn’t object,” I said, with the most sincere expression I could muster. I didn’t want to put a lot of pressure on her, and I wasn’t one to beg, but I wasn’t going to ignore this feeling. I wasn’t going to let her walk away and always wonder what would have happened if I told her how I felt. I was firmly placing the ball in her court; if she wanted to join us, and wanted to be with me, she could. If she didn’t join us, that was solely her decision, and she’d have to be the one to live with that.

Asking her if she wanted to date me or make something permanent out of this felt like it would be too much too soon. However, I wanted her to entertain that option, because I wanted her to stay. I wanted her in my life for more than just this trip. I’d be disappointed as hell if she went back to the Midwest.

“I appreciate that, I do.” She paused for a moment. It was silent, with only the sound of my heartbeat pulsing in my ears.

“I have a lot of shit to figure out. It’s my issues, not yours. If circumstances were different, if I wasn’t already married to my job, I’d definitely consider it.” She paused again and placed her hand on my arm. Damn if I didn’t hate rejection. “You don’t know it, but you are a hell of a package. The problem is I don’t know how to fit you all into my life and keep my career. I’ve worked so hard to get to my position, and I’d hate to lose that,” she said, letting me down easy.

“I meant what I said. If you change your mind, the offer is open. Even if it’s two years from now,” I said.

The doors to the elevator opened, and we were smacked in the face with hot, salty air as it blew through the open doors of the lobby.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She leaned on her tippy toes and grabbed my jaw. Then she planted a sexy kiss on my lips and released me. God, I was going to fall hard for this woman, and then she was going to leave me. It wasn’t fair. I was reminded again of another saying: it was better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all. The jury was still out on that one...

We exited the hotel, and I started sweating the moment we walked outside.

“Here, we are taking the rental,” I said and then led her to the parking lot of the resort. Garcia had rented the car so that we could get around the island quickly if need be. We realized we fucked that up when we went running after the women to save them in the market. All of us guys running across the bridge had definitely attracted some attention. A car would have been preferable.

She stopped in the parking lot after I hit the unlock button on the key fob. “A van, really?”

“There are a lot of us, and we didn’t want to spring for multiple cars,” I said with a shrug. She was rubbing off on me, the queen of the shoulder shrug.

“Isn’t Christine’s family filthy rich, and isn’t Jones an ex-NFL player? What do you mean you didn’t want to pay for

another vehicle?" Abby asked with a gobsmacked expression.

"Hey, finances are not something I have any part in. I'm sure in your extensive research of us, you know I am far from wealthy," I said.

"You're right, and money isn't everything. Most of the guys I help put away have way too much of it," she said earnestly.

We were halfway across the bridge when I asked, "What are you going to say to this Jeremiah guy?"

"I was thinking of leading with, *I'm glad to see you alive*. How's that?" she asked with a smirk.

I snorted in response.

"Perfect, hopefully he finds that funny. Comedy breaks the ice and fixes most things," she said.

"Then what?"

"I'm going to ask him if he knows who shot him and why," she said, shooting me a look that said, *Are you fucking stupid?*

"I know, but you are going to go right into questioning?" I asked.

"Right into questioning. There's no time for games with him. Who knows if someone will sneak into the hospital tonight and kill him when they learn he survived?"

"Damn, that's dark," I mumbled, but she was absolutely right.

"Yeah, well, I've lived in a world of darkness for a long time. That's my MO now."

"I think all of us have lived in darkness in some form. If you ever need someone to talk to about it, just pick one of us," I said.

"I know, thank you," she said quietly. She shrank in her seat, as if to avoid the topic completely. It made me want to reach out and drag her across the center console so she could sit in my lap and I could hold her face to my chest. I wanted

her to find the light in life, not just the small spotlight she found from her work. I wanted her to feel the sun.

Instead I did nothing of the sort. “Of course. Get your questions ready, Nancy Drew. We’re about here.”

I pulled the van into the hospital parking lot, and Abby looked at me as she unbuckled. “Let’s hope he has something good to share.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

abby

The day was eventful—to put it nicely. If I was being honest, I'd admit that it was a clusterfuck of epic proportions. My friend died, and I couldn't save her; my new friends forced me to do something other than work to distract myself, and I couldn't even do that right. Don't get me wrong, I went snorkeling and it was peaceful, but Lilith wasn't with me. I saw a beautiful array of fish, gorgeous coral reefs, and swam with large sea turtles, but I was alone. It was everything I would have expected from a private snorkeling tour, but it was very different from how I imagined it. I spent the hour in the water reminding myself I was experiencing something that Lilith never would. I finished the excursion for her, and later I would tell her family all about it, once I returned home.

After we docked, I took advantage of the time I had alone without the group. No one tailed me, and there was no drone flying overhead. I was completely alone. Who knew when I'd get the opportunity to secretly work on my mission again? I'd been neglecting it, and Lilith's death only made it worse. So instead of walking back to the resort, I walked right up to the field office and checked out the building. Before I knew it, I stood in the office of an agent that looked bored, and I concocted a new cover.

“Look, I took this vacation because what college student doesn't need a break? The professor surprised us with this assignment, and I need to interview someone from law enforcement ASAP. Do you have thirty minutes to spare?”

He glared at my lack of clothing and all of my tattoos with a form of disgust. He wasn't so great to look at either. He was balding, and he had a patch of dry skin on his forehead. His nose was pointed too sharp, and his eyes were dark and calculating. He hid all of that behind a pair of glasses that seemed to age him ten years. "So you didn't bother to even change before leaving the beach?"

"The paper is due tomorrow and I need time to write it," I said, ignoring his comments completely.

"Fine, you can have fifteen minutes of my time. Walk with me," he said and stood up from his desk. He led me through the building to the break room and poured a cup of coffee. He didn't bother offering me one.

"How long have you been with your current agency?" I asked and began typing on my phone to take notes.

"Ten years," he answered quickly. He already looked bored. I was going to have to be quick and direct to get what I wanted—information and a cordial relationship. A door left open that I could open later.

"Did you serve with any other agencies?"

"I was previously with a field office on the West Coast." It was an answer, but vague.

I had to ease into what I wanted to know, but I was quickly losing his interest. It would be a miracle if I could get anything useful from him. "What is your relationship with the locals like, and how does that affect your work?"

"What class did you say this was for?" he asked. His eyes narrowed slightly.

"Community policing. We study the best ways to interact with the community and how to create a better relationship with those we serve and protect," I answered.

"We get along with the locals just fine. We work closely with the Nassau Police Department, and between the two of us, we've really lowered the crime rates." I couldn't help but notice as his grip on the coffee cup tightened.

“In small, community-based agencies, sometimes law enforcement is contracted to work security or traffic for private events. We were taught this is a good opportunity for community outreach. Does the FBI ever do anything like that?” I asked, trying to relate my question back to the made-up class.

He hesitated before he answered, which only made me pay closer attention to his answer. “Sometimes, yes. There are some wealthy visitors here who have parties and what not. Sometimes agents will work those events and provide private security,” he answered. Well, that wasn’t allowed.

“What kind of events? Is it like directing church traffic, raging parties, business functions?” I asked.

“I’ll let you answer however you want for your paper... kid,” he said. The last word was said with a tone just short of disgust. God, I just wanted to slap him. He clearly thought too highly of himself.

“So your agency connects with the wealthy, but what about the poor?”

“Yes, but not as much. They are less trusting of law enforcement.”

“Why is that?” I pressed.

“The same reason they are back in the States. Often they are involved in illegal activities. Generally they aren’t bad people, but they do what they have to to pay the bills.”

“Do the wealthy ever do anything to help with that?” I asked.

His eyes narrowed, likely wondering how this was relevant to his work with the FBI. “Nothing that I can think of. The wealthy remain in their own bubble.”

“So let’s go over a few career highlights. Who is the most famous person you’ve had the opportunity to speak with related to your law enforcement work?”

“That’s your last question, kid,” he said, looking down at his watch. I was just hoping he’d throw me a frickin’ bone

here in an effort to show off a little. He seemed like he had narcissistic tendencies from the way he talked down to me and valued his time so much.

“We have a real rich guy on the island. I won’t drop names for privacy reasons, but he’s a real-estate tycoon. He owns properties all over this island and around the world. He’s got his hands in a little bit of everything these days. Sometimes he contacts us for private security when the Nassau police are unavailable to assist him.”

The agent set down his cup of coffee, and I took that as my cue. “I hate to rush you out of here, you seem...nice, but I’ve got a meeting I need to get to. You exit right through that door and it takes you back to the lobby of the building. Good luck on your paper,” he said. He didn’t even bother to shake my hand; he just made a hard left and went back to his office where he shut the door.

I stood there for a moment, just taking everything in. I tried to listen to conversations of those around me, but I wasn’t able to pick up on anything of interest. I wrote down the names of agents that were displayed on desks, and then I left. If I tried to go through desks, I was sure someone would try to arrest me.

I left and found the two Nassau police officers who responded to Jeremiah’s shooting. They patrolled the area near our resort. Running into them had been a happy accident, but I wasn’t completely sure it was an accident. Their car was facing the resort, as if they were looking for someone. I suspected it was Strong and me, but I had no way to confirm that. When I questioned them about Jeremiah, they looked like they wanted the ground to swallow me whole.

So much had happened already and the day was still far from over. I needed to speak to Jeremiah and figure out if he had anything to tell us about his attempted murder, and if any of it was connected to the kidnappings and trafficking. Those people in the market referred to him as an innocent. That sounded like a name that would be given to who opposed trafficking.

Strong drove us to the hospital in relative silence. I knew he was giving me the opportunity to talk about Lilith, but I wasn't ready. I wasn't sure if I would ever be ready. We signed into the hospital and explained that we were here to check in on the gunshot patient. We had saved his life and were hoping to see him.

"Oh my goodness, we heard about what you did! You saved that man's life. The tampon was a smart move," a nurse praised as she led us toward the room.

"How's he doing?" She seemed friendly enough to strike up a conversation with.

"He's alive. He's been a little down since he woke up. Keeps mentioning that he can't stay, that his family is in danger. I had to assure him that's not the case," she said.

"Here he is," the nurse said before I could comment. We stopped in front of a room, and I heard the sound of machines beeping from the hallway.

"Let me go wake him up and make sure he's comfortable. Wait here for just a moment," she instructed. Through the window I could see the man, Jeremiah, looking much better than the last time I saw him—less bloody.

The nurse woke him and explained he had a visitor. There was an instant change in his demeanor—nervousness, and jitters took over his limbs, and his heart rate spiked. He was afraid someone came back to finish him off.

The nurse motioned for us to enter the room, and I entered first, slowly. Adam followed a few steps behind. In my peripheral vision, I saw Adam try to make himself appear small, less intimidating.

"Hi, Jeremiah, my name is Abby, and this is Adam." My voice was soft, as if I were speaking to a child I didn't want to frighten. "We tended to you until the professionals showed up. How are you feeling?"

He looked at me for a moment, as if he were trying to read my thoughts, and it unnerved me. "I remember your voices," he finally said.

“You do?”

“Yes, I wanted to close my eyes, but your voice pulled me back. Thank you.” He blinked back a few tears. I bit my lip to keep a handle on my own. I wasn’t normally an emotional person, but today’s events and his gratitude blasted through me like a tidal wave.

“You’re very welcome,” I said softly.

“Do you mind if we sit with you for a while?” Adam asked.

“Go ahead.” He gave Adam a small smile, a good sign. Maybe he would let his guard down with us, enough to tell us about why someone wanted him dead.

The nurse stood in the doorway still, watching our exchange. “I’ll go now and give you guys some time. If you need anything, just call out for Mandy.”

“We will. Thanks, Mandy,” Adam said with a soft tone of his own. She looked at him like he hung the moon. I felt a pang of something I’d never felt before, possessiveness. The man wasn’t even mine, and I was already scared that he would lose interest in me.

Mandy left the room, and Adam took the seat in the back corner, under the TV mounted on the wall. That left me to take the seat closer to Jeremiah. I knew I couldn’t go straight into the tough questions like I wanted to. As soon as I saw how anxious he was through the window, I formulated plan B.

“Tell me about your injuries. It looked pretty bad when we tried to stop you from bleeding out.”

“Ah, yes. They told me that the bullet missed everything vital. I bled a lot, but they fixed me up,” he said.

“I’m glad you are okay,” I told him. I reached out and took his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. I meant every word.

He looked down at my hand with a small smile. He squeezed back. “Thanks to you.”

“I was just in the right place at the right time. I have some medical training and knew how to use it. Would you laugh if I

told you we stuck a tampon in your wound to help the bleeding?" I asked.

"Yes, I think I would, and it hurts to laugh," he said with a chuckle and a twinkle in his eye.

"Okay, then I won't tell you," I said with my own chuckle and a wink, causing him to smile.

"Do you mind that we came to visit you? I wanted to make sure that you were okay," I asked. If he minded, I wasn't sure how I was going to gently coax what we needed from him. I didn't want to cause him any pain or make things worse for him. He was probably terrified out of his mind, and forcing him to share what he knows wasn't going to help either of us.

"No, not at all. It's actually nice to have visitors. I have friends and family who are too scared to come," he said. I wasn't sure if the slip was due to a developing trust in us or the painkillers that were pumped into his arm, but I'd take advantage. It was what I came here for.

"Why would they be scared? You are alive and well. They should be happy and not scared."

He was silent for a moment, and I could practically see his thoughts bouncing around in his head as he planned out his response. "Life is not as it seems on the island. I put my nose where it didn't belong, and I was shot because of it. Others will be afraid to be associated with me from now on. I'm afraid I've made a pariah of myself." He frowned, and I felt sorry for him. The traffickers were ruining more lives than we originally thought. I just hoped he was on our side.

"I'm so sorry to hear that. What happened?" I pressed gently.

It wasn't lost on me that Adam still sat quietly in the corner. He was likely soaking in the conversation, looking for any other angles that I might miss, and that was okay. I had extensive training on questioning and leading an individual to get the information I needed. Adam had extensive training on other valuable skills, like how to jump from planes and helicopters, and how to invade a foreign country without

getting caught. This was my expertise, except for sleeping with men to get what I needed. I was even better at that.

Jeremiah winced. “I can’t share that. You are in enough danger as it is. You interfered with them killing me, and they might not want you around because of that. You’re a tourist. The best thing you could do for yourself is go back to your hotel, pack your things, and go home, immediately,” he warned. His hand trembled slightly in my grip. I felt the urge to put my other hand on top of his and tell him everything would be all right, that I’d protect him.

“Jeremiah, why do you say that? What could be so bad that they’d want me dead by association?” I asked.

According to the monitor, his heart rate increased. I saw panic form in his eyes. The best thing for his health would be for me to change the topic and give him the opportunity to calm down, but I was so close to finally getting some answers that I couldn’t risk doing that. What if we ran out of time before visiting hours ended and he was dead in the morning?

He swallowed hard and then stared up at the ceiling as he spoke. “It’s bad. Very bad.” He paused to swallow again, as if forming the words were making him sick. “There are evil men on this island who do terrible things to women. They don’t like it when others interfere with their work. I stopped them from a job, and they didn’t like it. They found me at that market, shot me, and left me to die.” His hand shook harder, and I squeezed it again.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Jeremiah.”

“It’s okay, I’ll be fine. When I’m out of here, I’ll pack up my family and move to a different island if I can. It’s just a matter of surviving until I scrape up the cash,” he said.

“What if I could help you with that?” I asked him. The idea popped into my head before I could even think it through. After all, it involved someone else’s money entirely.

“I’d say you really are an angel,” he said with a sense of awe.

“Just put a halo on me and call me Gabriel.” I beamed. I really hoped I wasn’t overstepping and that Christine would be kind enough to help and then not be mad that I offered up her money.

“I wouldn’t be able to accept that kind of help. That’s much too kind,” he said earnestly. He shook his head gently and squeezed my hand again.

“Nonsense. Would you feel better if you provided something in return? Would that make you feel better about taking the help and making a better life for yourself?”

“I suppose it would, but I’m afraid I don’t have much to offer. I’d offer labor to you, but I’m not in any shape to work at the moment,” he said.

“No, that’s okay. I’m going to share a secret with you, and then I’ll tell you what it is you can trade. You have to promise to keep my secret, even if someone threatens you, okay?” I asked.

“I promise,” he said. Curiosity had grabbed him. He probably would have promised anything to hear what I had to say next.

I hit the record button on my phone, hoping that I’d convince him to share more info with me. I was building my case, and I’d need Jeremiah’s statement as evidence.

“I’m investigating those guys who do bad things to others. Me and my friend Adam, we are here to put an end to what they are doing, but we need some more info. We have a couple of suspects, but any information you can give us will help.”

“What makes you think I know much about them?” he asked me. He pulled his hand back. His walls were already reforming, and I fought the urge to recoil from that. I wasn’t here to hurt him, only help.

“Because they were willing to kill you over whatever it is you know. Wouldn’t a warning have been sufficient if you meddled in one of their kidnappings? No, you know more than you let on, because you’ve done it multiple times, haven’t you, saved someone from being stolen from their families?”

“Yes,” he said solemnly. He folded his hands in his lap and reclined his head back against the back of the bed.

“That’s incredibly brave. You can continue that legacy by sharing what you know. Let us help,” I said.

He shook his head, tears forming in his eyes. “You don’t know what you’re up against. You don’t know what you are asking from me.”

“Then help me understand. Help me succeed, Jeremiah. I want you to be the last person ever hurt by these bad people. Only you have the power to help me.”

He was silent for a moment as he mulled over my pleas. “Okay, I’ll help you. Are you serious about trading info for money? I will have to leave town the moment I check out of this hospital, and I don’t have the funds to do so,” he said.

“I’m dead serious. In fact...” I turned around to face Adam. “Text either Christine or Jones and have them get together some cash to assist this man. See if they can bring it now.”

“On it. How much do you think you’ll need, Jeremiah?” Adam asked.

“I think ten thousand American dollars would do. That should hopefully help me get a place for me and my family on another island. The more remote the better at this point,” he answered.

“Have them pull twenty, just in case,” I mouthed.

Jeremiah must have read my lips, because he asked, “For real?” His voice had raised an octave higher. He went slack jawed, and his eyes widened in disbelief.

“Yes, for real. I don’t want to pull you from one danger and then drop you into another. You use that money and make sure your family is safe and taken care of, okay?”

“You’ve got it. Now let me tell you everything I know.”
Finally.

“Please do.” I gave him an encouraging nod.

“There is a group who are referred to as the Reapers. They snatch women and sometimes children out of their homes in the middle of the night. They often take tourists and then they sell them. They try to keep everyone quiet by spending enough money in the local markets to keep everyone fed, effectively buying silence or tolerance of what happens. Some of us were fed up and started a group we called the Watchmen. Us Watchmen do what we can to screw with their plans.”

“So you’ve messed with their plans over and over? They’ve probably warned you multiple times and you didn’t listen, so they reacted by shooting you,” I said, piecing together his story.

“Yes, you may be able to convince some of the Watchmen to help you if you can locate them, but some may not. Not after the message the Reapers sent trying to kill me. I’d recommend not going back into that market if I were you. It’s much too dangerous for you now,” he warned. His eyes were wide and practically pleading with me to promise that I wouldn’t go back.

“I went back to the market after you were shot. There was a woman there who referred to you and me as an innocent. She made sure my friends got out of the market while I fought off someone who wanted to attack us. What does being innocent mean?” I asked.

His face paled.

“It means you are in far more danger than I realized. An innocent is someone who is marked by the Reapers, someone they intend to take or kill. You must leave this island. You don’t realize who you are dealing with,” he warned.

“They don’t know who they are messing with either. I promise you, I am well equipped to deal with kidnappers. I’ve done it before. How many Reapers are there? Do they have a hideout?” I asked.

“No one knows the exact number of Reapers, and no one sees their faces, but I believe there are Reapers all over the island. They are all required to provide a person per shipment, and they all take turns. They receive special perks for being a

Reaper, but I don't know what they are. The Reapers often contract work out to others, and those men are often sloppy. Recently a few women escaped being marked. They were able to flee with the help of the Watchmen," he said.

"So with there being a Reaper in each territory, it would create a pattern if you tracked them all?" I asked.

"Most likely, yes." He nodded his head, as if he was pleased that I caught on so quickly.

I looked to Adam to make sure he understood. We could use the map to track down individual Reapers and take them out, one by one. His eyes were hard, but there was a gleam in them, as if he couldn't wait for the hunt.

"What about a hideout? Do you know if they have one?"

"I'm sure they do, but I've never seen it. I don't know how they get the women off the island either. It could be by boat, private jet, or commercial flights."

"Why do you suspect commercial flights? Wouldn't that be too obvious?" I asked.

"Because those who are tourists could be traced back to the island. It would bring too much international attention, and the tourists would stop coming. They'd hinder their own operation. If they flew the tourists out commercially, they weren't missing on the island. They land and go missing once they get off their flights."

"So you suspect they are flown off the island under duress and then from there they are either picked up or taken straight to their buyer?" I asked.

"Yes, at least for some of the tourists that are taken, not all. Some of the Reapers are lazy and don't care what attention it brings. For the local victims, the rules are different. The Reapers essentially buy the silence of the locals," he answered.

"Have they bought off the police?" I asked. This was an important question, and it would help me with my side investigation into the FBI. Even if the FBI wasn't moving bodies, but they knew of dirty police, there'd be some truth to what Bob suspected.

“Oh, yes, I’m sure there were officers that overlooked my shooting entirely. Paid by the Reapers to turn a blind eye. There are still good ones out there that try to do what they can, outside of the Reapers’ influence, but there aren’t many of them.”

No wonder it took so long for emergency services to arrive when he was shot, and no wonder Adam and I were grilled by the police. They were looking to see what we knew, if Jeremiah told us anything about why he was shot. I shiver at the thought of how close we were to the Reapers during that conversation. Their influence clearly stretched far and wide. It felt less likely that the local FBI office didn’t know about this, and that left me with a sense of dread. Part of me hoped that I could declare them incompetent but innocent. If the Reapers paid off the police, then they likely paid off the FBI too.

“What about other law enforcement on the island?” I pressed. I had to get the answer to my question in the most discreet way. I didn’t want to alert Adam to my investigation into the FBI field office. I wasn’t sure if he knew that the FBI held an office in the area, but I didn’t want to specifically name drop and bring it to his attention. I also didn’t want to give him a reason to lose confidence in me, to suspect that I might align myself with my corrupt colleagues.

“All of them,” Jeremiah confirmed.

My eyes widened, and it felt like I swallowed a rock. “That explains so much,” I whispered. My words sounded haunted, and I wanted nothing more than to march over to the local office and slam some faces against walls. I couldn’t do that, but I could imagine it in my head, over and over until it brought me some calm.

“I’m sure it does,” he said, matching my tone.

“If you had to guess how many Reapers there were, what would that number be?” Adam asked.

“On the island? I would think more than ten, but outside of that, I couldn’t be certain. I would think twenty to twenty-five would be reasonable, but again I just don’t know. If you are talking worldwide, I really have no idea,” Jeremiah answered.

“How long have they been doing this?” I asked.

“Fifteen years now. The operation started out a lot smaller, only disappearances here or there. It became a large-scale operation five years ago.”

My gut clenched, and I felt sick. The New York ring had only been operating for two years before I took it down. The Vegas ring that Adam’s crew caught had been operating for around the same amount of time. Fifteen years was an asinine amount of time. I could only imagine how many women had fallen victim to them over the years, and just how deep their influence truly was. It was like a poison, hidden by sunshine and tan lines.

“Is there someone from the Watchman that we can talk to further? Maybe we can organize something with them. Bring this all to a quick end.”

He hesitated a moment, still unsure of just how much he should tell us, despite our intentions. I could imagine that he didn’t want to put anyone else in danger. If I was marked as innocent, it was only a matter of time before the Reapers made a move on me. Sharing more information about the Watchers could make me a liability to them too. “The only person you might be able to speak with calls herself the employer,” he said.

I suppressed a grin. *Finally a win.* “I know exactly who that is.”

“You do?” Adam and Jeremiah asked at the same time.

“I do. She’s the one who called emergency services for you the night you were shot, and she was the one who called me an *innocent* when I went back to the market.”

“Then it sounds like she’s sympathetic to you. She’s your best bet. I don’t have much more to share, unfortunately. I only joined the Watchman’s cause about a year ago. The employer was the first to challenge the Reapers and she’ll know more,” Jeremiah finished.

“What you’ve shared has been invaluable,” I said. He really was; he’d confirmed my suspicions. The FBI was

turning a blind eye to the illegal operations going on here. The agent I interviewed earlier confirmed their association with Ricketts, so none of this was a coincidence. “I’ve recorded our conversation, and I’d like to use it in legal procedures down the road. Can you consent to me using this recording?” I asked.

He nodded before adding, “Yes, I, Jeremiah Glade, consent to you using this recording,” he said as I aimed the camera at him.

“And did we force you to share any of this information with us?” I asked.

“No, it was all shared with my own free will,” he confirmed. Then I cut off the camera.

Adam, who had been sitting quietly for most of the conversation, jumped in, now that the investigative work was done. “Thank you, you’ve pointed us in the right direction, and we will take your warnings seriously. There is no doubt about it, they are targeting Abby. Do you think we could use that against the Reapers to trap them?”

“If you were stupid enough, sure. But that’s a very dangerous game,” Jeremiah warned. He shot me a look that said, *Don’t even consider it.*

“Oh, I agree,” Adam said, and he shot me a warning look of his own.

Don’t get any ideas. I could hear the unspoken words as if he had spoken them aloud.

“Christine and Wells are here,” Adam said after his phone vibrated in his hand.

I looked to the doorway, and a moment later, the two stood there with a large envelope and a duffel bag.

“Hi, Jeremiah, I’m Christine, and this is my husband, Jake. We brought you some things you might need when you bust out of this joint, clothes and a hygiene kit. There’s also this,” she said as she held out the envelope.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Jeremiah said with a unsure expression.

Mandy popped her head in.

“There’s only about ten minutes left of visiting hours. I can maybe give you fifteen more minutes before I’ll have to kick you out for the night,” she said.

“We were on our way out. Thank you,” I told her and pasted on a sincere smile.

“Have a great night,” Mandy called as she went back to her rounds.

“I’m going to hand this to you to count if you’d like, and then maybe we can tuck it away in your duffel? There’s a couple of hidden pockets,” Christine confided.

He watched her silently for a moment. “No, I trust you. These two saved my life, and if you are friends of theirs, I’m sure you are good, honest people. Go ahead and just tuck it into the pockets,” Jeremiah said.

“Here, watch me so you can see how to access it later,” Christine suggested. She showed him where the hidden pockets were as she tucked the cash inside. Adam, Jake, and I quietly discussed what was next.

“That’s everything,” Christine said, finishing up.

“Thank you again, for everything,” Jeremiah said. He held his arms out for a hug. Both Christine and I gave him one. It was something I wouldn’t normally do as an agent. I always liked to remain professional at all times, but there was something about this man that had me breaking my rule. We had supported the same cause, but he never stood a chance of defeating the Reapers with his resources. Yet he was brave in the face of danger, and I admired that deeply.

“Remember my warnings. Christine, ask Abby about my warnings after you leave. You are a beautiful girl, and they will try to take you too.”

“I will,” Christine promised.

Everyone moved to the door. I took one last look at Jeremiah. "Take care," I told him.

"You too, Gabriel," he said with a wink. I might have jokingly referred to myself as an angel, but he undoubtedly believed it. Perhaps I was, but only time would tell.

CHAPTER TWENTY

adam

I recognized that look in Abby's eyes, and I didn't like it one bit. If I wasn't careful, I was going to turn into a caveman like Wells—hell, even Jones. Abby was already scheming ways to use herself as bait. I could practically see gears turning in her head as she thought through each possibility. The woman was a sucker for putting herself in harm's way. Even though she was trained for it, it wasn't always the best move. I'd hate to say that she got lucky with her last assignment. I didn't want to discount her training, persistence, mental fortitude, or intelligence, but part of her success was luck. She was lucky the men that she had been kidnapped by had taken a liking to her, or else her story could have had an ending like her friend. Those men could have decided they didn't want to sample the merchandise. What would have happened to her then? I didn't want to think Boss would let something terrible happen to her, but there are things that are even out of the FBI's hands.

The car ride back to the resort was quick, and Christine filled it with well wishes for Jeremiah. Abby sat in the front seat next to me, blankly staring out the window, and she tapped her fingers nervously on her legs. I wanted to reach out and place my hand on hers to ease her nerves, but I didn't think she'd appreciate the gesture. Not to mention, I didn't know how she'd feel about PDA in front of my friends when she and I weren't a couple, but working together. The whole situation was complicated, and I didn't want to make it worse over something as little as annoying finger taps.

We quickly made it back up to Guy's room without incident. After everyone crammed into the room together, Abby shared what we learned from Jeremiah.

"Well, that explains the missing persons patterns," Guy said. If anyone were trying to actively stop the Reapers, then the pattern would have made it easier for law enforcement to catch them. This was a testament to how brazen the Reapers were. They thought no one would be stupid enough to cross them.

Were we that stupid? *Yes. Unfortunately.*

"I propose that we use this to our advantage. We simply need to look at the map and figure out which part of the island will have the next kidnapping, and which Reaper will be picking up their next target, me. We can use that information to catch one in the act, then capture them and get the information we need," Abby plotted. I knew she was planning to be the bait, and I was going to take a risk. I would be a caveman. I laughed when the others called Jake and Wells that, but I understood why they didn't back down. It didn't feel right to allow someone to purposefully put themselves in danger, even when they knew the risks. Abby was arguably very qualified for this task, but I still couldn't get my heart to agree to what my head said was necessary. The conflict caused a knot of unease in my stomach.

"No." I was firm; I wouldn't back down.

She let out an exasperated sigh, and I could see her body stiffen, ready for conflict. "This isn't your call, Adam. I'm merely telling you what our best option is. We can play it safe and be here for weeks, or we can do this my way and end this in a few days," she said, holding nothing back. She looked around the room, looking for backup from my friends.

"I mean, Abby is trained for this shit. It's not like with Jasmine or Christine who have no training. Abby's a pro," Jones said with a shrug of his shoulders. He was a good one to talk; if it was his girl volunteering, he'd be bitching up a storm. It was blatantly obvious to everyone in the room that I liked Abby and didn't want to put her in unnecessary danger. I

felt frustrated because Jones should still understand my reluctance, even with Abby's training.

“Why not try looking for another way first?” I asked instead. Bitching out my friends really wasn't going to help me here; I needed them on my side, not against me. I wanted to find a better solution without getting angry like Wells and Jones did. I at least wanted to make a better effort to respect boundaries, while still being true to myself and trusting my instincts.

“What other way do you see? I'm not going to piss away days just trying to brainstorm a half-baked plan. The best way is to figure out if the manager or one of the other two is the Reaper for this portion of the island. It's up next in the pattern, and Jeremiah said I'm already a target. The easy way is often the best way; it's easy for a reason. It's simple, with little room for error.” She paused for a moment and crossed her arms. She stared at me, waiting for me to counter her point, but I couldn't. The easy way was often the right way, but I couldn't agree when the point she made was the opposite of my position.

“I'm going back to that market and I'm going to speak to the employer, and then I'm going to take whatever info I learn and put it into a plan to get to the bottom of this,” Abby said. Her hands fell from her chest and were planted firmly on her hips. She stared me down with a fiery gaze. I had no doubt it's that spirit that kept her tough through some shitty situations. While I liked it in the bedroom, I didn't like it now. Not when all I wanted to do was explore other options first—I wanted her safe. It was worth an extra few minutes of brainstorming to determine if there was another way.

Instead I tried to appeal to her emotions—tried to disarm that fire with a soft tone. “This isn't New York. You don't have to do this alone.”

Her eyes softened for a second, giving me hope that she was starting to see things from my perspective. Then her walls snapped right back into place, the fire returning. “You're right, it isn't New York. I don't have a whole office of agents ready to come for me if things get bad. All I have is you guys. I'd

prefer that you trust me, so that I can trust you to have my back. Trying to manipulate me doesn't show trust in me, and it sure as hell doesn't make me trust you. Either way, my mission will always come first. That's part of who I am, and if you want me on your team, you have to accept me and my expertise as I am," she said. Her body was extremely rigid, and her eyes showed me just how deep her resolve went. There would be no budging her from this plan. The tension between us was so thick it could be cut by a knife. "It's non-negotiable."

The room became awkwardly silent as she and I stared each other down.

Abby's words hurt. The manipulation attempt wasn't done with malicious intentions; it came from the need to protect her by any means necessary. I genuinely cared for Abby, and even though I'd only known her for a very short time, I knew I wanted a life with her. She could fill this empty piece inside of me. She could be my partner and my equal. Her earlier refusal to think about joining our team, and her refusal to consider another plan, felt like rejection. She wanted me to accept her as she was, but she couldn't commit to having me in her life after our mission was over. How was that fair? Why should I make the effort if she wasn't going to make an effort either?

The long silence was finally interrupted. "Yeah, these men have been known to turn into cavemen as soon as they fall for someone," Jasmine said with a snort. The comic relief was not appreciated; this was a serious conversation. If they couldn't handle the tension, they could leave.

I shot her a look that said, *Shut the hell up*. Jones just simply shook his head at me, silently telling me not to get Jasmine started.

"That's fine and dandy. He can have whatever feelings he wants. He's human; he's allowed to feel. But I don't appreciate it when someone tries to stop me from doing my work." Abby stopped to let out another sigh and rub her temples with her fingers, as if she was trying to massage away a headache. "I've trained very hard to be good at my job. People always want to

try to save me, but I don't need saving. I'm the wolf in sheep's clothing," she said, twisting the knife in me deeper.

She made my feelings sound like something that wasn't relevant. I was a part of this team, and how I felt about her and how she moved forward with our mission was completely relevant. I swore I could feel my blood pressure rising, and I did my best to keep my anger in check. I wanted nothing more than to raise my voice and shout at her, but if I did that, she'd walk away. Possibly for good. That didn't mean that I had to take her words sitting down. Gone was the nice guy who didn't want to hurt her feelings since she had no problem brushing off mine.

"Hold the phone. Let's talk about your hero complex. You are so used to doing things on your own and getting all the glory that you don't know how to be a team player, do you? I bet you secretly wish we would take the back seat and let you call the shots. I bet you want to walk all over our mission and take the credit for it back with Boss and the FBI. It bothers you that you have to go to a team to make decisions, and you can't just say *trust me*. Because why would we? We haven't seen you in action." I wanted to reach out and shake some sense into the woman who stared at me as if I'd grown devil horns on my forehead. But I did no such thing. It's all I could do to keep my anger in check. My tone was controlled but cold as ice as I continued. "This isn't your mission. Boss may have sent you here to spy on us, but we allowed you into our circle to help, not to run it like an FBI operation. News flash, Abby, this mission isn't on the books, and it's not your op. Now, if you won't listen to how I feel about you putting yourself in harm's way, fine. But don't lump me into some broad group of people who have had an opinion on what you do, and don't act as if how I feel doesn't matter at all. We've all done our best to be considerate of your feelings, especially after you just lost a friend. Show me the respect I've shown you."

Hurt flashed in her eyes, but I didn't stop. I couldn't now. She'd gotten under my skin and now the wound had festered. "I'm sorry that I actually give a damn about you as an individual. I know what you are capable of, but it won't stop me from worrying."

My chest was heaving from the effort it took to control my voice, to rein in the hurt and anger I felt. The room felt frigid now.

The hurt that crossed Abby's face was gone now, replaced by a cold expression. "I'm just going to go. We are only going to agree to disagree, and I don't want to fight with you. I want to work together without our feelings getting in the way. You know my plans. If any of you want to be involved, all you have to do is let me know. I'm more than happy to team up," Abby said to the rest of the room. She avoided looking at me.

"Count us in," Christine said as she glanced between Jasmine and Abby.

"Duh," Jasmine said with another snort.

The guys remained silent, torn by what they just witnessed. It was like they were kids being asked which parent they wanted to live with after a divorce. Our mission had gone to shit right before our eyes, and that was partially my fault, but mainly Abby's. We would have been fine if she hadn't run into me in the airport. We would have done things our own way and would have eventually figured it out. Jasmine and Christine were both beautiful women; they could have seduced a manager like Abby planned to. Abby just thought she was hot shit because she was trained by the FBI. News flash, Jasmine got some training from Boss after Vegas too. Abby was nothing special.

Lies.

Immediately after I thought the words, I regretted them. She was special, but not for the reasons she thought she was. That was something she needed to figure out for herself, since she wouldn't let me help. She wouldn't let me be anything more than a casual fuck. It's like she saw feelings and relationships as an illness, refusing to acknowledge or participate.

"On that note, I'm out."

I watched as Abby exited the room, and I clenched my hands into fists. I wanted to chase after her, but I kept my feet

in place. I wanted to tell her just what I thought of her attitude, of her experience—that she could stick it so far up her ass that she couldn't walk straight. But I also wanted to prove her wrong; I wanted to try to work through this with her. I still wanted her, despite the attitude and her issues with feelings.

What did that say about me that I desperately wanted someone who didn't want me?

“What a clusterfuck,” Wells said. The quiet tension suddenly eased, as if the words had poked a tiny hole in a balloon full of unease.

“Hey, I was about ready to pop some popcorn. Those frigid words had me over here sweating. It was like the opening scene to hate-fuck porn. Where is the intro music?” Yates joked. I nearly reached out to snap his neck. The way he took a step back from me showed that he knew he was in serious danger of losing another appendage.

I changed gears, determined not to let this set the group back. We operated just fine without Abby before. We can still spitball ideas just fine. “Can we focus on something else? Let's focus on your research,” I suggested to Guy.

“If that's what you want...” he said as he opened his laptop.

“It is.” I wanted to focus on work so that I didn't focus on Abby and trying to find her. She had me so heated that my body had it confused for something else. I needed to think about something that wouldn't give me a semi. Finding the Reapers certainly wouldn't do that.

“You don't want to chase after her?” Jones asked. He seemed a little shocked.

“No,” I said sharply.

There was one moment of awkward silence before Guy cut in. “Okay, so the ownership group that owns the resorts is just a shell obviously, but the shell corporation is owned by another, which is owned by another, and that's where this gets interesting.”

“How interesting?” Garcia asked.

“Would you consider confirmation that this Ricketts guy owns it interesting?” Guy asked.

“I’d say so,” Mendez said at the same time Yates said, “Fuck yeah.”

“So these resorts are another one of his investments?” Christine asked.

“Yes, in multiple ways. He can collect the profits from the place, but as the owner he’s probably primed this place to be easy access for the Reapers. Any reports of their involvement, he could bury and it would never see the light of day. He could have any number of Reapers in this resort at one time, and no one would be the wiser,” Guy said.

“That makes sense. We should have anticipated this,” Jones said.

“Yeah, but you know what jumping to conclusions does,” Wells said.

“There could have been some other player involved for all we knew,” Yates commented. “Better to get the confirmation than just build a plan off an assumption.”

“So, now we know it’s not just some conspiracy. The resorts themselves are a big part of this trafficking ring. This place was likely bought for that very reason, like hunting fish in a small, over-priced barrel,” Mendez said.

“No wonder he has three resorts, to make that barrel just a little bigger. They can spread the kidnappings out between the three resorts and other parts of the island, and with enough time between them, no one is the wiser. And if they do learn of it, then the Reapers buy their silence,” I said. I didn’t want to think of the alternative: death. Jeremiah was almost one of those statistics.

“The problem I’m having is that there is likely a number of Reapers and they likely live here. Even if we cut off the head of the snake with the arrest of Ricketts, or one of the other Reapers, the body will just grow a new head,” Yates said. There would be a new leader to take out.

“Not unless we find the other heads and chop them off along the way,” Guy said. That was asking a lot. Who knew how many Reapers there were? Without a full confession with someone at the top and them sharing the identities of the others, it was going to be difficult to end the operation entirely. We didn’t come here to put one fuckhead away; we wanted to put the whole operation to bed.

“And one of those heads belongs to the managers Abby wants to set up. We need to lob those off before we continue. They can’t remain loose ends, ready to kidnap from the resort while we are here. We wouldn’t forgive ourselves for something like that.” The room was silent, considering Christine’s point. “Jeremiah said that the Reapers often contract out. The managers could be the contractors and not actual Reapers. Either way, if we catch them, it might save another woman or two while we figure out our next steps.”

“It’s not fair to interfere with Abby’s plan. She laid out what she wanted to do, and it wasn’t a terrible idea. We can’t just stop her and take over because you don’t like her being in danger,” Jones said, and then he looked at me. “We all had to work though the idea of our women being in danger and trust each other enough to keep them safe.”

I didn’t want to hit my brother, but he was pushing me. “Pots and kettles, motherfucker,” I retorted.

“Hey, no one said you have to like it, Strong. God knows we hated every second of it, but we knew when to cut our losses and just did what we could to protect them. Trusted each other.”

“If you ask me, you should have cut them a little sooner,” Christine snapped back as she rolled her eyes. “Strong, I know it’s no surprise, but I’m with Abby on this one. You saw how she fought those men. Two of them dead and one unconscious before you had time to get there. Then you saw how her quick thinking helped save Jeremiah’s life. She knows what the hell she’s doing. She’s not a damsel in distress. If you like her, which you obviously do, repeating Jake and Jones’ mistakes is going to push her away. She’s not soft around the edges; she’s not like Jasmine and me. She’s got a short fuse, sure—but

she's strong enough to take this on. She may not need or want to work with us if you respond the way you just did."

"I just...I don't want anything bad to happen to her. This isn't New York and we aren't the FBI. There are other ways to go about this that don't involve her making herself bait. I can't guarantee we find her in time, like we found Mary," I murmured.

"You're right, it isn't Vegas, and we aren't the FBI, but she is. We are even better, and we don't have to follow their rules, and that will be our advantage. Now we could argue over this, or you could be satisfied that we all heard your objections, and we move on to bringing this bastard down. Think of how many people could be saved in the time that doing this Abby's way might save. How many women do you think we can return to their families because we caught them before transport?"

Christine was right. I felt a pang of guilt when I thought of those who were suffering right now. Abby's plan would speed up their release if we were successful. Instead of trying to stop her, I just needed to have her back, to make sure she stayed safe while she did her thing. She wanted to release those from the same suffering she experienced, the best way she knew how.

"Okay."

"Okay, as in you'll let this go?" Jasmine asked.

"Yes."

"Thank God. Now let's see what else we can contribute. Are there any other owners associated with this shell company?" Garcia asked.

"Yeah, it looks like there's another trust, but I can't see who it belongs to. It could be a trust associated with Ricketts or it could be someone else entirely," Guy said.

"So the operation could definitely continue, even if we get this Ricketts guy," Mendez added.

"Fuck, let's just hope this manager is a Reaper and he will have more information to share," Jones said.

“Yeah, let’s hope.” I didn’t dare put too much hope into it. I didn’t want to be disappointed if it fell through.

“Can you check the cameras? I want to know when Abby is going to do this. I want to have her back, even if she doesn’t know I’m there,” I said.

“I’ve been watching the feed this whole time. She already left the hotel. I bet she’s going to the market like she said she would,” Guy said.

“Fuck, Jeremiah told her not to go back there.” Why couldn’t she wait thirty minutes for us to both cool down, apologize, and then work together?

Because this mission is personal to her. Fuck.

“That ship has sailed. Let’s just make sure that she’s covered. She probably has enough pent-up anger that she may be looking for a fight,” Wells said.

“You should tell her about angry make-up sex,” Yates said with a laugh. Both Christine and Jasmine snorted and then started laughing hysterically. All the guys were chuckling except me. I was imagining angry make-up sex with Abby, and I liked it.

“Shut the fuck up before I knock your pirate ass out,” I told Yates.

“So let’s plant ourselves close to the market. Guy, can you get a drone up in the air to keep an eye out?” Mendez asked.

“Of course,” Guy said with a roll of his eyes. He was an expert with that thing by now. That drone probably had more miles than some planes.

“All right then, let’s go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

abby

God, I just wanted to punch Adam in the face. I'd had work with my fair share of annoying team members and agents, but none had worked their way so deeply under my skin as Adam.

It's because you had sex with him.

Maybe it wasn't the best move to sleep with him. I should have known that he would think that sleeping with me meant that he had a choice in what I did or didn't do. The possessive bullshit was not attractive to me, and I didn't tolerate it. I didn't need a guy in my life to make me feel safe or secure; I took care of that myself when it was clear that no one in the Navy would help me. I'd been taking care of myself since, and it's easier to rely on me than let someone else in. I didn't easily trust, and it's even harder for me to rely on someone else.

Horns honked as I marched my ass across the bridge at a fast pace, eager to find *the employer* at the market and then get the hell out of there. I didn't doubt Jeremiah's warning; I was selected by the Reapers to be taken and trafficked, and while I could handle myself, I wasn't ready to be taken yet. I needed to make sure that Adam's team had my back, and to do that, we both needed to be ready to talk. I was still pissed off, and if anyone tried to snatch me, I'd send them to an early grave.

I approached the market and did my best to make myself look as intimidating as possible. For that reason I pushed up my sleeves and put on my resting bitch face. People, tourists

and locals alike, moved out of my way as I entered the market. Those who didn't flee began to whisper quietly.

I heard the word "innocent" whispered again.

I continued to look around as subtly as I could for any signs of the employer. I had a feeling I wouldn't spot her, unless she wanted to be seen. I made a show of looking at a pretty woven tapestry, which I considered buying for my apartment, when I felt a presence beside me.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" the female voice asked, and I recognized it immediately. Luckily she didn't make me wait long to speak with her.

"It is," I answered with a slight nod.

"It was unwise to come back here." She made a show of looking at the same tapestry.

"I wanted to talk to you. I had a conversation with our mutual friend. He said your interests aligned with mine, and I want to solve your problem, but I need some information."

"Jeremiah shouldn't have done that. He will be in extreme danger already when they learn that he lives," she said. Out of my peripheral vision, I could see her brows furrow in worry.

"I took care of that. I gave him enough money to get his family to another island, where they will be safe."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I couldn't let him be killed because he helped me take on the Reapers. I'm not all talk. I really do want to clean up the crime on this island. I have a whole group of friends who feel the same way."

"Don't speak their name out loud!" she whispered harshly. She soothed her angry expression before she continued. "So you plan to come in guns blazing and endanger our people in the process?"

"No, I actually hope to be very covert. The only people who would ever notice would be the locals, when they realize there are no more kidnappings, and the Reapers, who will be sitting behind bars for the rest of their lives." I did my best to

put a cool confidence in my words. I needed her to believe me, to put her trust in me. Without her help, it might take us much longer to put an end to the senseless kidnappings and murders.

“You talk the talk, but you underestimate the reach of the Reapers,” she chastised.

I dropped the tapestry we were admiring. “Then help me understand. The more I know, the more I can accomplish. We aren’t leaving this island until we bring down the whole operation. Once that’s done, my friends will recover as many of the victims as possible and reunite them with their families.”

She stared at me long and hard, as if she was looking through a window to my soul and casting judgment. It was the first time in a long time where I actually cared what another woman thought of me. I wanted her to see me as worthy. I wanted her to see past the tough-girl bullshit and see my heart and my intentions.

After what felt like an eternity, she made her decision. “I will help you, but this must remain a secret. I’m going back to my shop down the way. I will stick my files in a black backpack, which I will stick on the wall beside the counter. Come buy that backpack, but hold onto it tightly. I don’t have any other copies. This is dangerous work,” she warned.

“Of course, I’ll be there shortly,” I said.

I was relieved to have her assistance. It would save us a lot of time. Hopefully we’d find the identity of a Reaper in those files. I wasn’t above kidnapping an asshole, especially in a country where I didn’t have any consequences, as long as the local police didn’t find out. Sometimes the lines between ethical and unethical were a little blurred. Law enforcement wasn’t black and white; it was conducted in the land of the gray.

The employer walked away, and I kept a casual eye on where she went. I waited exactly five minutes before I purchased the tapestry I spent so much time staring at. It was folded up and placed in a nice gift bag. The storekeeper

thanked me profusely for my purchase, and I could see the recognition in her eyes. She knew who I was, what I had done.

I made my way to *the employer's* shop and picked up the black backpack hanging on the wall near the counter.

“Thank you,” I told her after I paid for the bag.

“I hope you are able to do what you say you can. The world would be a much better place. Do not come back here unless it is to rain hell on them. They have laid eyes on you too many times now. Even now there are those who whisper in the ears of the Reapers to keep their own families safe. By now, they will know you are here, and they may not have any intention of letting you leave. I recommend not returning, especially not alone,” she warned.

“I won't,” I promised. “Thank you for your help.”

“Thank you for yours. I was worried about Jeremiah, but you've taken that burden off my shoulders.”

I simply nodded and left her store, determined to keep scrutiny off her. I kept my head up and on a swivel. I heard the mumbling again, and every once in a while someone pointed to me. I was sure I made quite the splash between saving Jeremiah and then killing a few Reapers—or their contractors. I hoped that gave me some kind of notoriety that would keep the Reapers from making a second go of it in public. Maybe they wouldn't want to be embarrassed or lose the fear that the locals felt for them.

I heard a cry out for help and turned. I saw a woman as she was pulled into an alley, very similar to the one I killed the two men in. A man dressed in all black had his hand over her mouth and a knife to her throat. He dragged her into the deep shadows caused by the overhead coverings extending from the rooftops. I was sure I'd be the last non-Reaper to lay eyes on her if I didn't do something. It could have been a trap, but I didn't care. I wouldn't let an innocent woman die because of me. I was no coward.

The fear in her eyes sparked an instant fury in my heart.

I took off running into the alley and remained aware of my surroundings. Two men were binding her hands and ankles together. Their backs were turned, not expecting anyone to pursue them. That spoke volumes to just how comfortable they were taking what they wanted on this island—and that really bothered me. It might make our jobs easier in the long run, but that meant bad things for the locals.

I stopped just short of the man closest to me. I was as quiet as a mouse and remained unaware of my presence. I slid my arm in front of him, right around his neck. I pulled my arm back toward me, putting him in a tight chokehold. He sputtered and tried to use his hands and arms to strike me. I simply grabbed his left hand with mine and bent it backward at a painful angle. I kept my eyes on his friend, who watched me as he tried to figure out what the hell he should do. It became obvious that no one had ever stepped in to help; they were unchallenged, which made me even angrier.

“You’re her,” the friend mumbled and stood his ground.

“And who might that be?” I asked with so much malice I was sure he’d go up in flames.

“The avenging angel,” he said.

Hah, that was a good one. “Sure, we’ll go with that. Untie her right now,” I ordered, my tone cold as steel.

“I can’t...they’ll...they’ll kill me if I don’t bring a woman to them,” he said with a stutter.

“That sounds like a *you* problem. Who will kill you?” I demanded. I wouldn’t show him an ounce of sympathy if he wouldn’t work with me.

“The Reapers,” he said.

“So you aren’t one of them?” I asked.

“No, they terrorize others into doing their dirty work,” he said. His head hung low as he added, “They threatened my wife and kids.”

I felt sorry for him for just a moment. He had to choose between his family and becoming a monster. I could almost

understand his choice.

“Like I said, untie her. She is not leaving this alley with you. The only thing you have a choice on is if you leave dead or alive,” I said.

“Alive, please,” he begged. His knees hit the ground, and he looked defeated.

His friend went slack in my arms, unconscious.

“Untie the woman.”

He bent forward and did what I asked. When the girl was free, I looked her over. She looked scared shitless, but overall she was unhurt.

“Go home, now,” I ordered.

“Thank you. Thank you so much. You are an avenging angel,” she said with tears in her eyes.

“Of course. Now be careful,” I told her. I wanted to roll my eyes at the angel comment. I was so far from it. I was positive that the angels up in heaven weren't rocking full-sleeve tattoos.

She ran from the alley and hopefully straight home like I ordered.

“Lay on the ground,” I ordered.

“Please don't hurt me,” the man begged, and he complied.

I shoved my knee into his back and then grabbed the rope he used to tie up the girl. I tied his wrists together and then his ankles, and then I did the same to his friend, who was still out cold.

“You will never take another girl. Do you understand me?” I asked.

“I swear, I won't,” he said.

I couldn't believe that I was actually allowing him to go free, but what options did I have? The local police were in the back pocket of the Reapers, and likely the FBI too. There was nowhere to send him for justice, unless I saw to it myself.

“Good, now you will remain here quietly for hours. When the sun rises tomorrow, then you can call out for help. Do you understand?” Did I actually think he’d wait that long? No. But I hoped he’d wait long enough for me to get the hell out of here. I also hoped he’d flee the island, because if he didn’t, he’d either end up dead at the hands of the Reapers, or in cuffs when we brought down the Reapers’ operation.

“I do,” he said and nodded his head too enthusiastically. He really was scared shitless of me. It felt kind of nice to be feared like this. Not something that an angel would enjoy.

“Good, and make sure to tell your Reaper friends about this, but you will not tell them what I look like.”

“I promise,” he said.

“And you’ll share the same with your friend?” I said as I kicked the unconscious man in the ribs.

He nodded his head again.

I turned my back and left. I quickly picked up my pace to make it out of the market before any of their friends could catch on to what happened. I didn’t need them to try to stop me from leaving. Not only was I marked to be kidnapped, they’d be furious at me for interfering with their work, again. It was only a matter of time before they decided they’d just rather have me dead. For a job like that, they’d send out a professional, not the inexperienced idiots they’d been sending.

I let out a sigh of relief when I came to the bridge that allowed me to cross back over to the Atlantis part of the island. It put me that much closer to the resort. I would go back to my room and review everything the employer gave me before I turned it over to Adam’s crew. By then I’d already have my next plan in place.

As I approached the resort, I saw Adam’s crew waiting for me outside.

“Glad to see you are okay. Did you get yourself into a sticky situation?” Jones asked with a smirk on his face. The bastard probably already knew the answer to that.

“The sticky situations seem to find me, but all is well. Did you have a drone out?” I asked.

Guy nodded, and I heard the sound of the drone hovering over us. They must have seen the whole thing.

“We didn’t see what you did in the alley, but we saw the woman run to safety. Did you neutralize them?” Wells asked.

“I knocked one out and tied them both up. I left them with a warning. They weren’t Reapers but blackmailed by them into doing their dirty work.”

“Wow, how much of the island is wrapped up in this?” Christine asked.

“Much more than we originally thought,” I answered. We were unraveling the threads of a very large secret. One that could stain the reputation of the island forever, crippling its economy overnight if it went public.

“What’s with the backpack? Did you learn anything while you were out?” Adam asked.

I could see he wasn’t big into public apologies. Fine then, me neither.

“I did, and this backpack has the employer’s research,” I answered with a cold tone. I wanted to remind him I was still pissed, but I wouldn’t be petty enough to avoid him completely. Our mission had to be prioritized over everything else, even feelings. That was the message I was trying to convey to him. Mission first, feelings second.

We made our way back toward the resort and back to Guy’s room. I made a pit stop to change into something more comfortable, which ended up being soft cotton shorts and a soft t-shirt. While I was eager to get started on trying to locate and investigate the manager who we had on our suspects list, I needed to know what was in the employer’s research first. It would be incredibly stupid to not read it front to back before proceeding any further.

I made it to Guy’s room and found a seat between Jasmine and Christine on the bed. I opened up the backpack and pulled out a manila folder. I could tell the folder and research had

been well loved. The dirt and coffee stains on the folder showed me how often *the employer* came back to this research. I was honored she trusted me to do something with it.

I pulled a stack of papers out and began to read through them. When I was done with the first sheet, I passed it to Jasmine, who skimmed it and passed it to Christine. From there it went down the line of guys.

By the time we got through the stack, it was well into the night and possibly very early morning, but it was worth it. I might have been wired and jittery due the espresso shots I threw back like water, but I felt a lot more prepared to bring down the Reapers.

“Did anyone else pick up the fact that Ricketts hasn’t been seen on the island for four months?” I asked as I rubbed my eyes.

“Yes, or that the trafficking is running without a hitch and might be considered even more aggressive. It means he has a number two who takes his role seriously,” Christine said as she looked down at the notes she had started taking after reading page three. She was the second in command of her family business, and I was sure she had experience in earning respect and results.

“Don’t forget that *the employer* identified a man who is either Ricketts’ brother or his second,” Jasmine added as she held up a picture of both men. Ricketts and the other man did have some similar features that led me to believe that they were brothers. *Trafficking, the family business. How cute.*

“There’s nothing specifically on the managers on our suspect list, but she does suspect that there are multiple people working at the resorts on this part of the island who are involved, which is good because it solidifies that we are on the right track,” Wells added.

“Exactly, so I think we need to proceed as we planned. I think we need to flush the managers out, find out what they know, and go from there,” I said. I hoped that my plan wouldn’t be objected to this time.

“What exactly would that entail?” Garcia asked.

“One of the suspects is the man I distracted when Adam broke into the office. He’s familiar with my face, and I’ve seen him around several times since. I’ve caught his attention. If he’s with the Reapers, then he knows by now that they want me. I say we play that angle up. Let’s make a situation that’s too good for him to refuse,” I suggested.

“So prey on his weaknesses like he probably does on others?” Jasmine asked with a smug smile.

“Exactly,” I said.

“It’s about time the prey becomes the predator, again,” Christine said with a smug smile of her own.

I knew I liked these girls.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

abby

When I got to the bar, I engaged the bartender in some casual conversation. I quickly realized that he was the manager for food and beverage for all three properties. I found it unusual that someone in a management position was working at the bar by himself. He didn't seem annoyed to be working in a position below him. In fact, he gave off the impression that he was exactly where he wanted to be. His smile was too charming, and he was way too observant for my liking. I knew bartenders were supposed to keep their guard up, but I was the only person on my half of the bar. Still, he could barely keep his eyes off me. That could be due to Jasmine and Christine's handiwork. They had really done a number on me in the makeup and hair department. I wasn't unskilled with a makeup brush, I had to change my appearance for my undercover work, but they blew any talent I had out of the water. Yet I didn't think that it was my appearance that brought the man's attention. After all, he was one of the three on our suspects list—possibly a Reaper.

I sat at the bar in the tightest red dress the world had ever known. It was a wonder I was able to drink anything at all, because I didn't have room to breathe. It pushed my cleavage so high that it almost spilled out of the low-cut top. The bottom hem of the dress barely covered my ass. I might as well have been on a silver platter spread eagle. My blond hair was curled into long, loose spirals, and my makeup was runway worthy.

"It's a shame that your date stood you up," Julio, the manager-slash-bartender, said as he dropped another gin and

tonic in front of me.

“Yeah, it happens I guess,” I said.

Five minutes prior, I’d spun a tale that I was there to meet a date and they had just texted to cancel. I sprinkled the seeds of opportunity—vulnerability—for him. Since then, he looked at his phone no less than four times, choosing to send off two different texts and receive a couple of replies. I couldn’t see who the exchanges involved, but I suspected it was someone within the Reapers.

I stirred my drink with my painted fingernail. The nail changed colors, which meant it was drugged. Most women certainly wouldn’t have grinned in a situation like mine, but I wasn’t most women. I fired off a text to the group.

Me: They are taking the sexy-looking bait. Bartender put something in my drink.

Adam: We are watching you on the cameras. Keep an eye out for the other manager. He keeps walking through the space every fifteen minutes or so. His eyes always seem to land on you.

Me: ;)

The bartender turned his back to me as he prepared a drink for another customer. I reached over and poured some of my drink into the counter-length beverage drain on the other side of the bar. I left half of the drink in the glass, so it wouldn’t look too suspicious.

I made a show of looking down at my phone, scrolling through social media. It was only a minute before I felt a presence behind me, from my left side. An arm landed on the bar, and the body faced me.

“Sorry to bother you, ma’am.” He didn’t look sorry at all. He looked ready to spread my legs and gobble me up. “You’re the guest who reported the man who fell in the bathroom, aren’t you?” I stared at the face of my target, the manager who

I had distracted from the HR office. He leaned in close to me, invading my personal space with his average-looking face and his strong aftershave smell.

I plastered on a fake smile, pretending I was thrilled to be remembered. “Yes, that was me. Is he okay?”

“He will be. I wanted to thank you for reporting it. It helps us stay on the up and up with legal things,” he said.

“Ah.” I made my eyes widen in understanding. “You’re welcome.” My fingers played with my glass, making myself seem coy.

“Is Julio taking good care of you?” He glanced between me and the other man. They were clearly communicating with their eyes. Julio nodded his head slightly. *Done, spiked my drink. Plan’s in motion.* I could practically hear the silent words they exchanged.

Now was my chance to drop some more seeds of opportunity. “Yes, he’s been great. I definitely got my money’s worth. Alcohol makes me sleepy, and I’m feeling it now. He must be pouring them heavily,” I said, purposefully slurring my words at the end.

“Excellent,” he said. His body language told me all I needed to know. He was excited. A bystander might have thought he was being overly friendly, but I saw right through him. I read the intentions like they were on a flashing neon sign. It was a smooth operation they’d practiced before. The bartender drugged up their target, and the other manager scoped them out. I bet they sent housekeeping up to the room to check on the women and make sure they were out cold before they were kidnapped.

I gave a fake yawn to sell the act. “I hate to be rude, but I’m going to go up to my room before I fall asleep right here. You’re a manager, right?”

He nodded his head.

“Can you have housekeeping bring up some fresh towels to room 2015?” I asked.

“Of course. I will make sure they come up shortly,” he promised with a sleazy smile. God, his face made me want to yack all over the floor. I didn’t understand how he could be so obvious and women still fall for his act. Then I remembered drugs and money were a hell of a thing. Drugs to make women willing, and money to buy silence.

I stood up and pretended to sway on my feet a little.

He smiled at me. “Have a great night.”

One thing was for sure—if he’s the manager that came to take me, he wouldn’t be.

I walked away, continuing my act of unsteady footwork. I made my way to the elevators with the feel of predator eyes on my back. When the doors closed in front of me, I let out a sigh of relief. I exited on my floor and quickly made my way to my room. I pulled off my dress and changed into a robe. My phone vibrated on the bed.

Christine: They sent someone to follow you up. To make sure you didn’t pass out on your way to the room.

Me: Who do you think set the better trap for the other?

Christine: Definitely us.

I sat and waited. I received another text when a housekeeper carrying a stack of towels got off the elevator on our floor. I watched through the peephole of my door as he looked around nervously. He was definitely working in some shape or form with the Reapers. Why else would he be nervous to bring up towels to a guest room?

When he finally got the nerve to knock, I continued to watch for a moment. I ran my fingers through my hair to mess it up—to look like bedhead.

I schooled my face into a dreamy expression and then opened the door.

“Oh, good, I was waiting on these,” I said with a fake yawn. “Would you mind bringing those in here?” I asked.

“Of course, miss,” the housekeeper said. He looked a little shocked, as if he hadn’t expected me to answer. I didn’t miss the master room key he held in his other hand and subtly tucked into his pocket. He was going to force entry into the room if there was no answer. Likely to make sure I was knocked out.

He came into the room and placed the towels on the desk in the room.

“Is there anything else you need, miss?” His Adam’s apple bobbed. He was extremely nervous, as if he hadn’t expected me to be awake. Entirely caught off guard, as if he’d never had this happen before.

I shut the door behind me and leaned against the door and flipped the lock.

“Actually, yes. Why are you so nervous?” I asked, dropping the dreamy facade.

“I don’t know what you mean, miss.” He looked terrified now. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and desperately looked around for an escape route.

“I think you do. You expected me to be asleep, didn’t you?”

“No, miss. I’m...I’m just bringing towels...as...as you requested.” His stutter was like a flashing neon sign, *GUILTY*.

“Then you won’t mind showing me your phone.” I held out my hand expectantly.

“That is highly inappropriate. If you have any questions, you can ask my manager. Let me go get him for you,” he said, his tone angry and defensive.

Enough of this shit. “I’m going to ask nicely one last time. Let me see your phone, or I will make you regret it.” I flashed him a peek of my FBI badge, not that it held any weight here.

His Adam’s apple bobbed again as he pulled out his phone and handed it over. It wasn’t password protected, which was

lucky for me. I pulled up his messaging app and wasn't disappointed. His last text message thread looked like it was from the HR manager, although the contact didn't have his name; it just said *boss man*.

Boss man: Head up to her room now. Should have been long enough. Let me know when you're done.

The housekeeper in front of me had given a thumbs-up to the message.

I quickly fired back a text.

Me: Done.

Boss man: On my way up.

Stage two, clearing the scene. "I'm going to be real straight with you. You have two options, and you have no time to think through them, so listen carefully. You can either make your way down the hall and knock on my friends' door and tell them everything you know about the Reapers. With that option, you'll probably get a really good plea deal, especially if you acted on their behalf under duress. Or you can refuse, and I'll tie you up and shove you in the closet. After that, I can't guarantee what will happen to you." My tone changed from firm to nonchalant, showing just how little I cared about his fate.

He thought only for a moment before he asked, "What room number?"

I gave him the number and sent him on his way, keeping his phone. It was evidence, and he didn't need to send any kind of warning. There'd be no fun in that for me. I watched as he crossed the hallway and knocked on their door before I shut my own.

My real target would be here any minute, and I needed to be ready. I laid down in the bed and made it look like I was asleep. I wasn't sure what the housekeeper would typically do besides making sure their target was asleep. I suppose I should have asked the man before I let him leave, but that couldn't be helped now.

I closed my eyes and waited. I kept my gun tucked under the pillow behind my head. Around five minutes later, I heard the metal of the door lock turn and the door gently open. Quiet footsteps padded against the floor and the door shut behind the intruder. He flipped the lock. For half a second, my mind was brought back to a storage closet on an aircraft carrier. The sound of the lock engaging from the inside of the closet as my uniform was pulled down against my will, a mouth clamped over my mouth. Harsh whispers and threats whispered into my ear.

Then just like that, I snapped myself out of it. Occasionally, despite my best efforts, my work still brought me back to my waking nightmare, and I had to pull myself from it. Trauma never truly went away. Occasionally the terror clawed its way through the dirt I'd tried to bury it under.

I remained where I was, pretending to be in a deep sleep, despite my racing heart. It wasn't from nerves, but adrenaline. I imagined it was the same feeling Adam and his friends had when they engaged in a firefight or dropped behind enemy lines.

When the intruder was at my bedside, he grabbed my wrist tightly. I wanted to stop my act just to punch him in the face. Why would you grab someone who was sleeping that hard except to cause them pain? Whoever he was, he wasn't working for the Reapers under duress; this was for enjoyment.

He bent lower, getting near my face, likely checking the rhythm of my breathing. I pulled my hand out from under my pillow and pointed the gun right under his chin.

“Good morning, mother fucker,” I said with a wide grin.

He immediately let go of my wrist and took a step back. I kept the pistol under his chin.

“What are you doing?” he asked as he put his hands up.

“Catching a predator,” I retorted, unable to keep a smirk off my face.

“I just came to check on you. My housekeeper reported you weren’t feeling well,” he said. His Adam’s apple bobbed too, and sweat began to bead on his forehead.

“Is that right?” I asked.

He quickly nodded his head. His eyes darted around the room, just like his housekeeper’s had. His feet slightly widened as if he was preparing to attack me or run. The men I’d cornered before always acted one of two ways: they reeked of the smell of fear and begged for mercy, or they underestimated me and put up a fight. I knew that the idiot would do the latter, and he would regret it.

“Let me show you why I don’t believe you,” I said. I pulled out the housekeeper’s cell phone and pulled up the thread between him and the phone’s owner. His eyes went wide for a moment before he recovered. My eyes never left his, and I kept my grip on the gun tight. I wouldn’t allow him to take it from me.

“It’s not what you think,” he implored. His feet shifted again, and his body pivoted just slightly. He was one step closer to making this worse for himself or getting a bullet in his head.

“It’s exactly what I think. The Reapers have me marked, and you thought you were about to deliver,” I goaded him. We needed as much information as this jerkwad would share.

“No, that’s not true,” he lied. He almost stumbled over his words. I could see his nervous persona slipping away, and resolve took its place. He was preparing for something.

“Do me a favor: don’t bother lying to me.” My voice turned cold, my favorite persona to slip into—cold, uncaring, and ruthless.

“What do you want?” he asked; his voice dropped and his upper body went rigid. His words filled with venom.

“I want to know everything you do about the Reapers.” My voice was so sharp and cold I almost wouldn’t have recognized it. It startled me the one time I heard my voice played back to me. It was the voice of someone not to be fucked with. Laced with danger and sadistic.

“What the fuck do you know about the Reapers?” His tone was poisonous. Too bad he’d never get close enough to inject me with his poison. I was already soiled and way more deadly. His fists clenched and released. He was backed into a proverbial corner and about to do something about it. *Get ready.*

“Enough to know that you’re one of them or doing their dirty work.” I rubbed the barrel of the gun under his chin, just to remind him it was there. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You are going to lay your skeevy ass down on the bed. I’m going to tie you to it, and then you are going to tell me everything you know. If you don’t, there will be hell to pay.” My venom was scarier than his. He was stuck between a scary bitch holding a gun and a group who would put a bullet in his head to keep him silent. Me, on the other hand, I had a coward in front of me and everything to gain.

His eyebrow rose with surprise before he caught it, and his mouth set into a scowl. “Make me. I bet you don’t even know how to use that gun you’re holding.” His scowl was replaced by a cocky grin. He was goading me, and I had no problem proving him wrong.

I brought my knee up into his balls and my left hand circled his throat—immediately cutting off the inhale. I clicked the safety off and put it to his temple. My inner anger, that I sometimes had trouble reining in, wanted me to pull the trigger. If I let my emotions get the best of me, I would. But I wasn’t a cold-blooded killer. All the lives I’d taken were because there was no other way, it was me or them. He wasn’t a threat; I was.

“Let’s try this again. This time, you might not want to goad me. I have a whole arsenal of creative ideas on how to inflict pain. I’d love a volunteer to practice on,” I said with a sneer.

It felt good to let out this rage. I used my hand around his throat to guide him to the bed, where I pushed him down. He tried to reach for my hand with the gun, and I quickly pistol whipped him.

“Fuck!” he screamed out and tried to shove me off of him. His foot caught me in the stomach and nearly knocked the wind out of me. I applied more pressure at his throat, making sure that my nails sunk painfully into the flesh. I could feel his racing pulse beneath my fingers. It sent a thrill through me, which made it easier to recover from his kick. I pistol whipped him again, and he went slack for a moment as he was temporarily dazed.

With one hand, I secured a wrist to the headboard. It took me a bit longer than it normally would if I had two hands, even in his dazed state. I wouldn't dare take my hand off my weapon, not even for a second. I got his other hand secured to the other side of the bed and took just a second to steady myself. Believe it or not, that was the easy part. The hard part was getting the man to talk more than he already had. It was obvious he knew something, and I was going to figure out what he knew, even if it took all night. I meant what I said; I had a whole slew of creative ideas on how to get it out of him. Were my methods legal? Absolutely not. Would I lose my job for this? It was very likely, if someone actually believed him. It would be my word versus his, and if I were him, I wouldn't like his odds—not when he was being prosecuted for attempted sexual assault and kidnapping.

“Now that you're comfortable,” I paused as I adjusted my robe, “it's time to get chatty. Who is the leader of the Reapers?”

“I'll tell you nothing,” he spat.

This was all part of my tactic to make him think I knew a lot more than I did. I wanted him to think I was fishing for the tiniest details. Really any details he provided would help fill in what was missing of the big picture. I'd have to answer my own questions for a little while, but that was all right; I liked hearing myself talk.

“That’s okay. I know his name is Ricketts,” I said with a shrug of my shoulder.

His eyebrows raised in surprise for a moment before he regained control. Instead, his face returned to a mask of hate and disgust. Goody, the feeling was mutual.

“Want to tell me about the companies he owns?” I asked.

“I don’t know anything about any companies,” he said as he shook his head. I traced the barrel of the gun up his leg and was strategically close to something he wouldn’t want to lose.

“Ah, so you’re telling me that as the manager at all three of the resorts right here on this strip of the island you know nothing about the shell company that owns them?” I asked, answering another one of my questions.

He simply gulped in response, his eyes not leaving the gun at his groin for a second. Despite the position he was in, I saw a bulge form in his pants.

“Interesting...” I said, waiting to see what reaction I would get next.

I used the grip of the gun to hit him in the balls again, and he howled out in pain. When he was done screaming, he cried out, “Look, lady, I don’t know what you want from me!”

“I’ve made it very clear what I want. Everything you know about the Reapers.” I climbed onto the bed and straddled the man, taking advantage of his traitorous body. Did I want to touch him? Not really, but I needed to paint a picture of mental instability. I did a lot worse than sit on the lap of some fucked-up guys to get the information I needed while undercover. That was easy-peasy.

I wanted him to think he would never have me figured out. Men feared what they couldn’t understand. If they realized they couldn’t anticipate my next move, it generally caused more fear. Sitting on his lap and teasing him sexually, while simultaneously causing him pain, would confuse the fuck out of him, get him flustered, and then he’d slip up.

“It sounds like you already know a lot,” he said through gritted teeth. I was sure his balls were hurting a whole hell of a

lot right now.

I unbuttoned the fly of his jeans to send mixed messages. “I do know a lot, but I have a few things I need to clarify, like which one of Ricketts’ properties the victims are being kept in.”

“I don’t know,” he said.

I ground my ass into his pelvis. Despite his fear, he still twitched beneath me. Fear and lust were two very powerful emotions to push past, and as they battled for control, he’d slip eventually.

I made an annoying buzzer sound. “I’m sorry, wrong answer. You get one more try before I start breaking your fingers.” I rubbed the barrel of the gun along his neck, as if it were an extension of my hand.

“I’ve never been there! I’ve only been to the drop-off point. That’s as far as I’m allowed to go,” he said. *So not a true Reaper then.*

“And refresh my memory of the location,” I demanded coolly as I dragged the muzzle across his forehead.

He shook his head back and forth, trying to get rid of the cold metal. I bounced it across his face. Not hard, but I was sure it wasn’t pleasant either. “Potter’s Cay Docks,” he said in a rush.

“Isn’t there a police station right there?” I questioned.

He tried to buck against me, which only ground himself into me more. He shuddered in response. “Yeah, but the police don’t care. The Reapers are in their pockets,” he nearly shouted.

“I already knew that.” I tsked as if to sound disappointed. “Tell me, why are they so blatant about it?” I pressed. He flexed underneath me again, and because I was just a little fucked-up in the head, I enjoyed it. I was in control, so I didn’t have fear to suppress my reaction to being on top of a hard body.

“The drops happen in the middle of the night, in the cover of darkness, transferring from one boat to another.”

“What’s the name of their boat?” I asked.

“The S.S. *Scythe*.”

I nearly snorted at the name. “How original.

“When’s the next drop?” I asked. I dragged the cold barrel of the gun down the front of his body and ran it along the waistband to his boxers. He swallowed hard. He flexed again, and I could see just how confused he was by his response to me. I could almost guarantee he wouldn’t talk about this type of interrogation. I could only imagine how embarrassed he’d be to say he was bested by a woman, and then she sexually confused him.

“You were...were supposed to be it. Tonight.”

My eyes flashed; I saw it in the mirror that was hanging above the headboard. “Sorry to ruin those plans.” I wasn’t really. Instead, I’d be crashing the party.

I shimmied down his body and reached for his thighs. I searched his pockets and found his phone. He tried to tug against his ropes, but I was a good girl scout—my knots were secure. My body weight on his groin kept him from moving his lower body much and kept him hard as a rock.

“Good luck breaking out of those. They are some new-level kinky ropes,” I said as I opened his messaging app. Hatred flashed in his eyes, and a creepy grin spread across his lips.

“How about you reward me for what I’ve shared?” His eyes zeroed in on my breasts, which looked really nice in the silky night camisole I was wearing under the robe.

“Or, how about this...I could just let you live. I’ll even throw in a bonus. I’ll let you keep your disgusting penis if you shut your fucking trap,” I countered.

I found the message thread I was looking for. The contact didn’t have a name, only a skull emoji. *Again, how original.*

There was one text from the skull person. *Got her, drop off tonight.*

The reply was simply: 2.

“Well, it looks like I’ve got a party to attend, don’t I?”

“You’re going to go anyway?” His eyes widened in shock and maybe a small dose of fear.

“Of course. I’m going to follow those fucks and I’m going to bring the whole operation down on their heads.” I was amazed at my ability to deliver the words with a cool confidence that I didn’t quite feel. There was a lot that could go wrong. I was so far off my own mission, but truth be told, I was stuck on how to progress it further. To get to the bottom of the FBI involvement, I needed to end the ring and needed to catch all the players involved in the act.

“And how is one girl going to do that?” He was doing his best to sound tough and vengeful. I saw what he couldn’t fully hide, fear and respect. All of that was wrapped into a perverted little package.

“I don’t know who the fuck you think you are, but I ask the questions here,” I said. I slapped his face hard. He shut up as the muzzle of the gun was forced into his mouth.

“My last question. What the fuck do I do with you?”

He looked scared shitless, and I tried not to laugh.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

adam

“Okay, I’m super fucking impressed and extremely turned on,” I told Abby.

“Well, thank you,” she said sweetly, the total opposite of how she’d spent the last thirty minutes acting.

I had seen the whole thing from the cameras we placed in Abby’s room prior to her going down to the bar. I thought we had all underestimated her in the beginning, even though she had an impressive history in the first place. None of us would be making that mistake again. She was a fucking siren, and she was great at using her body to get exactly what she wanted. She acted with no shame, only the confidence of someone who knew she’d get what she wanted. We decided as a whole that we would let her guide this operation after that. Christine and Jasmine both agreed what Abby did was completely outside of their comfort zone, making Abby irreplaceable on this mission.

What she did with those ropes to tie the guy to the bed, that was fucking hot. Those knots were complex, and then when she sat on his lap to distract him...God, that gave me a boner the size of Texas. I was extremely jealous of the fucker she was interrogating. I wanted her to tie me to the bed and grind her center into me. I wouldn’t mind her rubbing the cold metal of the gun across my skin. I trusted her not to make any mistakes.

The asshole I had been jealous of was now sitting on a boat on his way to US waters to be picked up by Boss’ agents for attempted kidnapping. While he wasn’t on the list of

individuals that the FBI was looking for, he was an American citizen who attempted to commit a crime against another American citizen, which made him free game for charges and prosecution. Naturally we deleted the video and only saved a few key pieces of audio for the FBI's investigation. Garcia and Mendez would be back with the boat they had rented shortly. The US Marshals had been waiting in international waters for them, so they didn't have to go too far. We needed the boat back and ready for tonight.

"I still think you should let me be bait and see where they take me," Abby said.

"Not that I don't think you can handle it, but bad things can happen when you are bait," Christine said. Yeah, she'd know; she almost died in a car crash because of it. In fact, there were actually two accidents, and both had been life threatening.

"Not to mention, you'd be restrained—they could throw you over the boat if they suspect anything is amiss. You'd drown before we get to you," Yates said.

"We can't let you do that." I made sure she saw just how incapable I was of letting her go. "We will follow them when they realize that their shipment isn't coming," I said.

"What if they realize they are being followed?" she asked.

"They won't. We will keep a far distance and keep the lights off. Guy will have the drone up in the air and follow them that way with the night-vision camera," Wells said.

"We don't want to act tonight either. Let's let the Marshals get that guy booked, they can start interrogating him, and we can make sure that we have everything in order to get a bunch of criminals, and victims transported back safely," Jones added.

"I guess you have a point, but I'm just wondering..." Abby said, trailing off.

"Wondering what?"

"We don't know what happens to the victims right after they are kidnapped. Does this guy do something different than

your last perp? He had them all stored in a warehouse. What if this guy is different? What if he doesn't risk holding them and ships them straight away? Or what if I'm wrong and they have a large amount of women on standby? What if they get nervous after the no-show tonight and send those women on their way to their buyers? Are we going to let a bunch of victims go while we wait for the perfect opportunity?" she asked.

"Fuck," Guy said. "It's the Vegas situation all over again, except this time with more uncertainty and we know less about how they operate."

"Damn it. Maybe we need another boat on standby, ready to act, just in case," I said. Abby had a really valid point. We weren't going to let girls become sex slaves because we underestimated the Reapers. What we needed was to get the FBI down here ASAP. We needed Boss to interrogate the manager and then get a bunch of agents to the island.

"On it. I'll get us another boat," Guy said as he pulled up another boat rental website.

"We need more than just another boat. We need the FBI. Can't we just request more agents? Surely what we've got so far should be enough to give Boss what he needs to swoop in. Fuck the reward money for Ricketts. If we can identify where the Reapers' base of operations are and insure they are inside, we need to let the bureau take over from there," I said.

"There's a problem with that," Abby said with a slight hesitation. A pinch of nervousness crossed her face, and she swallowed hard.

"And what's that?" I asked. She looked guilty, and I could only guess the secret she kept.

"Bob won't be able to send anyone, not without fucking some things up for me..." she said with a sigh. She sounded slightly defeated.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I growled.

"There is a local FBI field office here, so Bob won't be able to just send in the calvary. We suspect that the field office

is in on this, or at the very least turning their nose the other way...”

“And if Boss calls for reinforcements, it blows your side quest out of the water,” Yates finished for her.

She nodded.

“Were you ever going to tell us about that one?” I asked.

“Eventually yes, but I didn’t want you to distrust the agency entirely. I didn’t want you to lose trust in me by association,” she answered. I could see a small bit of guilt trapped behind her siren eyes. I believed her this time, and I couldn’t fault her from withholding that from us. We would have lost trust in both her and Boss if we knew that the FBI couldn’t be trusted.

“Fuck, so we’re on our own,” Wells complained.

“Essentially, yes. That’s why I insisted that we send the ship into international waters for the arrest. I didn’t want the local field office to catch wind and warn anyone or, even more importantly, try to cover up their own tracks until we get this figured out. I’m trying to bury the office in evidence. People don’t trust law enforcement, and they are the reason why,” Abby explained.

“So we have to take down a whole trafficking ring and transport the victims ourselves?” Christine asked in disbelief.

“Well, at least the first part. What are you going to do about the FBI agents? You can’t just go in and arrest them. That won’t go over real well,” Jasmine asked Abby.

“You’re absolutely right. I can’t go in and arrest them. I’m putting together a report with evidence, and I will hopefully be able to convince internal affairs and investigations to open an official inquiry into this office. They’ll already have a strike against them as the investigation of the trafficking ring unfolds, because this was all happening under their noses with nothing being done about that. Their credibility and ability to do their jobs will be micromanaged while the investigation happens, and hopefully they will find more damning evidence

or get confessions. That's all above my pay grade, but I have to lead the horses to water," Abby answered.

"So back to tonight, then. We just make the arrests of the traffickers. We protect the victims while we wait on back up?" Jones asked.

Abby nodded. "We're only going to act tonight if it's clearly obvious there is a large group of victims in holding, and they are being transported then, okay? Otherwise we need to take the time to plan another trap or a safer way to arrest the Reapers. If we know where they are hiding and operating from, we can keep an eye on them, watch for when they make their move. There has to be a safe way to bring them down without getting anyone else involved. We need to stay under the radar until it's safe to bring a team from my office in," Abby said.

Guy cleared his throat and held his hand out. Jones slapped his credit card into Guy's hand to pay for the boat rental.

"That's fair," I answered. What she proposed was smart. We'd only intervene if we had no other options. This was no longer just about taking down a large human trafficking ring; this was about exposing a corrupt part of the FBI and the impact that it would have. We would have to sink some time into helping Abby get the evidence she needed. None of us needed rogue agents trying to retaliate against us for ruining whatever arrangement they had with the Reapers.

"Glad we could compromise," Wells said with a smirk.

Yeah, this discussion went a lot smoother than the one we had in Vegas. We had a lot of issues to work through before we took action. Some wanted to jump head first and worry about how to fly later, while others knew we needed some sort of plan. At least this time, it wasn't nearly as tension filled.

"Do you have any evidence yet?" Jasmine asked.

"Yes, I actually interviewed an agent," Abby answered with a small smirk.

"When did you have the chance to do that?" I asked with my eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Do you really think a private snorkeling tour takes six hours?” she asked.

“Damn it, Abby, tell us it was at least worth breaking the one rule we made, twice over,” I growled. This woman was going to drive me absolutely insane, and yet I secretly loved it. I loved the way she could get under my skin. She challenged me and kept me on my toes, and I wanted more. I was a fucking sucker for her; it just sucked that eventually I’d lose her.

“Yes, I pretended to be a college student studying criminal justice. I made up some bullshit last-minute paper and I needed to interview law enforcement to find out more about policing and interacting with the community. I got the agent to admit that they do take some private contracts from citizens, and one of those is security. He bragged about accepting some contracts for a real-estate tycoon. He didn’t mention Ricketts by name, of course, but he didn’t have to. I could read between the lines.”

“Holy fuck.” Yates let out a whistle and then grinned. “You sure are impressive. I know you turned down Strong, but what about a bionic man?” Yates asked. Her wiggled his eyebrows. I was dangerously close to painting the surrounding skin purple with a bruise. No man liked to be reminded of rejection.

Abby let out a loud laugh with a snort at the end. “Yates, Strong is exactly my type, and if I turned him down, what makes you think I’m going to take you up on that offer?” she teased.

“Opposites attract,” he said with another grin. The group busted out into laughter. Even I had a hard time maintaining an annoyed expression. He was pathetic sometimes.

“Nice try. Next time you make a move, you may get a bionic hand to match your leg, got it?” she asked with a sickly sweet smile.

“Got it. Jeez, no joke. You and Strong are perfect for each other. Intimidating as a motherfucker,” he said and took a step backward.

I didn't bother holding back a laugh that time.

"We need to load the boats up with our loadouts too, just in case we have to make a move tonight," Guy said, bringing the conversation back to the mission.

He was right.

"I'll get that taken care of as soon as we're under the cover of darkness. Come on, babe, want to help me take inventory of the guns and rounds?" Wells asked.

"You know I find it fascinating," she said with a wink.

I didn't know if that was some weird talking dirty and roleplay combination they had going on, but I wanted it to stop.

They exited Guy's suite, and the feeling of wanting to gag left with them.

"What else is there to do now?" Jasmine asked.

"Nothing, I've got the drone's batteries charging now, and the night-vision camera is already mounted. Once Wells confirms we have everything and the second boat is picked up and loaded, then we're ready, but we need to wait until it's dark," Guy said.

"So what I'm hearing is there's time to go get an ice cream cone?" Jasmine asked.

"If that's how you want to fill the next couple of hours, sure, be my guest," Guy said with a chuckle.

Jasmine grabbed Jones' hand. "You're coming with me. You have the cash," she said as she pulled him out of the room. Just like that, there were only four of us left.

"It feels weird to have free time," Abby said suddenly.

"Yeah, it happens occasionally. We can't always be moving. We need downtime for the success of the mission, not to mention it's better to act at opportune times, like night," Yates said, dropping a truth nugget.

"Hah, yeah, I guess so," she said with a snort and rolled her eyes. Yates was talking to an FBI agent; she knew that

already. She was just stating an observation.

“Let’s go kill some free time,” I told her.

“What do you have in mind?” she asked.

“Do you want them to hear?” I asked as I motioned to the other two in the room. I still wanted her to redo that interrogation from earlier, but with me as the suspect. I swore if Guy’s face could turn pink, it would have. Yates rolled his eyes at us and pretended to gag.

“Adios, losers,” I said as I tugged Abby out of the room.

“Let’s go get something to eat,” I told her once we were in the hall.

“That’s not what you implied in the room,” she said with a smirk.

“I just said that so those idiots wouldn’t join us. I don’t need them crashing our date,” I told her with a wink.

“You know this is very far from a date,” she said jokingly.

“I bet your idea of chasing down bad guys would totally be a date with the right guy,” I told her.

She was silent for a moment as she considered my words.

“You’re probably right. Work is too big a part of my life for it not interfere in my dating life too. I probably would consider that a first date,” she said with a smirk.

“So why can’t we grab food and call it a date?” I asked her. I was half teasing but also half serious, because deep down I could feel hesitation from her. She had no problem letting me fuck her brains out, but when it came time for any sort of emotional intimacy, she shied away from it completely.

“Because I’m not going out on dates with anyone. That implies I’m looking for a relationship, which I’m not.”

“Even with this explosive chemistry we’ve got going on?” I asked.

We were in the elevator, and I wished I had waited to ask when we got to a table in the lobby area. That area was wide

open with room to breathe, not a tiny elevator car that we were both trapped in, regretting my words.

“We’ve got chemistry, but as far as I can remember, relationships are a lot more than that. Most importantly, they are a commitment, which I don’t have the time or energy to make,” she said, and then the doors opened.

I felt slightly defeated, but I’d keep trying. Everyone had their issues. Hell, Christine and Wells had PTSD to work through, and Jasmine and Jones had a complicated past they had to sort out. Abby needed time to sort through her commitment issues, and I’d be waiting when she did.

We loaded up food from the buffet bar and found an empty table.

“So you’re telling me that even though you and I have something good, you don’t want it?” I asked, giving one last metaphorical shove before I dropped the topic for tonight.

“I’m telling you that while you and I work well together, it can’t be anything more than it is now. I’m not saying this to hurt you; if anything, I’m being honest and upfront to spare your feelings. You’re a good guy who has served his country well. You deserve to be happy, like Wells and Jones are, but I can’t be the one to make you happy. I’ve got a career that I worked damn hard for, and I can’t give that up, no matter how good you are at fucking me,” she said.

Her words wounded and healed me at the same time. She was letting me down but throwing compliments in there so that it wouldn’t hurt as badly. A compliment sandwich.

“What if I could make you happier than your job? I’m not rich like Jones or Christine, but we could keep doing these bounty-hunting gigs. You’d still be able to put away assholes like you are now. The only difference is it would be without a badge,” I offered.

“As sweet as that sounds, it’s not the same. Is what you are doing now the same as what you did in the Army? Can you even compare them at this point?” She paused for a moment to let me consider her words. “What you’re doing now is

different from what you did in the uniform. You were following orders. It's structured. There were rules, and there was comradery. I have the same thing with the FBI, and that's what I need. If I don't have structure, I slide off the rails. It's one of the reasons I joined the Navy in the first place. I like having rules and operating within them. This whole experience has been eye opening for me and made me realize just how much I like what I have going for me back home. Not to mention, Bob is grooming me to be the best undercover agent the FBI has for these operations, and that's huge," she said.

I could see the truth in her words. She really did feel that way, and they weren't a bunch of excuses she was feeding me. She laid out for me exactly what it was that she needed, and she was right; it was much different from what we were doing.

I hoped that at some point she would change her mind, because the idea of letting the perfect girl slip through my fingers made me want to punch a wall. She had to change her mind, because I couldn't imagine the alternative. I didn't want to live a life where I didn't see her every day. Where I didn't get to share my fucked-up humor with her and she'd laugh, because she genuinely thought it was funny. I didn't want to wake up in the morning wondering where she was or if she was alive, or which nasty pig had his dick in her. She deserved way more than that. We only met days ago, but I fell fast and hard—just like our sex.

I watched as she ate her salad, and it occurred to me, Abby had too much structure. She said if she didn't follow rules she'd fly off the tracks. Maybe the rules helped her cope with what happened to her. If she stayed in her lane, ate her healthy foods, and kept to herself, nothing else bad could happen to her. The only exception was her job, where all kinds of bad stuff could happen to her, but she was prepared for it. It was like she lived two separate lives, the damaged girl that she hid from the world and the Alpha female who took shit from no one. Who used that fake personality to ignore her reality.

She finished her water and watched me as I ate wing after wing, cleaning every bit of meat off with my teeth.

"What?" I asked her.

“Nothing, just figuring you out,” she said with a small smile.

“Oh yeah?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“I was just doing the same to you,” I told her.

“What am I about, then?”

I couldn't dive in deep with all my revelations. She'd toss her food and storm out of the room, so I had to come up with a watered-down version. Something she could handle. “You play your life completely safe, except for your job, where you give yourself the freedom to enjoy yourself.”

Her eyes widened for a moment before she smiled. “You figured all of that out from watching me eat my salad?”

“I figured it out in all the moments since I met you. You are reserved, keep to yourself so no one has the power to hurt you. But when you are on the job, everything changes. You become someone else.”

“I'm not going to admit if any of that is true, but good guess.” She tried not to make it obvious that I hit the nail on the head, but she failed. Her tone was too calm, too stiff.

“What did you figure out about me?” I challenged.

“While you are generally a large guy, you put a lot of time and effort into your jacked man image. Partially because it's the complete opposite of who you are inside, and somehow you think disguising that will protect you. You seem to be a hopeless romantic at heart but have never gotten the opportunity to show it, so you secretly pine away for what your friends have,” she said. She was one hundred percent right, but it didn't bother me. I wanted her to understand me, I wanted her to fall for me like I had her, and as far as I knew, women liked hopeless romantics.

“Are you going to deny it?” she asked with a smug expression. She expected the truth to wound me, but it didn't. I'd own it and hope she could own her truth. It was the only way to change it.

I leaned back in my chair after wiping my hands with a wet wipe. “Absolutely not. I am who I am, and I’m fine with you seeing that.”

She sat back in her chair. She didn’t expect that answer. She waited for me to push back like many other guys would, but I wasn’t most guys. I’d seen shit most men couldn’t even dream of in their nightmares, and while it haunted me, I was a better man because of it. I knew how short life was—there wasn’t time to fuck around. Games were meant to pass time, but I knew just how little of it I had. When you wanted something, you needed to make it known and go after it.

As if sensing my thoughts, she cleared her throat and picked up her empty plate. She left it in the bin for dirty ones, and I followed. “I think I need a nap before the mission tonight.”

Clearly our conversation had taken a turn that she wasn’t comfortable with, so she put distance between us. That was okay, though; I laid down the groundwork. I planted the seeds in her mind. Deep down she knew I saw her for who she really was, and I still liked her. Now she just needed to accept that about herself and then let me the fuck in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

abby

Adam's words stuck with me. I tried to close my eyes, and the words bounced around in my head, keeping me from finding sleep. He was right. I played my life safe except for my job. I was once a wild child—in case my tattoos didn't give it away. I knew I wanted to go into the Navy from the time I was in middle school. I wanted to serve my country, and I spent years preparing for that. I got some of my tattoos before I even enlisted. I worked my body hard and thrived on learning. I wanted to be the best sailor I could, yet that was my downfall. It was what attracted my assailant.

After a whole deployment filled with sexual assault, I changed completely. I was just the pretty shell on the surface, but the rest of me turned black and rotten. The one thing I wanted to do with my life was completely ruined. All because that punk-bitch saw something in me that stood out, something that he wanted, so he took it and broke me in the process. I promised myself I wouldn't let anyone else do that to me again. If I was going to go all psychologist on myself—that could be why I didn't want a relationship. It was like making the key to a glass house from a hammer. I couldn't give someone that kind of power.

Instead I needed to feel in power, to destroy the lives of those sick and twisted perverts who took what they wanted from others without consequence. My job, working as an undercover agent to bring down sex trafficking operations, that allowed me to take my life back, and the power and life that was stolen from me. Every time I put a sick bastard behind bars, I got my revenge on a dead man who escaped justice.

He'd never know the pain of his wife or children knowing of his actions. They only saw him as a hero. What he did never got back to them, and I wasn't heartless enough to contact them and share my story. I let a dead man who didn't deserve peace find it, only so that his family would have it too. I took that pain and held onto it, for the sake of his family. Putting away others was a hobby, my therapy, and my job, all rolled up into one honorable career.

Life was all sorts of complicated and fucked up. So was I.

My alarm rang. I didn't get a minute of sleep, but my sheets were still tangled around my legs. I pulled them off and got dressed in all black. I concealed my gun at my side and pulled my hair back into a long side braid so that it was out of my face. After I brushed my teeth and put on a boatload of deodorant—to counteract the long clothing I was wearing in this tropical heat—I was ready.

I met the crew in the hallway, and together we snuck out the back entrance of the resort and drove to Potter's Cay. We loaded the two boats and then quietly left the dock. It was eleven at night, so we still had three hours before we expected the Reapers to arrive. Which gave us time to blend in and become part of the darkness.

Adam, Wells, Jones, Mendez, and I were on the speed boat, and Garcia, Yates, Guy, Jasmine, and Christine were on the larger-looking yacht. We were divided into two teams for two reasons. The first was that the speed boat would barely fit the five of us. Fully loaded, it wouldn't be very fast, which was a must. If we needed to follow the Reapers in a fast retreat, we'd be screwed, packed tightly like sardines on one boat. Second, if we did end up having to intervene and storm their hideout, we'd have no way to transport the victims or the traffickers. So we bought a shit-ton of zip ties and duct tape. And on the yacht we had first-aid kits, water, and food. Hopefully we'd end up not needing it tonight and would have a lot more time to prepare, but I was counting on things going wrong. They always seemed to in situations like this.

The yacht was placed further out to sea, because it was larger and more visible. So our speed boat kept its distance

while I waited with my small crew. Jones' dumb ass actually had a fishing line out. I could have smacked him on the back of the head when I saw that, but Adam did that for me, and he grinned the whole time Jones rubbed the spot.

At one in the morning, Guy sent the drone up to start recon to see if anyone was approaching. We didn't know where exactly the boat would be coming from. Would it leave from Potter's Cay and wait in the ocean for the other boat? Or would it come from somewhere else on the island, giving us the opportunity to follow it? We all waited anxiously to find out, except Jones; he enjoyed his fishing.

At two, we heard the sound of a boat approaching the waters around Potter's Cay.

"Incoming," Guy said into our radios.

We saw a sleek black boat approach Potter's Cay and then stall. It flashed a light twice and then went dark again. This must have been some kind of code that they used to communicate. *It's me, I'm here.*

As much as I wanted to flash our own light, I held off. They'd get close enough to see it was a trap and warn the rest of the Reapers. As much as I hated to admit it, the guys were right. We needed to follow the bees to the hive.

After ten minutes, they started their motor and turned around and headed back the way they came. Their black boat with no lights was difficult to follow in the dark.

"Eyes in the sky?" I asked into the radio.

"Yes, we won't lose them," Guy answered.

I saw the drone fly overhead, following the retreating boat at a safe distance.

"They are heading west. Let's see where they end up," Wells commented.

Twenty minutes later, we had our answer. They turned left into the Old Fort Canal and made their way through the channels, which looked more like a maze than anything else. When they parked the boat in front of a house, I could have

cried in relief. We now knew at least one operation point for them.

“Let’s do an address check to make sure this is a house Ricketts owns.”

“Already on it,” Christine said into the radio. After a moment, she added, “It’s his, along with the ones on each side.”

“Jackpot,” Jones said. A wide grin grew across his face before Jasmine smacked his arm.

“So now what? Do we just let them go for now?” she asked.

“No, we need to watch. We need to make sure they aren’t going to make any other moves tonight,” I said, at the same time Adam said, “No.”

“No, what?” Wells asked.

“No, I don’t think we should just let them go. Why do you think they have three houses side by side?” he asked.

“Because they can’t fit the whole operation in one,” I answered.

“Just like in your New York case, they needed a high rise because their operation was that big. Robbie needed warehouses, so this doesn’t sit right with me just walking away from here, even if they don’t make any moves tonight,” Adam said with a conviction I hadn’t heard from him before.

“So you’re saying we go in there guns blazing tonight?” Jones asked.

“I don’t want to, but I don’t think we have much of a choice. Look how easy it would be for them to transport people. In an hour, they could make multiple trips to a large transport ship and have a bunch of women in another country. That’s assuming that these houses are still occupied, that they haven’t moved anyone in a while,” Adam said.

“Look, there’s always a choice. We need to make the best one that guarantees the safety of any innocent people who may be inside. We can’t move forward with a half-assed raid unless

it's a last resort. Now that we know where they are, and confirmed they aren't in the middle of a move, let's do a full day of recon. We can take shifts and rotate out. From there we can put together a plan that keeps us and the victims safe," Garcia said into the radio.

I was torn. I was with Adam. I wanted to go in there right now and kick some ass and free those who were probably terrified beyond belief. I wanted to end their suffering. Those women probably had no hope of a rescue. They probably assumed that no one was coming for them. During my deployment, my hope was the shoreline. It was ironic that I was on a boat again, and this time it was to bring someone else's nightmare to an end. For that very reason, I wanted to back Adam up and demand that we storm their base of operations. With as many buildings as they had, three houses, and two pool houses along with a small boathouse, it was like a compound.

The less emotionally charged part of me—the part that remembered my training—kicked in. I knew that Garcia made a very valid point. To have the upper hand, it's best to understand the enemy before confronting them. That meant knowing the battleground too. We didn't have a way to lure them all to a location of our choosing. They might have sent a couple of guys out for me today, but we surely wouldn't get lucky enough to get them all at one time in some massive showdown. This wasn't a TV show, and we couldn't manipulate the script to work in our favor. On top of that, we may have lost their interest in me when they came back empty handed. Or it could've had the opposite effect. Only time would tell, and then you'd be able to use that knowledge. Waiting right now was the right call, as much as it pained me to admit it.

By now the Reapers were probably looking for the manager, and he wouldn't be answering. His phone was with the Marshals, and it was their call on how to investigate further from there. We wouldn't have long before they opened their own investigation, and if they stormed in, it would definitely spook the FBI office that I came here to investigate.

For some reason, the four guys in my boat turned to look at me. Like I was the deciding vote.

“I...I think Garcia might have a point on this.” My eyes flashed to Adam’s, and I hoped he’d understand. I was picking a plan, not a partner. “I think we do need a plan. I read the report about the raid in Las Vegas, and it was sloppy. That wasn’t your doing; that was on Bob. You saw how messy that got. What if we have a way to avoid that entirely? What he did endangered the lives of everyone. A standoff like that could have been avoided. He could have tried to get to them in transit, right as they left the warehouse. I think we need to figure out what security measures the Reapers have taken and figure out how to disable them completely so that they never see us coming when we do make our move,” I said.

“Like Uzbekistan,” Mendez said.

“I don’t know what that means, but sure,” I answered.

“He means like our mission there. We did recon for three weeks, figuring out their routines, who was responsible for what, observing their security, and waiting for a new moon for the cover of darkness,” Adam explained.

“Then yes, exactly like that, but we aren’t waiting three weeks. I couldn’t live with myself taking that amount of time. I think that we should complete some recon tonight and take shifts. Guy, any chance you can try to get access to their internet? Figure out a back door and see if they have cameras or anything else that could help us?” I asked.

“Yeah, but I have to warn you, they may not have any of that stuff. The resorts all had paper records, and that was under lock and key. They may not trust technology, and there’s nothing I can do if they don’t even have the internet and a working computer there. It would be a risk for them.”

He had a point. In New York, the only computer in the high rise was in the head asshole’s office. It sat right on the desk that he fucked me on. I had stared at it several times just wishing for the opportunity to hack into it and send what I could to Bob and the rest of the team. I didn’t get lucky enough until the last day, when the asshole tried to cross a

boundary and I choked him out. At first he thought it was me trying to be kinky, but when he realized he was about to black out and I wasn't letting go, he became frantic. It was already too late. I got a bruise to the cheek, and he lost consciousness. I tied him to the chair with his tie while I powered on the computer and sent everything I could find over to Bob. The lines got a little blurred at the legality of that, as an agent sending information to the bureau from this guy without a warrant and without his permission, but it ultimately held out. I was first acting as a kidnapped victim since there wasn't a way for me to actually escape. I was by definition held against my will.

"Give it a try and let us know what you find. If we get the opportunity, I'd like to get my feet on the ground and scope out the buildings from the outside, check out possible entry points, and see if there are any other security measures," I said.

"If there are, you could take a chance of triggering them," he countered.

"Are you thinking of infrared lasers?" I asked.

"That's one of many concerns," Jones said.

"Also redneck booby traps, like from *Home Alone*." Jasmine snickered at her reference through the radio. I ignored it, despite it being a good reference. I didn't need anything to encourage Adam to be even more protective.

"Don't you know the trick?" I asked, referring to lasers.

"What trick?"

"Throw a very small amount of dirt into the air while wearing night goggles. Not enough dirt to appear like a solid object going through the beams, but just enough to float in a breeze. You will see the light from the laser scatter off the dirt particles," I said.

"For real?" Christine asked through the radio.

"For real," I answered.

"That's like some spy shit," Jasmine commented.

“Let’s tuck that bit of knowledge away for another day. No one gets off the boat tonight. We give them thirty minutes to settle down, then we will ride past very slowly with the lights off and get one good look at the compound and then get out of here. We’ll pick the first time to do recon and then switch out every four hours,” Wells said.

I was happy enough with that plan. We waited on the boat quietly for what felt like an agonizing thirty minutes in silence as we waited for the coast to be clear. Twenty-five minutes in, all the lights in the center house turned off, and everything remained silent. Wells started up the trolling motor, which was much quieter than the large, superpowered motor hanging off the back of the boat. We’d use the big guns when we got back out to the ocean.

We slowly crept up to the house and remained completely silent. A fish could have farted in the water and we would have heard it. I looked for any signs of cameras. After a minute, I spotted one angled down toward the back door. Hopefully we were out of view. I checked out all three houses and silently thanked God for the invention of night-vision goggles. With them I was able to spot the cameras trained at the back doors and the three deadbolt locks on each door. They were solid steel, which didn’t match up with the design of the rest of the rich, bougie neighborhood. This should have stood out when they were doing recon in the area, but hindsight was always twenty-twenty. Their area of expertise was in the Middle East, not the playground of the rich and perverted.

I did everything I could to commit these houses to memory. I took in the size of the windows, which I’d be able to fit through, but Adam surely wouldn’t. Someone smaller like Yates or Guy might be able to squeeze in, but I guessed that the rest would be too large to make it through stealthily.

All too soon Wells guided us out of the canal and back to the yacht that was waiting for us just outside the entrance to the canal.

We tied our boat to the yacht and boarded. Then began to plan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

adam

It was a long fucking day, and the damn yacht didn't have a fucking coffee maker. So I had to settle for the instant coffee packets that Christine kept in her purse. I didn't ask why she carried them, but I never thought I'd say that I was thankful for them. I wasn't a coffee snob, but they tasted like garbage. My only saving grace was they still had the caffeine that I needed to help me stay awake. We pulled an all-nighter in the yacht planning, while Yates had sailed us further out to sea. The last thing we wanted was anyone pointing out our presence, which would certainly be noticed in what was likely a private waterway.

Abby did some casual scrolling and found a house on the other side of the canal, about four houses down from the traffickers. It came with a dock and was listed as a vacation rental online. Christine handed over her debit card immediately. It gave us a place to hang out much closer to what Abby had dubbed "the compound." I'd miss the luxury of the resort, but we weren't on vacation, and a rental would be much better than I endured in the sandbox.

"Here, take these," Jones said as he handed over the fishing poles he rented.

"Perfect cover for being outside and keeping an eye on the compound, fishing off the dock," he said with a smug smile that told me he hoped we were impressed with that.

"Don't compliment him. It will just go to his head. Then I'll have to deal with that later," Jasmine said as she shook her

head. She was fighting for control of a grin that wanted to break free.

“You wound me, woman,” Jones said as I grabbed the poles.

“In all honesty, I was going to ask for them,” Abby said, taking the bait.

“And you wound me more,” Jones said, faking a wound to his chest.

“Sure I do,” she replied with a smile.

Didn't she realize just how easily she fit in with my friends, that she could find happiness with us?

“Good luck. We'll go dock the yacht, and someone will be back in four hours to switch shifts,” Wells said.

“See you then,” I said to my friends as I dropped down onto the speedboat and held my hand out to Abby. She ignored it and made her own graceful leap onto the boat.

Show off.

We turned on the boat's trolling motor and parked at the dock to the house we rented. I tied up the boat while Abby went to the front and entered the code into the lockbox. The house's lights turned on, and then she opened the back door to let me in.

“This place isn't bad,” she appraised as she stared at the artwork on the walls.

“I hope not. Christine paid a lot,” I said with a chuckle.

She rolled her eyes. “I'll go inside and make some better coffee. Looks like the host left a selection. Why don't you set up our lines?”

“On it,” I said with a smile.

I trashed the rest of the instant coffee. She came back out a few minutes later with a much improved cup of coffee, and I sighed in relief at the taste. It didn't matter that it felt like it was two hundred degrees out; I could always use a cup of coffee.

Abby picked up her pole from the floor of the dock and casted out her line. We casually snuck glances at the compound and continued to memorize the layout. We missed the garden last night. It was large in size, enough to feed quite a few people. The property also had “do not trespass” signs posted at each house. The curtains were all closed, and no one seemed to look out the windows. The houses remained eerily quiet.

I noticed three vehicles parked in the area under each of the houses, which were on stilts—because this was an island, after all. I wasn’t able to see the license plate numbers for the vehicles parked in the drive for the two further houses. I was able to make out the plates of the two closest vehicles. I texted photos of them to Guy.

Guy: Those plates are both registered to Thomas Ricketts, our target’s brother.

Me: So this looks like a family business?

Guy: Yeah, quite possibly. The question is, what role does he play?

Me: Hopefully we’ll know everything real soon.

Guy: Fingers crossed.

There was only fifteen minutes left in our shift when the back door to the closest house on the compound opened. A woman in ill-fitting clothes exited, and she carried a basket. She was barefoot, her hair was pulled back, and she looked dirty. She also looked relieved, like this was the first time she had set foot outside for a while and was taking in all the fresh air she could. Abby and I both watched, not speaking a word. We didn’t want to draw any attention to ourselves, because she wasn’t alone.

A man stepped out the same back door. His arms were crossed in front of him, and he leaned against one of the supports of the house, like he was annoyed that he had to come

outside. I didn't miss the Ruger he had tucked into his waistband. The fact that he needed a gun to contain one woman proved just how big of a pussy he really was.

I could hear the periodic insults he made to her as she started harvesting from the garden. She looked like she paid no mind to the words, until he bragged about what he was going to do to her later. She flinched. My vision turned red, and my fists clenched. Abby let out a hiss, and her whole body went rigid.

I placed my left hand on hers and brought it up to rest comfortably on my thigh. I gently squeezed her hand and hoped that she understood my silent gesture. *I'm here. You aren't going through this alone.* I would personally fuck the guy up when we breached the compound. Abby's eyes only left the compound for a moment to meet mine, and I understood her silent response. The anger in her ran so deep that her eyes were red and brimmed with tears. Her jaw was clenched and she was breathing heavily. Her body told me what she couldn't verbalize. The man was all hers when we breached the compound. I wouldn't deny her that satisfaction. Hell, I wouldn't deny her anything. Anything she wanted was hers when she was with me; I hoped that she'd catch on and want what I had to offer, aside from our mind-blowing sexcapades.

After twenty minutes, the woman got up from her knees in the dirt with a basket full of tomatoes, lettuces, and peppers. She had a watermelon propped up on her hip, supported by her other hand. She walked to the back door after taking one last look around, like she wasn't sure when she'd get to see it all again, and that made my heart break for the girl. My mind went somewhere it shouldn't have, and I imagined that girl being Abby. It made me want to smash things and scream in rage all at the same time, but I reined it in. Abby was safe, right next to me, and fighting her own inner struggle. Abby might not be that woman currently, but she was at one point, and that had a lasting effect on someone. Abby might not have PTSD from combat, but I knew she still had the mental scars, just the same as the guys and I did. Hell, even Christine and Jasmine had forms of it. We were all linked by our scars and

the impact it had on us; it made us want to be better people. We wanted to make the world a safer place.

When the woman reached the top of the stairs, her babysitter shoved her into the house and locked the door behind him. Abby let out a loud breath, and her shoulders drooped.

“That was rough,” I told her.

“Yeah, it took every ounce of my self-control not to jump into the canal and pop up on the other side and grab her,” she said.

“I’m sure. Let’s go inside. Our relief should be here by now, and then we can go back to the resort and decompress. We’ll have the first round of intel, and we can use that to lay down the groundwork for a plan,” I suggested.

“Okay. Only because we’re going to further the plan,” she agreed. I knew what she was doing. She was trying to convince herself that she couldn’t worry about herself until the victims were taken care of. All of us had also been guilty of that at one point, some of us more than others.

“Whatever you say, as long as you eat, hydrate, and rest while you’re doing it.” I wasn’t going to argue with her that she deserved to be able to have some downtime. That wasn’t how she operated, and I didn’t want her to shut me down.

We got up from the dock and headed back inside our rental. Christine and Wells were there making themselves some coffee, and they brought creamer. Thank the coffee gods. I also eyed the bag of snacks and case of water.

“Take what you want,” Christine offered.

I reached into the bag and grabbed snacks for Abby and me. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yeah, one sec.” She shifted to speak to Christine and Wells. “They had a girl out there just now picking from the garden. She was escorted by an armed guard. So they’re definitely there, just good at lying low.”

“We’ll keep an eye out,” Wells said as he tossed me the keys to the rental car.

He opened the back door, and he and Christine went out back, lawn chairs in hand.

I made my way to the front door, and Abby reluctantly followed. Once we were in the car, our ride was relatively quiet. My mind was still on what we witnessed. Back at the resort, I forced Abby to take a shower. We’d both had a long couple of days, and she needed not only to get clean but decompress. She seemed to be in a daze. Part of her seemed to be living in her memories again, but every once in a while she’d mumble an observation she made about the compound. Like she was already working out the pieces to a jigsaw puzzle in her head, fitting together the pieces of a plan that we didn’t have yet.

I got into the shower with her and lathered her up and shampooed her hair. Jones once talked about how intimate it could feel to shower with your partner, even without doing anything sexual, and he was right. I took my time running my soapy hands over her tattooed arms, looking closely at the artwork. A kraken was wrapped around her bicep, its tentacles snaking out of the water and wrapping around an aircraft carrier. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out the symbolism behind it. The tattoo sleeve included a whole underwater scene with other sea creatures. Various other tattoos covered her body with beautiful art and the occasional sayings. As my fingers traced the ink, I wondered how many others had run their fingers over them. And how many of them had bad intentions?

After the longest shower on planet earth, I wrapped her in a fluffy towel and helped dry her off. She smelled clean and looked better, though looks could be deceiving.

“You okay?” I pulled the towel tightly around her shoulders. Her eyes met mine.

“Yeah, just calculating a million and one plans in my head.” She tried to give a small smile, but it came out all wrong. How much more of this job would she be able to do

before it destroyed her completely? I was worried for her, maybe more so than the women trapped on that compound, and that scared me.

“What have you come up with?” I wrapped my arms around her to keep her warm as she began to shiver.

“I’ve got a few contenders, but I need more time to work out the flaws. They aren’t ready for the light of day yet.” She sucked her lip between her teeth and began to gnaw. Abby always appeared to be the pillar of strength, and slowly but surely, she let that facade go when it was just us. Abby was capable of protecting herself, but what about her heart? Would she let me protect that for her?

“You know, this is unusual for me.”

“What is?” she asked curiously. Her eyes looked up at me, and I nearly lost my breath. The vulnerability there moved something inside of me. I thought I finally understood what love really was. I thought that maybe in this moment she felt it too. The way she leaned into my warmth had me aching to tell her about how I felt right now, but I was scared she’d pull away.

“Letting someone else create the plans. Usually it’s us guys putting our heads together. Each time another woman joins our group, it seems like they start calling the shots,” I said with a smirk.

“What’s wrong with that?” she asked with the tiniest smirk of her own. I could tell she was trying to hide it, and yet with me, she couldn’t hide. She could only shine.

“Nothing, I’m just wondering how long it will be before the group is run entirely by women.” My smirk grew. I ran my hands up her arms, across her shoulders, and up her neck, to hold behind her head. My fingers tangled in her hair as I stared down at her face.

“I’d say not long.” She really struggled to hide her smile; it reached her eyes, giving it away like a neon sign.

“To run the group, you’ve got to stay with us.” My tone turned serious. I was unable to help it. I needed her with me,

always. The thought of her going home after an assignment to struggle like this would haunt me every day we weren't together.

"We've been through this, Adam," she said with a sigh, her smile fading.

"I know, I'm just reminding you of what you'll miss out on."

She gave a sad smile. "Let's get dressed and meet up with the others, yeah?" She changed the subject.

"I've got one thing in mind first," I said with a suggestive smirk. My fingers gave a gentle tug in her hair. Her eyes heated, like turning on a gas fireplace. Now that she seemed to be back to the land of the living, mentally, I wanted to erase the sight of her on top of another man from my memory. I wanted her on top of me, and I wanted to hear those sexy little mewling sounds she made when she was overwhelmed with pleasure.

"Oh yeah, and what's that?" Her attempt at playing coy failed miserably, because I could see an inferno of desire just behind her eyes. She bit her lip again, and my dick jerked in anticipation. I wanted her more than I'd wanted anything. More than I wanted to cover up my scarring, and more than I wanted to feel normal. She was everything I could have ever hoped for.

"This." I pulled her to me and kissed her. The towels between us fell.

She wrapped her hands around my body, and her hands traced my pectoral muscles before they landed around my neck. She jumped and pulled herself up my body. She conveniently placed her center right at my cock, and I gave her a knowing smile. She was already wet, ready for me to give her something else to focus on.

So I did.

I pushed her body up against the glass of the shower, and I trapped her wrists above her head with one hand. With the

other, I squeezed her ass while I pushed my hard-on up against her stomach.

“You know, I was jealous of that dickwad you tied to the bed.” My voice was low and deadly serious. I imagined her body over mine, her grinding on me. She was the only person I’d ever concede that power to.

“Oh, really?” she asked with a coy smile. That admission absolutely delighted her.

“Mhmm,” I said as I placed my lips to her neck.

“I’d hate for you to feel jealous of some loser. Let me go, and I’ll make it up to you,” she said with an irresistible grin. I couldn’t wait to watch her try.

I released her wrists, and she smiled. She grabbed my wrist and gave my arm a hard tug. She pulled me to the bed and then pushed me down on it.

“Get in the center,” she commented, and I obliged, grinning like an idiot. She was so fucking sexy I couldn’t help it. She was a bewitching siren, and I was totally caught under her spell, trapped in her song.

She grabbed my wrist and pulled the ropes she used out of the nightstand. She wrapped the rope around my wrists. I pulled against the bindings, and they held strong.

“Color me impressed,” I taunted.

“Just one of many, many skills,” she teased as she ran her finger across my collarbone. “What did you think about the gun? Too much?”

“Nah, that was sexy as shit too, added to the effect,” I said with a smirk. She leaned over to the nightstand and pulled out the Glock she kept hidden there. She flipped on the safety, cleared out the clip, and cleared the weapon, all within my view.

“I’d rather be safe than sorry,” she said with a smirk. She pressed the cold steel against my cheek and ran it down, over my neck. “Did you like this?” she asked seductively, her voice dropping lower.

I nodded and closed my eyes. The cold metal moved even further south, and it trailed over my pecs. She straddled me, her center sitting on my abdomen. “Why are you all the way up here?” I asked as I looked up at her. Her perfect tits were near my face, and I wanted a taste. I licked my lips, and she smirked.

“Because this is supposed to be tortuous. Now stop talking. I’m the one that asks the questions,” she said, and then she slapped me. The sound echoed around the room, and my dick flexed. I was definitely going to enjoy this.

She turned around and bent forward so that her face was directly over my raging hard-on. At this point, it was painful, and I thrust my hips upward to bring it closer to her face. Her perfect peach of an ass was pointed up into the air. I wanted nothing more than to grab her by her thighs and bring it to my face so that I could lick her clean. Instead she remained far out of my reach. I could smell her arousal, though.

Her breath teased the skin of my shaft, and I let out a groan.

“For the love of God, swallow me or when I get free from this rope, which I will, I’ll punish you until you can’t walk straight,” I demanded.

“So testy,” she teased, and then her tongue delicately touched me. I grunted. The small touch wasn’t nearly enough.

“You think you can break those ropes, big boy?” Her husky tone went straight to my dick, which flexed right in front of her.

“I’m sure I could, but I’m not sure you want to find out.” I might like pain, but I didn’t think she would, not real pain.

She turned her face forward and placed her lips on my shaft, and then she took me in her mouth. Her head bobbed up and down while I stared at her ass. It taunted me with its jiggle. I imagined smacking it hard. I thrust my hips upward, forcing her to swallow me deeper. I heard her gag and backed off slightly. Her hand cupped my balls, and they tightened. I

let out a deep groan—I had to think about cute puppies to keep myself from blowing my load right then and there.

“Get on me,” I demanded.

“I thought I was supposed to be in control here,” she countered. She turned her head over her shoulder to look at me, and her eyebrow was arched.

“Oh, you are. You get to decide if you do what I demand. But you face the tortuous consequences if you don’t.” Just for good measure, I tugged hard on the ropes and loosened them slightly from the brute force. The headboard groaned from the show. Her eyes widened slightly, and then she turned her body back around. She sat on my thighs and waited to hear what I wanted next.

“Bring your ass over here and sit on my face. You have thirty seconds to get nice and wet for me,” I told her. Her eyes lit up with excitement, and she climbed up my body. Like the good girl she was, she did as I demanded. I used my tongue to pleasure her, starting soft and slow. I didn’t have the use of my hands, but I didn’t need them anyways. I had her mewling and clawing at my scalp as the tip of my tongue traced circles on her clit. Her body rocked as she let out breathy pants. At twenty-six seconds, her body clenched tight and she leaned back as the orgasm washed over her. Her lean body and perfect tights were a sight as she removed her pussy from my face. I licked my lips at her delicious taste.

I gave her exactly ten seconds to breathe before I gave her another command. “Now sit on my dick.”

She scooted backward and positioned herself on top of me and then lowered herself. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and I locked my muscles as I enjoyed the tightness that enveloped me. She immediately started riding me. I rolled my hips to thrust into her, and soon the friction had her crying out. Her nails clawed at my hips. She was going to leave marks. I hoped so; I’d get them tattooed on me. I opened my eyes and watched as she bent backward in ecstasy. I wasn’t able to hold back a low growl of pleasure as I came. She leaned forward

and laid her face against my chest after she gained her bearings.

“Want me to release you now?” she asked softly.

“No, let me show you a magic trick,” I said with a smirk.

She purred against my chest, and I got to work.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

abby

“So walk us through what you saw,” I said to Christine and Wells when they returned.

“Another vehicle pulled up. They escorted a girl into the middle house, she wasn’t restrained, but there was an armed man on either side of her and she was crying.” She might as well have been.

“The car left ten minutes later. I got the plates,” Wells said, and he slid over his phone with a picture of the SUV.

“Did you see anyone else?” Adam asked.

“A boat came down the canal and paused by the house for a moment and then sped off. No idea what that was about, though,” Christine said.

“Maybe a security patrol?” Guy asked.

“Maybe.”

I looked around the room. Garcia and Mendez were gone; it must have been their turn to watch the compound.

“I see the other Ricketts brother,” Mendez said through the radio.

All of us perked up at his words.

“What’s he doing?” Wells asked.

“He entered that boatshed they have on property. He’s been in there for a few minutes now. I’m not sure exactly what he’s doing,” Mendez answered.

“Did anyone else go in with him?” I asked.

“No, just him. He’s of course armed too. They all are.”

“So when we breach, we are going to need to make sure that we’re all packing and we’re all wearing vests,” Jones said.

“Agreed,” Mendez answered back through the radio.

There was a minute of silence before Mendez spoke again. “He’s locking the shed up now, and he’s carrying a rifle. I’m wondering if they built a makeshift armory in that building.”

“But why in a separate building as opposed to in the houses?” Christine asked.

“To put more distance between them and the victims. Harder to fight back,” I answered, instantly understanding. I wondered if they’d had issues with victims trying to force their way out before?

“I’m thinking that we need to gain access to that shed if we end up having to raid the compound. We can load up with their gear and anything we aren’t using gets emptied out and put on our yacht so they can’t access it,” Wells said.

“I agree, if it’s a surprise ambush, they wouldn’t have any reason to have more than their sidearms. I’d rather face them all with side pieces as opposed to rifles,” Yates said.

“Good catch, Mendez,” I said into the radio.

“Why, thank you. At least I’m appreciated by someone,” he said with a flirtatious chuckle.

“Of course we appreciate you. You are the best guy dancer in the group,” Christine said with a smile. I sensed a story for another day.

“You aren’t wrong,” Mendez commented with another laugh, and Wells growled at him. Definitely a story for another day.

“Did you have any luck gaining access to their network or cameras?” I asked Guy.

“Actually, yes. I am able to watch the cameras, which they only have outside. When the time comes, I’ll be able to take

the cameras offline and the network down. I don't know how they communicate between the three buildings yet, but if it's through the network, they won't be able to when it's down."

"That's somewhat good news," Jasmine said.

"Yeah, I just wish I knew more about the inside," he said.

"Don't we all?"

That got everyone to let out an uneasy chuckle. We all wished we knew more.

"Abby, you mentioned having some ideas on how to proceed?" Adam asked.

He gave me a tender look, which pierced me through the heart. I knew what he really wanted from me, and it was more than my ideas on how to safely breach the compound. He wanted my heart, and I couldn't let him have it. After we brought down this trafficking ring, I was going to have to leave and make a clean break. It would break me, but he'd move on.

I nodded. "We can't just go guns blazing because we want to. We have evidence that someone is being held captive, and some substantial evidence to document that the local office could be in on this. Bob will bring in agents from my office, people who can be trusted. The agents and I will raid the compound. You guys can remain behind to assist with the victims. I'm assuming there will be a lot of them."

Jasmine didn't look happy about the proposal.

"I get it, not everyone trusts the bureau, but my office will make sure that this is done right. There's no hesitation, no need for more evidence to prove there is trafficking. We've got it. At the very least there is clearly a woman being held captive in that house, and that's enough for the agency. However, if the traffickers try to move the victims before my team arrives, then I propose that under the cover of night we do the exact opposite of what Bob did in Vegas. If I was there, and not undercover at the time, I would have never let that fly. I don't know what Bob was thinking with that stunt. Stealth is the mission. We put silencers on our weapons and we need vests.

We wait until we have evidence they are moving the victims before we step in. At the same time, one person clears out the gun shed, and Christine and Jasmine stay with the yacht. If all of this does go down, we are going to need someone to drive it and someone to take the speed boat if they need to,” I said.

Neither of the other women looked happy to be left on the boats, but they didn’t fight me on it. It wasn’t because they were women; that would be so hypocritical it would be sickening. Neither of them were trained with guns and close-quarters combat like I or the guys were. I’d spent years training, and they’d spent months.

“Only if we have to act, we breach the houses in teams of two. All at the same time, much like we did the offices of the resorts. We don’t want to give the others time to communicate and prepare if we go in one house at a time. By the time we clear one house, the other two could have already fled, and then we’re shit out of luck because we won’t find them again. They’ll be careful after that,” I added.

“Don’t you think teams of two are too small?” Jasmine asked.

“No, if you get too many of us crammed into one house, we are at risk of friendly fire. We’ll clear the houses one room at a time, just like they were trained to,” I said.

“She is right. We don’t want to be tripping over each other. With teams of two, with one person can clear the shed, leaving one of us as a spare to act as backup if needed. Once the shed is clear, there will be two backups,” Jones said.

“I say that we leave a note in the garden to see if we can get any assistance from the women inside. Maybe they can unlock a door to make it easier for the FBI to get in, or us if we end up having to intervene,” Christine said.

She had a valid suggestion. It would also help them keep calm if they knew help was coming, but it was a risky move. What if the traffickers found the note instead?

“Let’s see how it goes. We can leave a note hidden in the garden, but if they don’t come out tomorrow to tend to it, Bob

won't care. We aren't waiting around any longer. We don't want to chance them trying to leave and making anything else more complicated," I said.

"Fair enough," Christine responded. She was pleased that I was willing to give her idea a shot. I wondered if she was used to having the guys shoot down her ideas.

"All right, let's come up with a message to put in the note. When nighttime rolls around, we'll tuck it into the garden," Guy said.

He pulled out a piece of paper from a notebook.

We ended up writing the words, "*Rescue coming soon. Leave a door or window unlocked if you can. Don't tell the assholes.*"

"So after we plant the note, we wait until Bob's team arrives. If the Reapers try to move the women, we will breach the compound with or without the FBI," Yates said.

"Yes. I'm going to text Bob so he can mobilize a team."

I sent Bob a text and waited for him to respond. "In the meantime, let's see what we can find out about the other Ricketts brother. Surprisingly, we haven't seen Ricketts yet, or anything else that puts him here on the island." I also needed to do more investigating of the local FBI office. I had circumstantial evidence, but I really needed something concrete that linked them to the compound. I needed something damning.

"You're right, it is strange that we haven't spotted him at all. Guys like him would be flaunting his money in the richer parts of the island. I haven't heard his name come up in conversation with any of the locals. Are we sure he's even here at this point?" Guy asked.

"He's got real estate all over the world. How easy would it be for him to just charter a private plane and hop to another country?" Adam asked.

"I'd say pretty fucking easy. The problem I keep circling back to is that this guy has too much money. What would be his motive for human trafficking anyway? He's not someone

trying to climb a metaphorical ladder like Robbie was. The asshole is a real-estate tycoon. He makes more in real estate than he would in trafficking, right?” Jones asked.

“What if all of the property investing is a front? What if he invests the trafficking money into real estate so that no one questions where the money is coming from? You just assume someone with his wealth makes it all from the properties. What if that isn’t the case?” Yates said.

“What good does it do him to continue when we know for a fact he is making money off this real-estate venture? We have the tax records to prove it,” Guy said.

“What’s his lifestyle like? Who does he send money to? Does he owe anyone? All of those could be incentives. Take a look at his brother. Maybe he plays a role in the why aspect,” Yates suggested.

“Whatever his deal is, he’s getting into one of the cars and leaving,” Garcia said through the radio.

“Does he have anyone with him?” Jasmine asked.

“Actually, yes, another man just exited and hopped in the car too.”

“Any chance you can follow them?” I asked.

“Not unless you brought us another vehicle to use, one for land,” he said. “Not to mention we’re on the other side of the canal. We wouldn’t be able to get to them on that side in time.”

“That’s frustrating,” I growl.

“Yeah, tell me about it. I don’t think they are going to go anywhere we can access by water, hence the car and not one of their boats,” Mendez added.

“Shit, why didn’t we prepare for this?” Wells growled and balled his fists.

“Don’t beat yourself up. This slipped by me too.” It’s even worse; I was a trained FBI agent. “We’ll make sure we have someone there to watch him return.” They wouldn’t make another move without him.

Now it was a waiting game.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

adam

We planted the note during the cover of night. Abby and I were on the morning shift. It was the same time yesterday that we saw the woman with the armed guard. I felt like I was holding my breath the whole shift, hoping that the door would open again. When it finally did, I heard Abby's breath hitch beside me. The same woman was holding the same basket. The same asshole as yesterday followed her out and then took up his post, leaning against the stilted support to the house.

The tension between Abby and me was thick as we waited for her to lift the ripe melon we placed the note under. When her hand touched the large fruit, I saw her face scrunch up in confusion as her fingers made contact with the paper. She tugged it out from beneath the melon and kept the paper on the ground. I watched as she quickly read it, and then her head shot up to see if the guard had seen the paper. He looked oblivious as he stared at a boat that passed by us on the canal. With him temporarily distracted, the woman looked around and locked eyes with us. She nodded her head very slightly. If I wasn't looking for it, I would have missed it entirely.

She then buried the note back into the dirt. It wasn't like she could take it with her and get caught with it. She placed a non-ripe melon on top and then picked the one from the vine that had concealed our note. She looked at it like it was her salvation. It went in her basket, and then she continued walking through the garden.

When she was done, she picked up her basket and took it over to the armed guard, who let her back into the house. She was gone, and we had to hope she'd be able to make sure a door or window was left unlocked so that the FBI, or we, could sneak in without bringing any unwanted attention. I doubted that the other two buildings would be as easy to access; I doubted the occupants of each house were allowed time to socialize with each other so that they could share a message. We'd have to worry about accessing those two buildings when it came time to breach them.

"She found it," Abby told our group over the radio.

"Perfect, now we hope she can do what we asked," Christine said.

We were about to stand up and go inside to change out our shifts when I saw a blacked-out SUV pull up to the house. Abby let out a hiss as a man in a professional black suit and dark sunglasses stepped out of the car. Another man got out of the passenger side, and Abby nearly put her fist through the dock we were sitting on.

"What's going on?" I asked her, but I had a sneaking suspicion. These were FBI agents.

"Those are agents. What are they doing here?" She was quiet for a moment before she added, "It's just two of them. They'd be smart enough to bring way more than two agents to shut this shit down, if that's what they planned to do..."

I read between the lines. "So you suspect they are here to assist Ricketts' brother."

She nodded. "I can't think of any other reason. They clearly aren't here to investigate. If they were, they would have had a warrant, and there would have been a whole bunch of suits—so that's out." Another minute passed before she spoke again. "How are they helping? Is it just exchanging information, or are they moving bodies? This is all information I need to specifically address in my report."

"We'll keep watching and figure it out. Do you need to notify Boss?" I asked.

“I do.” She pulled her phone out and started snapping photos of the SUV and made sure she got photos of the license plate, as well as far away photos, which included the houses in the compound. That way there would be no disputing the location of the SUV when the photos were taken.

“God, I would kill to have a bug in that house right now,” she mumbled.

I nodded, feeling the same. “Best we can do is document everything going on out here. Let’s stick around until the agents come out. You can record them getting into the vehicle. Do you know the agents personally?” I asked. I knew the FBI was a massive agency, so it was unlikely—but maybe she met one when she went rogue and scoped out their office.

“Dark hair dirtbag is the one I interviewed. He’s an arrogant ass,” she said with a hiss.

“That’s good news. You can identify him in your report. If he doesn’t have records on his computer or desk regarding his trip here, then you can correlate that to his involvement. They are required to keep records when they start an investigation, aren’t they?”

She simply nodded, because as quickly as the agents came, they were leaving. They walked briskly from the front door and back to their vehicle, scanning their surroundings on the way. Abby quickly grabbed my face and began to kiss me. The action obscured both our faces and made us look unsuspecting, as if we hadn’t even noticed them pull up.

Abby had her phone propped up between her thighs, so the agents had no idea that they were being recorded. The longer they stood there scanning, the more video we had to identify them. They got back into the vehicle and took off, and Abby pulled her face away from mine.

“Done so soon?” I asked breathlessly.

She gave me a tight smile in response. “We need to get this sent to Bob right away. I want to look through the records and see if I can get a name and more info for the other agent, and confirm the SUV is registered to the bureau. If they are using

bureau resources, then they are going to be in hot fucking water.”

“Then let’s get to it.” I stood up and offered her a hand. She took it, and I gave it a gentle squeeze.

We had evidence of a corrupt FBI office, and it was a big break for Abby. I still didn’t understand why the local field office was involved in this anyways. Weren’t agents paid well for putting their life on the line and what not? Then I almost snorted; I remembered how little I was paid to drop into combat zones.

Abby and I entered the rental and switched with Christine and Wells. We gave them a brief rundown of what we saw and strict instructions to photograph and video any other cars and people who arrived. We were now on track to build a solid case against the FBI, and we were going to need as much evidence and as many witnesses as we could get.

When we got back to the resort, Abby went straight to her room.

“I can’t access my work computer with you guys around. While I trust you, I’m going to have to make sure I keep my nose clean. If I’m going to take down a rogue faction of the FBI, then I’m going to have to make sure I’m not doing anything illegal either,” she told me.

“What about the rules you’ve broken so far?” I asked her.

“I was simply vacationing in Nassau. None of this became related to my job until I saw members of my organization actively assisting a trafficking organization. You and your friends need to remember that I in no way, shape, or form abused my power to assist you,” she said, turning deadly serious. Her eyes were fierce, and her body language was tense.

“I’ve got it. Don’t worry,” I assured her. I almost told her to calm down, but I liked having my nuts attached to my body, and I wanted to keep them that way.

She entered her room and slammed the door behind her. I had a feeling that she hoped the agency had just been lazy or

this ring had just been too good to identify. I could only imagine the tight position that investigating her colleagues put her in. Not only was she going to make a case against those who were supposed to work alongside her, but she would be under heavy scrutiny for making that exact case in the first place. This had so many possible endings, and I was sure that freaked her out. She could put together a whole case for the agency, for them to bury it and fire her.

Her quick fuse seemed justified here, and I did my best to let it roll off. One thing was for sure, my team would have her back. We'd make sure the FBI knew that she did everything by the book, even if the rest of us had to blur a few lines.

I went back to my room to change into something more comfortable. Basketball shorts and a tank felt so much better than the jeans and t-shirt I had been in earlier. The island was hot, all the time.

I moved over to Guy's room and briefed the team about what we saw.

"Do you think we should put our own case together against the agency?" Garcia asked.

"I don't know. I'd be very hesitant to. I don't want Abby to think we are undermining her. If anyone knows what it takes to out one of her own, it would be her. I think that's something we have to let her take the lead on. She's made it very clear that she's got to be by the book. I think we just take on the trafficking ring. It helps keep her in the clear," Jones said.

"I agree. Let's not make this any harder on Abby. We will turn over anything directly linking FBI agents and other law enforcement directly to her for her case," I suggested.

"Do you think she's told Boss by now?" Jasmine asked.

"Oh, I'm sure she did. He was her mentor and the one who sent her here. She's going to have to prepare him for this," I answered.

"How do you think he's going to take it?" Jasmine asked, concern taking over her facial features.

“I don’t know. I imagine better than Abby. He already had suspicions. Why do you care?” I asked.

“I have a soft spot for the old goat. He saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself,” she answered.

“Once we confirm that he knows, you can send him a very vague text to check in. How’s that?” Jones asked.

“That works, thank you.” She shot Jones a look, and I knew that she was appreciative of his understanding. I felt a pang of jealousy. I wanted that between Abby and me.

“In the meantime, let’s get ready for tonight’s watch of the compound,” Yates suggested. We all agreed.

□

“Night-vision scopes?”

“Check.”

“Night-vision goggles?”

“Check.”

“Smoke grenades?”

“Check.”

“First-aid kits?”

“Check.”

“Bulletproof vests?”

“Check.”

“That’s the last of the list,” Wells said.

“Good, then we can get everything on the yacht and the speed boat. When are Garcia and Mendez supposed to be back with those?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I have no idea where the refueling station is from here or how long that takes,” Wells said with a shoulder shrug.

“Have you talked to Abby since she went to her room to work on the case?” Wells asked.

“No, I haven’t. I figured I’d give her some space. She was pretty upset by the whole thing.”

“I can imagine. That’s like us being forced to capture and arrest a defected soldier or something,” he commented.

“Yeah, glad we were never put in that position. It’d be weird to capture one of our own.”

“I don’t envy her. Can you check in and see if she needs any equipment for tonight? I’d rather be safe than sorry. I threw in a ski mask in case she doesn’t want her face seen, since she has to stay in the clear and all.”

“That’s a good idea, man. Thanks.”

“No problem, let me know what she says,” he told me as I opened the door.

“Will do. Keep your phone on you.”

I exited the room and walked down the hall to Abby’s room and knocked on the door. I waited for a moment, and there was no answer. Was she asleep or in the shower? If she was in the shower, I might just have to show her how much I appreciated her not inviting me.

I started to get hard just thinking about her naked body under the steaming hot water.

I reached into my wallet and pulled out the spare room key I swiped when she wasn’t looking. She didn’t know I had it. I wasn’t above stealing if it meant I had access to her any time I needed it. In fact, I couldn’t see her being too angry about the swiped card. She would have probably done the same thing.

I opened the door after the lock beeped and lit up green. I entered the room and felt a little confused. The bed was made, her laptop sat on the desk, and the room was quiet. I went over to the bathroom and opened the door. It was empty.

She wasn’t in the room, and she would have texted me to let me know she was going down to the lobby. I had a feeling she wasn’t even in the building any more.

“What the fuck, Abby...”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

abby

I hovered over Bob's contact in my phone, took a deep breath, and hit the call button. Four rings later, he picked up.

"Hey, kiddo, how's it going?" he asked.

I let out a frustrated sigh. "It was going great until I figured out that your suspicions were right," I told him. I couldn't be any more vague in case he was somewhere he couldn't talk or we could be overheard.

"Hold on, let me get somewhere secure," he said.

Two minutes later, I heard a car door slam.

"Okay, I'm in my personal vehicle now. My suspicions about the local office are right?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, yes. We located the compound that the Ricketts brothers are using to run their trafficking ring. We've laid eyes on one woman so far, but I have a feeling that all three houses on the property are full. I saw two agents getting out of an agency-registered SUV," I explained.

"Damn, that's pretty ballsy. They must be confident that no one has any idea what's going on."

"It's ballsy as hell. They were in uniform and everything. They didn't bring anyone with them or appear to leave with anything more than they came with. This makes me question their motive for involvement and how deep this goes."

He let out a frustrated sigh of his own. "That's a question I wish I could help you answer. I think you are going to have to

treat it as if it's the whole field office, until we can prove otherwise. Just because an agent isn't involved doesn't mean he wouldn't be sympathetic to his colleagues getting in trouble. Did you get any video?"

"Bob, you know I did," I told him with a smirk.

"I know, I know, you're one of my best. That would have been second nature to you. Have you opened an official investigation?" he asked.

"I've created the report, but I haven't forwarded it yet. I'm torn between calling it complete and looking for more evidence. I was waiting for your directions on how to proceed," I answered.

"What more evidence do you need? Once Brent Ricketts and his cronies are arrested, we can launch a full investigation into the ring and bring your findings about the office to the higher-ups," he said.

"The problem is none of us have laid eyes on Brent Ricketts. We've only heard about his brother. I'm not even sure if Brent is on the island," I said. I nervously fiddled with my fingernail, because the next admission was the most troubling to me. "I'm worried that the other agents might try to step in and stop us from raiding the compound. I want enough evidence so that they can't possibly try to pin me with interfering in a made-up investigation. You know that they will do whatever they have to to get out of this. Even make a fake investigation and backdate it. They'll spin the story to say that the video proves they were investigating a fake complaint called in. It's all so infuriating, because I know exactly how they will try to fight this. The more evidence, the harder it will be for them."

"We've always posed that risk, Abby. That's what happens when you take on corrupt law enforcement. It doesn't mean it isn't worth trying. You just have to be ready to stand your ground." His voice was so sincere and so passionate, I knew I had to try. "You have Jasmine and Jones' crew there as witnesses. When it comes to the formal investigation, they will have some credibility with the department. Look at what they

did in Vegas. Look at their impressive record of service to their country. You won't simply be ignored. What you've done is impressive too." His words helped ease my worries. He was right; they had to take this seriously. There were enough witnesses, and the bureau was already aware of Brent Ricketts from Robbie's investigation. If there were ties found between Ricketts and agents, then that should be enough.

He continued on. "I took a look at the cases investigated and closed by the local office. They haven't done anything of value in over three years. There's a small drug bust here and there, and they occasionally catch someone trying to illegally smuggle goods, but that's it. Nothing high profile, nothing related to missing persons or violent crimes on the island. That's all shit that's going to get looked at in the internal investigation."

"How far will it go?" I'd never seen anything like this happen within the bureau before.

"It will go deep. They will conduct a probe into everyone's finances, including yours. They will do extensive interviews with you, the agents at the field office, and my assets. They'll tear that office apart, sift through all the records, all their cases and investigations, and it will happen quickly. One day everything is normal, and the next the investigator arrives with his crew, confiscates phones, electronic devices, and computers. They'll shut down the office, and the officers will be instructed to go home and wait and not to contact each other. There will be agents watching them, and the full hammer of justice will come down on them when it's discovered they were aiding and abetting a human trafficking ring."

"So I can expect the same treatment?" I asked.

"No, not at first. You'll submit the report, and they'll let you know what actions they are going to take. Like I said, they'll review your finances to make sure you aren't being bribed into doing this, they'll interview you, and they'll give you instructions to follow. You probably won't be allowed to contact me or my assets."

The idea of that hurt, but it would be for the best anyways. I was going to need to make a clean break from the group after the investigation was over. The longer I stayed and called them my friends, the harder it would be to turn my back on them and walk away.

“Be ready, because you are going to get mixed reactions from your peers. You’ll have colleagues telling you how brave you were, and others will call you a snitch,” he warned. He sounded just as pissed about the accusation as I felt.

“That’s nothing new. I get the same reactions from civilians,” I countered.

“Then you’ll be prepared. You’re sure the local agents don’t suspect anything is amiss?” Bob questioned.

“Not that I know of, but I’m not perfect. The fact that we can only confirm one Ricketts brother is here makes timing and arrests kind of tricky,” I added. “I’m worried about tipping off the rich asshole and then us never finding him. Yet I know we need to step in and rescue anyone held captive in those houses.” It felt good to voice all my concerns to someone who would understand them, someone with a law enforcement background. My mentor.

“We’ll worry about him later. We both know we need to prioritize the safety and wellbeing of the captives. Our arrest of this ring will also come under scrutiny during the investigation of the other office, so it needs to be as by the book as we can get. We will have to tie these two crimes together and explain that you didn’t involve the local agency because you suspected they were aiding and abetting, and that’s why you submitted a report to me. I’ll authorize the assistance of the agents from our office out of precaution and go from there. I’ll send them out on the next flight. But let me be clear, if you see the traffickers trying to transport the women tonight, step in, even if we haven’t arrived yet. The guys could be on record as assisting you with the arrests as private citizens, and they’d be protected because it was with your permission. Putting the health and safety of the victims first will be the right call in the higher-ups’ eyes. As for Brent Ricketts, there will be plenty of fish to fry when you make

arrests. They may be willing to share what they know and cut deals. The man won't be able to hide forever. We'll freeze his accounts and he'll eventually have to crawl out from the rock he's hiding under."

"You're right, and the sooner we conduct the arrests, the less chance we have of the field office figuring out what we are up to," I added.

"Exactly, we don't need them to forge any documents to cover their asses. If only two officers showed up, and they didn't take anything with them, they weren't there investigating. They were likely negotiating something," Bob commented.

"Exactly, they were there for two minutes tops," I added.

"When are you going back to the compound to watch?"

"Tonight," I answered.

"Okay. Do me a favor. When you hang up with me, finalize the report. Send me all the supporting evidence you have. I'll be on the next flight out with more agents."

"Okay, I will." I let out a deep breath.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

I nearly snort. "Who wouldn't be? As far as I'm concerned, this is bigger than New York."

"You'll be fine. You are a great agent, and I will back you up all the way. It isn't just you putting your reputation on the line. I'm doing the same, and I'll be making this as big of a deal as I possibly can. Once you send me your report, I can get started on mine," he reminded me.

"You took enough heat for the Las Vegas raid," I teased.

"You're funny, kid. You know taking the heat is part of our job description. We are held to a very high standard, and there is no room for fuckups, even though we are human and mistakes are bound to happen. Just do what you can," he reassured me.

“Why is this all so complicated?” I asked, trying to keep my head from hurting.

“Because this isn’t a solo operation for intel with a field office you trust. This is espionage on your own agency, and that is never easy,” he answered without missing a beat.

“Okay, sending over everything now,” I told him, and I opened my laptop. The words of my report stared back at me.

“Stay safe—and good luck tonight. I’ll see you soon.”

I ended the call and shot off several encrypted emails to Bob with everything I had gathered on the field office and the human trafficking ring. Bob was going to need to submit the report and gather more agents with no ties to the local FBI office here. In a matter of twelve hours, they’d be here, and then we could raid the compound and arrest a bunch of fucktard douchebags. That was assuming they didn’t try to make a transport tonight. If they did, then it would be just me and the guys.

I hoped we didn’t get that unlucky. I knew they were probably itching for some action, but I really didn’t want to intervene without Bob and the agents he’d bring. I wanted as many credible witnesses as I could get.

After I forwarded the emails, I powered off the laptop and grabbed my room key. I slipped on a pair of sneakers and peeked my head out into the hall. None of the crew were there, so I quickly made my way to the emergency stairs so I wouldn’t chance running into one of them in the lobby.

Adam was going to be pissed when he realized that I left the hotel, but I didn’t care. At this point, their investigation on the ring had enough evidence to warrant a full-scale raid on the compound, and those wheels were in motion. Their job here was done, aside from surveillance tonight—but a nagging sensation told me my investigation into the FBI office was not. The video of the agents showing up to the compound was circumstantial at best. Sure, Bob said I had enough to bring the big dogs in, but what if I could get more? I wanted to get evidence that proved they actively ignored reports about trafficking. If I could get more evidence against them, well, I’d

feel much better about this. I was putting my credibility and career on the line, and a minute's worth of video was the only real evidence we had. I needed something that couldn't be explained away easily.

My best bet was to go back to the FBI office and speak with the agent I interviewed before. After all, he was one of the two agents that showed up to the compound. He was inexplicably tied to all of this, and I just couldn't pass up the idea of digging his hole deeper.

I threw on another bikini with denim shorts and a crop top. I had a cover as a partying criminal justice college student to play, and I knew just how to use that angle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

abby

“**W**here the hell have you been?” Adam asked as I approached the resort. I had purposefully been ignoring his calls and hoped he’d just focus on his mission instead, but I had been wrong.

“I had something I needed to do to strengthen my own case against the FBI,” I said as I approached.

“Did you tell anyone what you were doing?” he asked, still fuming.

“Yes, I told Bob what I was up to,” I lied.

“But you couldn’t send me a quick text?” he asked. His face scrunched up with concern, and hurt flashed across his eyes and pinched his eyebrows together.

Annoyance and frustration instantly flared in my chest. All the mixed emotions I had about his case came to a raging head, and I couldn’t hold back any further. Bob didn’t feel the need to question me like this, so why was Adam? Why couldn’t he trust me to have my own back? “I don’t know what’s gotten into you, Adam, but I don’t have to tell you if I’m doing anything. I am not your girlfriend, and you are not my superior.” I let out a breath and dropped the tone of my voice lower. “I suggest pulling the giant stick out of your ass before it gets stuck there. I didn’t want to argue with you, but you are pushing my buttons.” I jammed my finger into his chest and then walked away.

“Don’t walk away from me,” he hissed as he stalked behind me.

I turned around quickly on my heels. “Did anything I said sink in?” I asked, exasperated.

“Oh, I heard it, but it bounced right off. You may not be my girlfriend, but I still care about you. It’s a common courtesy to let others know when you might be doing something a little risky, especially if it could jeopardize their mission,” he said.

“I didn’t jeopardize your mission,” I said, seething. My fists clenched at my sides.

“You better hope you’re right,” he said and walked away from me.

I hoped I was right.

I went back up to my room and opened my laptop again, searching to see if Agent Gordon made a report for my “*incident*.” A few minutes later and a couple of refreshes and there was still nothing. I felt disappointed. I had secretly hoped that maybe Bob and I were wrong, and maybe they were at the compound checking out a lead or something. Every minute that passed with no entry into our system, the more obvious it became that he was a dirty agent and their whole office couldn’t be trusted. Bob and I did the right thing by calling in other agents and preparing to move forward with the raid.

I stood up from the desk and then slammed the laptop closed.

Time to go face the music. It was going to get dark soon. Adam and I would be on shift before we knew it. I walked over to Guy’s room and knocked on the door. Wells opened it and allowed me in.

“How’s your case coming along?” he asked as I stepped through.

“Unfortunately, it’s exactly as Bob predicted. The more I dig, the more I realize he was right.” He nodded his head, as if he could relate.

“Did you figure out which agents visited the compound?” he questioned.

“Yeah, they are in the report I sent over to Bob.” No point in sharing names he wouldn’t remember.

“Do you know any of them?” he asked. I was surprised by his small talk, because Wells didn’t seem like the type to want to get into nitty-gritty. He seemed like a man of action, not words.

“One, but I don’t personally know him, thank God.” I could only imagine how unpleasant it would be to have a personal or working relationship with Agent Gordon.

“I suppose that’s good,” he muses.

“Yeah. If any of my acquaintances were involved, I might lose my fucking mind,” I admitted with a bite of anger. I imagined someone I knew sitting behind the desk allowing all of this to happen. It made me want to do terrible things to a punching bag.

“Speaking of losing minds—Strong came in here pretty mad. He wouldn’t say what happened, but I’m assuming it has something to do with you,” he suggested. His eyebrow raised playfully.

“That’s a fair assessment,” I replied with a fake chuckle. None of it was actually funny.

“Can you tell me what happened so that I can help him? I don’t want his mind fucked up when we are this close to the end. While we’re on babysitting duty and are only entering if there’s movement, we have to plan as if that’s going to happen. And when your head isn’t in the right place...that’s how people get hurt.”

He sounded like he was speaking from personal experience. Part of me was torn—I really wanted more details about some of their missions from their time in the Army. I was really curious as to how Yates lost his leg or Adam got all the scarring that hid beneath his tattoos—but as a prior service member, I knew it was best not to ask. Could trigger PTSD and shit.

He looked at me impatiently.

“He’s into me.” He raised his eyebrows, tilted his head, and mashed his lips together. The *obviously* face. “I think he’s imagining a wedding ring, two-point-five kids, and a white picket fence, but that’s not in our future. I can’t give him anything except a fun vacation of casual hookups. My work is too important to me, and I don’t have room in my life for anything else. He keeps trying to boss me around like I’m his girl, this is his mission, and his job is at stake.”

“And you told him this?”

“In different words, yes. Despite that, he still tries to boss me around and keep me under his thumb. I’m not about that in or out of a relationship, and I won’t let that shit slide. He likes me, I get it. I set boundaries he doesn’t like, so he’s grumpy.” I crossed my arms in annoyance and to put up a physical barrier between me and my feelings.

“He’s grumpy because he wants to protect you, and you won’t let him,” he said with a chuckle. The amusement annoyed me. I wasn’t amused at all. I felt like I was left out of a bad joke and was struggling to hear the punchline.

“In a very basic nutshell, that’s part of it,” I agreed.

“I don’t want to tell you what to do, but can I make a recommendation?” he asked me. I was under the impression that if I said no, he’d still make it anyway. But I humored him, because at least he asked instead of trying to boss me around.

“What’s your recommendation?” I asked with a sigh.

“Go find him, and fuck his brains out before we leave tonight. After it’s over, think long and hard about what you really want for yourself and not what you need to do for others,” he said.

I pulled my head back in shock at the crude suggestion. I shouldn’t have been surprised though; he was a dude who probably saw me as a hot bro, his friend’s girl. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Strong told us briefly about your motivations, your undying commitment to your cause. I admire it wholeheartedly. We felt the same about answering our nation’s

call. But at some point you have to take a step back and look at what you accomplished, then leave the fight for the next well-trained soldier,” he said. His shoulders settled, and his expression was sincere, imploring me to read between the lines. My job didn’t need to be my identity.

“So you think I should just quit the FBI, post up with Adam somewhere, and play house?” I asked, not quite believing what I was hearing. It was hard to keep the bitterness from my tone. The suggestion crossed a line.

“Absolutely not. Does it look like Jasmine or Christine gave up what they were doing once they got with Jones or me? No, in fact, they are doing more of it with our support. This doesn’t have to be a ‘your job versus your man’ situation. He’d support you in your career while standing on the sides. I’ve never seen him even interested in a relationship with a woman before. It’s usually just quick fucks with pretty bimbos, so this is huge for him. If you don’t think you can be part of the FBI and be with Strong—who I can see plain as day that you have feelings for—then look at other ways you can complete your mission. After everything you’ve been through, and all the lives you’ve saved, you don’t have to be a martyr. You want all of those you save to find happiness, right? You can find your own slice of happiness too.”

I took a long time to reflect on his words. I wanted to be pissed off that he suggested that I could squeeze a man as large and in charge as Adam into my life. I didn’t think he quite understood my predicament. My job was my life. It allowed me to help others out of a situation I barely survived in one piece; it was my crutch, it was where I found my peace, and it was how I battled my demons. While Adam was a great guy, and we had chemistry, that was a gamble. It’d always been my job versus everything else in my life, because it was so demanding. Not to mention, our demons were very different, and while he had sympathy for my situation, he could never truly understand it. He could never truly understand me if he thought he could pressure me into something more.

“And how would I find my own slice of happiness when my job is the only thing that has made me happy for as long as

I can remember?” I asked, my tone sounding quiet and defeated.

“You join us. We have the same mission. Think about it. You came here to aid us in our mission to free these trafficked women, and you discovered the betrayal of a whole field office. We are all ingrained to want to make the world a better place. Do that as a part of our group, you’ll be doing what you love, with someone you could fall in love with. Lord knows he’s already fallen for you,” he countered.

“Adam is in love with me?” A rock sank to the bottom of my stomach, making me feel nauseous.

“He hasn’t admitted it, but I can read between the lines.”

I was a smart woman; why didn’t I see this coming? The answer was simple if I wanted to be my own psychologist about it—I didn’t see myself as loveable.

Fuck, no wonder he was acting that way. He was practically a caveman, the way Christine and Jasmine described their men. Nothing I said got through to him because it wasn’t anything he wanted to hear. All he wanted from me was to hear me say that I wanted what he did—that I wanted us to work. Deep down in some part of my heart I kept locked away, I wanted that. I truly did. But I didn’t want to let go of my career, and I didn’t know if I’d have room for both in my life. I didn’t want to break his heart when I failed to make enough room for him. It was better not to try, better to avoid failure. He put me in an impossible place. I had to choose between my love for my career or my developing feelings for Adam.

Did I love him? Maybe. Everything happened so quickly. I barely remembered all of Christine and Wells’ wedding, but I remembered how Adam looked at his friends, and his face lit up in happiness for them. He drank and let loose and dragged me to the dance floor where we had the time of our lives. The chemistry between us climbed to new heights before we had no choice but to run upstairs and fuck it out of our systems—some ammonium phosphate to smother the flames. But they

were never really extinguished, only hidden under the wet blanket I threw on them.

Adam was strong and brave and always put others before himself. He was smart, had a sense of humor, and looked hot as fuck naked. His gaze had a way of cutting right into me; he had a way of making me feel beautiful, despite what I'd been through and how I'd used my body. He knew my past and accepted me for it. He looked at me and saw me for what I was, not for what others had done to me or used me for. Plenty of men gazed at me naked, but none of them made me feel wanted in mind, body, and soul. Adam had; his eyes told me he wanted it all. And that absolutely terrified me. I'd rather take a bullet than confront those feelings head on.

I was going to have to choose between a job that patched me up when I was a broken mess and a man who made me feel whole.

What was I going to do?

“All right, get out of that head of yours. Adam and the rest are on their way back up, and you look like I kicked your kitten,” Wells said. He looked slightly guilty, and I almost felt bad for making him feel that way. Almost.

I let out a snort.

“Much better.” His smile was contagious. I bit on my lip to hide my own.

CHAPTER THIRTY

abby

“All right, we’re leaving in twenty minutes. Everyone go take care of your last-minute needs. It’s going to be another long night,” Jones ordered.

“Meet back here in fifteen,” Wells added.

I stepped out of the room and felt Adam’s eyes on me as I left. I knew he’d follow. If the man had a chance to corner me, he would. It was the typical alpha-hole thing to do.

I stood outside my room door and swiped my key when Adam’s hand rested against the doorframe. I felt the heat of his body trapping me between the door and his hard torso.

“We need to talk,” he demanded. He left no room for argument in his tone or between us. I opened the door and then pulled him inside. When the door closed, I slammed Adam into it.

“No talking, only this.” I pressed my lips to his. I slid my hands under his shirt, and my fingers traced the grooves of his abdomen. His hands immediately grabbed my hips and jerked me closer to him.

Wells knew Adam better than I did, and if this was what he thought the man needed, then I wasn’t going to argue. It couldn’t make things any worse; our wires had already crossed so many times. How was one more time of bumping uglies going to hurt? Actually his “*uglies*” wasn’t ugly at all. It was actually a very good-looking penis.

I grabbed the edge of his shirt and pulled it over his head. I moved my mouth down his neck and then down his smooth

chest, leaving kisses as I went. He moaned at the sensation, then I felt his body tense. I looked upward and saw he was biting his lip as he looked up to the ceiling. His strong jawline smiled down on me. I tweaked his nipple and smirked in defiance. He quickly rotated us so that my back was pressed against the door. He lifted my shirt up and left kisses on my cleavage.

“You’re right, this is much better than talking,” he said to my right breast.

“Mhmm,” I moaned as his hand found its way into the front of my pants and under my panties.

His finger slipped inside of me and was met with no resistance. I wanted him inside me the moment I slammed him against the door. I was already wet for him. Whenever that man was near, I was wet for him. He was a fine piece of tattooed muscles. Knowing that he wanted me gave me a high I hadn’t felt in a long time. There were a lot of things he made me feel; some of them were a first. That absolutely terrified me.

From the expression in Adam’s eyes, I saw that Wells was right. Sex was exactly what Adam needed. As long as he didn’t ask me to marry him after this, we’d be okay until after the mission. This would be enough for now.

I mewled as his finger slipped in and out. When he added a second finger, my head hit the back of the door, and I let out a loud whimper. I needed more.

“We don’t have much time,” Adam said.

“Then what are you waiting for?” I asked between breaths.

“You’re right, what am I waiting for?” He let out a throaty chuckle. The sound stirred my insides. I loved that I delighted him that much.

He spun me around and pulled my pants down. His hands left my body only to unzip his fly. I barely had time to take a breath before his dick was in his hand and it was guided to my entrance. I took one breath and then he was in. I heard his sigh of relief and felt him withdraw. He entered again, and the

sensation had me wanting to fall to my knees in pleasure. The chemistry between us was heightened by the sense of danger that we both felt coming for us. Add that this mission had a time limit and expiration date—it was a recipe for heartbreak. Yet we were both buying. Full-on lust and understanding.

“More,” I said, and he immediately complied.

He picked up his pace, and he reached around me to place a hand on my left breast, and the other went loosely around my neck. If anything, it was to help stabilize my head as he pounded into me from behind, but I couldn’t ignore the insinuation of rough play, and I quite enjoyed it. His hand pinched my nipple, and I cried out.

“Do you like this?” he whispered into my ear.

“Yes,” I panted. *More than you will ever know, big guy.*

“What about this?” he said and reached down to touch my clit.

“Yes,” I said with a whimper. He could throw me off the roof of the building and ask if I liked it, and I’d say yes if it meant he’d fuck me after.

“And this?” he asked as the finger on my clit increased the pressure there.

“I like it so much that if you stop I might have to kill you,” I said breathlessly.

“Well, who am I to tempt death?” he asked and put his mouth to my neck, gently nibbling on the skin as his finger and his dick made me climb higher and higher to the peaks of ecstasy.

“I’m going to come,” I warned as my hands reached behind me and played with the hair on his head. I tugged on it, so he’d feel a bit of pain, to hopefully send him over the edge; we were running out of time.

He didn’t say anything, but he didn’t have to. The groan and curses that left his throat as I tugged on his hair told me everything I needed to know. That, and his extra rough thrusts, told me he was right there with me.

I leaned my head back as my muscles clenched, lightning shooting up my spine. His thrusts continued until he grunted and began to slow down. When they stopped completely, we stood still for what felt like thirty seconds, just heavily breathing—basking in the sex afterglow. He pulled out, and it felt like he took a piece of me with him. That realization had me at a loss for words. I wasn't ready to feel something like that. Maybe it was just the clear expiration date in my head. Bob would be here soon, and within the next twenty-four hours or so, I'd help the agents raid the compound, and this would all be over. I'd fly back home, and I'd never see Adam again.

“We need to clean up and get going. They are expecting us any minute,” Adam said to my back.

“Of course.” I pulled up my pants and made a mad dash to the bathroom to clean up and then traded places with Adam. “So we're good now?” He leaned against the bathroom doorway, his shoulder against the trim.

“Yeah, we're good,” I answered with a fake smile.

He might be good, but I was feeling anything but. He made me feel things that I didn't want to feel. I didn't want to miss him when he stood right in front of me. My sadness should be caused by Lilith's death, not mourning a relationship I never had in the first place.

“Then let's go.” He nudged me out the door.

I tried to ignore my heart—which somehow climbed up my throat. Instead, I focused on getting my head in the game. We rejoined the others and quickly exited the resort, taking the stairs and exiting out the back. It was getting dark as we stepped onto our rented boats in Potter's Cay with no issues.

Me: We're on our way to stake out the compound again.

Bob: Remember we're on our way. Don't take any action unless they are trying to move the victims. If they do, get some evidence of that.

Me: Understood.

“Remember, we are just here to observe. The team of agents are on their way.” I pinned them with a warning glare. “We aren’t using any of this equipment unless the traffickers make moves to relocate the victims tonight. Got it?”

They all gave various acknowledgments of understanding.

“I have to say this, even though I don’t want to. I can’t have anyone going rogue. Not when we are so close to wrapping this up with a nice little bow. If I give an order, you understand that it’s because I am a federal agent. If you don’t comply, you are resisting an order given by law enforcement and hindering a federal investigation?” I asked.

They all nodded.

“Glad we’re clear. I’m looking forward to a nice, quiet night of babysitting.”

Our boats left the dock, and Wells guided our speedboat toward the canals on the west side of the island. Jones followed in the yacht behind us. We remained quiet, because while it was dark out, it wasn’t late. People were still out and about on the beach, and we didn’t want to draw any attention to ourselves.

When we were a mile from the entrance to the canals, we stopped. We waited in silence as Guy and Garcia watched from the windows inside the rental home. Guy had the drone hovering at the house with the night-vision camera to see if he could pick movement outside. Jasmine, Christine, and Yates all had fishing poles out on the yacht, giving us the cover of tourists out night fishing. None of us spoke, and none of us really even moved, except for the occasional cast. We were all in our own heads, waiting for this to all finally be over. I thought we all wanted to know that the women inside were safe and sound, being returned to their families.

My phone vibrated in my pocket.

Bob: ETA four hours. Any activity?

Me: None yet. We're outside of the main waterway. Watching via drone. Guy and Garcia are in the rental house keeping a close eye.

Bob: Roger.

“Guy, is the compound quiet now?” I asked.

“No one has been outside for the past thirty minutes. I’d say it’s safe to come through as long as you are silent,” he answered.

Those of us in the speedboat quietly made our way up the canal and then killed the trolling motor right behind the compound. We dropped anchor and kept watch from our bellies on the floor of the boat.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

adam

Abby nudged me awake. I'd been laying with my mouth open, a small puddle of drool soaking into the carpet of the boat. "Wake up. SUVs are pulling up, and they aren't Bob's."

I raised my head slightly and scanned the compound. Several blacked-out SUVs parked in front of the houses. Several men in suits stepped out and walked up to the houses.

"Do you think they are there to make arrests?" I asked her.

"Absolutely not. They wouldn't be in suits. They'd be in tactical gear, with vests and everything. They'd have ambulances on site to treat the victims. Something's very wrong." I could barely make out the worry on her face, but the distant headlights provided just enough ambient light.

"They are being transported tonight?" A shot of adrenaline rushed through me. Go figure that they'd make a move the night that we were on orders to sit back and babysit.

"We can only assume. Let's see what happens. I need a couple of minutes to observe before I make the call." She pulled out her phone and dialed up Boss.

"Bob, several FBI agents just rolled up," she whispered. She paused for a moment to listen to whatever he had to say. "No, they aren't there to breach. They aren't tactical," she answered the question I didn't hear him ask. "No, nothing else yet. Strong, take a few photos of the SUVs. Flash off," she ordered.

"Mhmm," she whispered into the phone again.

Another shot of adrenaline mixed with fury shot through my body as a woman was escorted out. Her hands were tied, and tape covered her mouth.

“Bob, looks like they are transporting at least one, likely more for the amount of vehicles they have. If we don’t want to lose victims, we have to call it, now. How far are you?” There was no mistaking the worried urgency in her voice, nor the way her foot silently shook back and forth behind her.

I snapped several photos as I recorded the agent manhandling the woman.

“An hour is too far,” she said, sounding slightly panicked. She was right. A lot could happen in that time. Hell, a lot could happen in five minutes.

“I really thought I was going to have you here for this.” Her leg started shaking more. She wasn’t as cool, calm, and collected as she led everyone to believe. She got nervous too; she just masked it well. Except for when she was with me.

“Okay, okay. We’ll do it. See you soon.” She paused and then added, “I don’t need your luck.”

Her eyes snapped to mine. “Looks like we’re on our own.”

“Fucking shit.” Shit was going to go from zero to one hundred real quick.

Abby reached for the radio. “Okay, change of plans. Looks like they are working on a transport and we’re going to stop them. First things first, I’m going to sneak over there and tamper with their vehicles. You guys need to get prepared. Hopefully I can buy us enough time until Bob and his team arrive, but if not, we need to be ready to go in,” she whispered.

“Roger, we’ll suit up now. Garcia, get over here. Guy, keep the drone up in the air but be prepared to hop in the car and follow any moving vehicles,” Wells directed.

“I don’t like this,” I whispered to Abby. The unease in my gut told me that something bad was going to happen. It was the same feeling I had when I followed the man upstairs—before he blew a building sky high, nearly killing me in the process.

“Neither do I, but this is our only shot at preventing a full-on confrontation that puts everyone at risk. This makes sure they can’t get away. I’m going to go fuck with their tires. Cover me, okay?” she asked, handing me the rifle with the scope.

“Didn’t we tell you Yates was the sniper?” I tried to bite back a smile. I’d rather cover my girl anyway. If I couldn’t be there right beside her, the least I could do was cover her six with the scope. There was no one I trusted more with her safety than myself.

“Don’t act like you aren’t a bad ass either. You’re going to let him cover me? What kind of caveman are you?” she asked before she put her gun and shoes on the side of the boat. She slid over the side and quietly slipped into the water. I handed both her gun and her shoes to her. She silently swam with them over her head until she made it to the compound’s property. She squeezed the water out of her shirt and tested her radio.

“Still working?” she whispered.

“We read you loud and clear. The radios are water resistant,” I whispered back.

“Thank God.” She let out the smallest of sighs. “I only thought about that once I was in the water.”

She slipped her shoes on and quietly snuck along the outside perimeter of the grounds, near the water’s edge. I watched her black silhouette move silently. If there were no headlights nearby, I wouldn’t have been able to see her at all.

She turned left and followed the furthest property line where it met the neighbor’s yard, and she crept alongside some short bushes. I occasionally saw the top of her head peek over, but most of her was hidden by the foliage.

“When the coast is clear, I think someone should break into the storage shed and remove all the guns. If not, at least do a number on the lock so the weapons can’t be accessed,” Jones whispered into his radio.

We needed to limit the rouge agents and Reapers' ability to fight back.

"On it." I could certainly fuck up a lock if need be. I was the strongest and could use brute force to bend the lock into something they'd have to cut through. "Yates, watch Abby's back while I'm busy. I'll get in the prone next to the building and take back over when I'm done."

"Roger," he answered.

I took off my shoes, not bothering to even bring them with me. My feet were tough, and I was going to be standing on grass. I'd be stealthier without them. I held my rifle over my head as I slipped into the water and silently made my way to the shore. I crept up the right side of the shed to provide me with cover as I waited for the best time to make my move. I could see Abby's crouching form as she moved to the far side of the first SUV. In her radio, she let out the tiniest grunt as she punctured a hole in the tire. Then another as she sabotaged the back tire.

"Go with all four if you can," Yates whispered. "They can still get pretty far on two wheels if they try."

"How am I going to do that without being seen?" she huffed. "Never mind, I've got it."

She got down on her belly and slid under the car and punctured a hole in the inside of the two other tires. I watched as the height of the vehicle slowly sank an inch. In a few minutes the vehicle would be on its rims.

"Get to the next one. They will be back any minute with the next victim, and surely they'll notice the tires," Mendez whispered.

I checked out the lock, and it was a large industrial one. It might be a bit of a challenge to bend. It would be very obvious from a distance if it was bent out of shape. But tampering with the locking mechanism wouldn't be. I pulled out my Gerber—a multitool—and jammed the knife into the lock. I twisted the knife around and heard springs snap inside. I bent the tool up sharply and then the blade snapped off inside.

I pocketed the Gerber and dropped into the prone position and picked up Abby watch. “Gun shed is out of the equation,” I whispered.

“Roger,” Garcia answered.

Abby moved to the next SUV and sliced the two front tires. It leaned forward at a weird angle. She released two more tiny grunts, signaling the demise of the last two tires on that vehicle.

“Keep going, Abby,” I whispered. I heard voices coming from the house on the far left and several lights turned on. I swallowed back a fit of rage as I tightened my grip on my weapon. I didn’t want to think about the assault going on. I wanted nothing more than to bust through the door and put a bullet through the asshole’s brain. But Abby needed to make sure they couldn’t escape. We did the woman no good if she could be rushed out a door and thrown into a vehicle, never to be seen again.

Abby moved to the final vehicle—the one that held the restrained victim from earlier. There wasn’t a single guard with her, but she wasn’t a flight risk; her hands were handcuffed to the grab bar over the windows.

She saw Abby and started to stir. Abby put her finger to her lips at the window, and the woman nodded, then went still again. Abby dropped to the ground. The back door opened, and several suits came out with another victim. Abby had punctured the second tire when they made it to the vehicle.

“Does something look funny to you?” one of the suits said to the other as they pushed their hostage into the back of the vehicle.

“Did you forget to add air to the tires?”

“They didn’t need it,” the first suit answered. I couldn’t see his face, but his voice carried, and it sounded anxious.

“Let’s get them out of here. We’ll fix up the tires and come back.” They didn’t bother to check out the other vehicles. They slipped into the driver and passenger seats.

“Abby, they are about to move,” I whispered into the radio. A bit of panic began to stir in my gut. I had to keep myself from getting up and sprinting across the yard to pull her from under the vehicle.

The doors shut and the SUV turned on.

“Abby get out of there.”

She hesitated. “I can’t, not without them seeing me. I’m clinging to the underneath, and I’ll drop when we get a little further from the compound,” she whispered.

“But they’ll only get faster,” Yates warned.

“I’ll survive,” she answered. “They’ll get away with two women. I can’t let that happen to them.”

“Then what do you want us to do?” I asked.

I was afraid she didn’t hear me—she paused for a few seconds. Only silence answered us. “Get ready, because I don’t think there’s any way to proceed without letting them know we are here. They are bound to find out in minutes when the next batch of agents exit anyways,” she finally answered.

“So we’re doing this then?” Garcia asked.

“We’re doing this,” I answered at the same time Abby did.

“Abby, I’m going to take out those last two tires. You need to stay extremely still. That will stop the vehicle safely at your current speed and keep you from getting hurt. When the tires are out and they get out to check on them, then you can knock their ass out and free the women. Got it?” Yates whispered.

“Roger,” she responded.

“You better hold on tight in case they spin out. Three, two, one...” I heard the silenced round and the loud hissing of the tire.

“You okay, Abby?” I asked as the vehicle swerved a little.

“Roger. Yates, get the other one,” she whispered urgently as the vehicle kept moving.

“Three, two, one...” The silenced round fired off and made impact with the last tire. The vehicle squealed further from the houses, creating some distance between us and her.

The SUV’s door was thrown open, and the driver stepped out. He bent to inspect the tires, and Abby reached out, covering his mouth. Her leg kicked out and tripped him. He fell backward, hitting his head hard on the ground. She checked for a pulse but remained under the car.

“What’s going on?” the other suit asked as he stepped out. Abby swung her leg out again, tripping him before he could bend to check out the tire. He tried to catch himself. Abby rolled out from under the vehicle, wrapped her arm around his neck, and put him in a chokehold. Her legs were wrapped around his, and her other hand was placed over his nose and mouth. He tried to fight her, but he burned through his oxygen and sagged against her.

“They’re both out. I’m going to free the women and cuff the agents in the vehicle,” she whispered.

“Roger.” I felt a surge of pride in her. I knew she was capable, but it was something to see her in action. She was quick and so sure of her movements. It was as if it was a well-choreographed scene for a movie and not real life.

She freed the women from their cuffs, and they took off down the road. They ran in the direction of the canal’s exit. In minutes, they’d be able to see the yacht and get help from Jasmine and Christine.

Abby grunted as she lifted the men from under their arms and shifted them into the SUV. She cuffed them to the grab bars and turned off the vehicle. The latch engaged, and she tossed the keys into the bushes near her.

She ducked behind the cover of the vehicle. I let out a sigh of relief. Phase one was complete. Now we had to hope it was like shooting fishing in a barrel.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

adam

“All right, everyone, in positions. Jasmine, send a text to Bob. Tell him we have no choice but to breach,” I ordered.

“On it.”

“I’m coming around the back. Let’s revert to the plan,” Abby suggested.

“Roger,” we all answered in hushed unison.

The team slipped off the boat and into the water behind me. They joined me on the grass, all of us soaking wet.

“Team one, furthest house to the left. Team two, center house. Team three, furthest house to the right. Team four takes the front yard, making sure no one comes running out the front. Any last questions?” Abby asked after she reached us.

No one uttered a word. Her eyes met mine in the darkness. There were so many things I wanted to say, but I wouldn’t—not with an audience.

Her eyes skimmed the group. “Keep your head in the game. Remember, don’t shoot to kill. Rubber rounds only,” she warned.

We all nodded. Abby quietly spun and led the way across the back lawn, using the cover of darkness to keep her hidden. Her handgun was out and at the ready. Her rifle was strapped to her back. She was the only one authorized to use deadly force. Everyone else was only allowed to as a last resort. We’d

make do with rubber rounds unless we were about to get shot ourselves.

She tiptoed up to the back door of the center house. We were team two. Guy started making his way around to the front yard where he'd down any suspects trying to escape. "Ready and in the prone," he whispered into the radio.

Abby stuck her thumb up in the air. Outside of house one, Wells had his thumb up, and Jake was standing to his right, ready to clear the first room as soon as the door was open. Outside of house three, Garcia was kneeling in front of the door, much like Abby was, and he had his thumb up, with Mendez there ready to charge in and clear the room.

"Breach," Abby whispered the order into the radio. Abby lowered her thumb, and she tested the doorknob; it was unlocked.

She silently pushed the door open and then dropped to the ground like we'd gone over. The lights were off, and as I pushed my way into the room, it was easy to see that it was empty. I quickly moved to the next room, and Abby followed. She was perfectly capable of running point, but I'd rather be her bullet shield.

I cleared the next room—empty. I heard snoring coming from the next room over. I pointed to the wall. Abby squeezed my arm to confirm she saw my signal. I exited the room and opened the next to find five sleeping men. One bolted upright and cried out. He moved his hand toward the nightstand, toward his pistol resting there. I lunged for him and grabbed his wrist before he could touch the metal of the gun. The air in the room moved as Abby rushed past me. I barely had time to blink before she had her knees in the back of a suspect. She zip-tied his wrist as I finished fighting with my suspect. He was the biggest out of all the men in the room. In a few more seconds, I had his zip-ties on and secured him to the headboard. He wasn't going anywhere. Abby trained her pistol on the man who sat straight up in bed, staring at us. I dragged him from the bed and deposited him on the floor. I bound his wrists with zip-ties and left him face down.

“Status check,” Yates said into our radios.

“Room of five suspects found. Three incapacitated. Two more to go, and then we will continue clearing the house,” Abby whispered into her radio. Her gun was already trained on the last two suspects. Their hands were up waiting for us.

“We’ve found four, still clearing rooms,” Garcia answered.

“Three restrained, clearing still in progress,” Jones added.

Something moved out of my peripheral vision. He resembled our target, Ricketts’ brother. Abby’s head whipped around. She bounced on her toes to keep herself light. “Do you have these two?”

Before I could answer, she took off running after him. No doubt he was looking for a way out of the house. Abby disappeared out of my sight, but I heard her retreating footsteps as she pursued him. I wanted to chase after her, but I wasn’t going to let these two pricks get away. They’d screw everything up for us and cause us even more danger. It wasn’t worth the risk, and Abby was capable of a foot chase.

“You can make this a lot less painful for yourself and get on the fucking ground. Hands behind your back,” I growled in a low warning.

They took several seconds to size me up, along with the rifle strapped to my back and my Glock—still aimed in their direction. They dropped to the floor like rocks.

“That was the right call.” I bound them to the other beds. None of them were leaving this room until Bob’s team came for them.

I moved to the next room and found it empty. I came across an unlocked cell phone. I made a mental note to come back and look for it.

I moved outside the next door, and three gunshots popped off—the sound echoed through the building.

“Whose shots fired?” Guy asked through the radio. A panic bubbled up inside me. Those shots came from inside our

house, from upstairs. Someone was resulting in extreme force, and I had to hope it was Abby.

“From house two, Abby was in pursuit of Ricketts’ brother. Send backup to house two so I can check it out.”

“I’m fine,” Abby panted loudly into the radio. “Mine,” she said breathlessly.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it...I’ve got this covered. Watch my six,” she said.

She sounded winded, but I had to take her at her word. I continued a quick search of each room of this massive house.

I heard another round of shots go off coming from the direction of house three.

“Mine, but I too might need some backup. They have ARs in here,” Mendez said.

More shots went off, five to be exact.

“Taking fire,” Garcia said, breathlessly.

“Fuck, on my way,” Yates said breathlessly into the radio. He charged to house three to assist.

“Does that mean we aren’t getting backup?” I asked.

“Wait two minutes, let me confirm team three is covered, and I’ll rush over there,” Yates said.

I continued moving onto the next room, checking the pantry and the lower cabinets of the massive kitchen. I found an under-the-stairs closet and half expected to find a tied-up woman in there. Instead it looked like there was nothing but trash and messed-up sheets on a ratty mattress. The cuffs on the floor gave me an idea of what happened in this space. I tried to block that out. I needed to keep moving so I could check on Abby.

“Status update, Abby?” I asked, thankful that at least I could talk to her through the radio.

“Kind of busy... Can’t talk.” The sound of a good punch could be heard through the radio, and I hoped like hell it was her who threw the punch.

I heard loud footsteps on the stairs and peeked around the side of them while keeping myself hidden. A man almost my size came running around the bottom of the stairs and back toward the kitchen where I was standing. He had a gun pointed right at me. He didn’t give me a second to act in self-defense before the shot fired. The round hit me in the vest, covered by my shirt.

I let out a pained grunt. The impact hurt like hell, and I was going to bruise like a mother fucker. On the bright side, at least the vest took the round. The man looked surprised as hell that I was still standing, likely not realizing that I had a vest on. I quickly charged him as another shot went off, hitting me again. I took him to the ground, and his head bounced off the hardwood.

“Whose shot?” Yates panted into the radio.

“I took fire. I’m okay. Suspect’s down.” I clocked my attacker straight in the jaw. He had no way to defend himself. His gun was five feet away, and my knees pinned each of his arms. My hand around his throat kept him from turning away from the hit.

I felt his nose crunch under my next hit, blood splattered, but I didn’t care. He cried out in pain, and I hit him again, this time rendering him unconscious.

“I’m on my way,” Yates shouted.

I heard the front door open as I got the unconscious man into zip-ties.

“I need you to finish clearing this floor. I’m going up to the next,” I told him.

“Abby’s up there?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said with a grunt as I got up and sprinted up the stairs.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

abby

I saw the target, and it was like I had a one-track mind. Adam had this room under control, so I sprinted into the hallway and up the stairs that the suspect ran up. What was he trying to do, wake the whole fucking house? Actually, if he was smart, that's exactly what he'd do. He'd try to get any backup that he could.

"Stop running," I whisper-shouted at him.

He ignored me and gained speed. He moved out of my sight when he got to the top of the stairs—and now we played hide and go seek. I hoped to God there were no balconies on the other side of the house that he could jump from. It would be a third-story drop, but if he had a rope ladder or something, it would be nothing for him to escape. I remained silent, so he couldn't figure out where I was. Unfortunately, we'd both have the element of surprise, and I had no idea if he was armed or if he was taking this opportunity to pick up a weapon. None of this was ideal, and the stakes were high.

I kept my Glock 19M in front of me. It was best for close-quarter shooting like this, and I had normal rounds. I kept an ear out for Adam below—just in case he needed me. I continued my silent stalking down the hall. One foot in front of the other marked the seconds that ticked by. The only sounds came from downstairs.

I entered the room to my left first. Someone came up behind me, and before I could turn around, something was wrapped around my throat. I lowered my weapon just slightly so I could bring my non-dominant hand up to my throat—to

see what was wrapped around it. It felt like a leather belt. It was pulled tight against my neck, cutting off my air supply. I tried bringing my elbow back into my attacker's gut, but he quickly dodged. He pinned my arm behind my back. A sharp pain vibrated through my shoulder at the uncomfortable position. He kept his body weight behind me, pressed tightly against my back so that I wouldn't have the opportunity to break free.

Fuck that. I would not go down like that. I still had so much more to do.

I looked down at my feet without moving my head. His right foot was just to the right of mine. If I could see it, I could shoot it. I lowered the Glock and aimed at his foot, then pulled the trigger.

He let out a shocked and pained cry—the pressure around my neck disappeared. I dropped low to the ground. The force freed the belt from his hands, and it fell to the ground too. While in a squatting position, I used my leg to sweep him off his feet. He fell to the ground with a thud. Blood gushed from his foot, the scent quickly filling the air.

“Whose shots fired?” Guy asked into the radio; he sounded slightly panicked.

Get it together, Guy.

“From house two, Abby was in pursuit of Ricketts' brother. Send backup to house two so I can check it out,” Adam replied. He sounded slightly calmer than his friend, but not much.

“I'm fine,” I interjected. I hadn't realized how out of breath I was until I spoke. “Mine,” I added so they knew I fired the shots.

The asshole was on his stomach and zip-tied his hands behind his back. I secured his ankle to a bed.

“Where are you?” Adam asked.

“Don't worry about it... I've got this covered. Watch my six.”

I moved to the next room with my weapon still drawn.

“You’re going to leave me here like this?” my attacker called out.

“Yup,” I said with a wicked grin and then moved along.

I made it to the next room, and a wave of frustration swam through my veins. Ricketts could be gone by now, along with anyone else hanging up here. If they hadn’t been scared of me before, they certainly would be after my tango with the leather belt strangler. More gunshots echoed from outside the house. I hoped that the guys were okay.

“Those are mine, but I too might need some backup. They have ARs in here,” Mendez said into the radio. He was clearly up shit’s creek if he was firing and still asking for help.

Five more rounds pierced the night.

“Taking fire,” Garcia reported.

“Fuck, changing directions,” Yates responded. I assumed he was running to house three.

“Does that mean we aren’t getting backup?” Adam asked with a growl.

“Wait two minutes, let me confirm team three is covered, and I’ll rush over there,” Yates said.

I wanted to say that it was all right and we didn’t need backup, but that would be foolish. Always accept backup when it was offered. It would be nice to have someone clear rooms behind me while I searched for Ricketts. I didn’t want him to get away. I hadn’t failed a mission yet, and I wasn’t going to start now.

I heard another shot fire the exact moment I felt the impact of the blow. It skimmed the edge of my vest, and the bullet lodged itself right in my shoulder. I put my hand out to brace myself and keep the impact from knocking me over. I pulled my gun close to my chest with my uninjured arm and quickly spun around. I shot the asshole who shot me. He was already pulling the trigger on another shot—I didn’t have time to aim

for a non-lethal shot. My bullet hit him center mass—right after he fired another round. It was stopped by my vest.

Thank god. One gunshot wound was bad enough.

His body dropped to the floor, and his eyes stared above him—unseeing. I removed the weapon out of his bloody hands and kept moving. He wasn't getting up.

My shoulder burned. It felt like someone took a red-hot fire poker and shoved it in my wound. Every time I moved the arm, there was unbearable pain. I favored the arm and kept moving. Adam was going to be furious that I was shot in the first place, and second—that I was going to keep moving and pretend it didn't happen. On top of that, he'd be upset that he didn't get to put the man down himself.

I pushed through the pain with each step as I trudged along. I had to be running out of assholes to find. There was still one more floor of the house to search, and I still needed to find the women they kept prisoner.

I heard footsteps running up the staircase behind me. Adam came into view, and he looked relieved to see me.

“You okay?” he asked. His eyes were worried, his brows knitted together. A deep worry line formed on his forehead.

I nodded, because I didn't trust myself to speak—and we needed to keep quiet to keep the element of surprise. I moved to the next set of stairs. The space was dark, no one had turned on any lights to flee, and it wasn't safe to turn any on. I was relieved he didn't notice the bloodstain on my shoulder. It helped that the black vest partially covered it. He'd go absolutely nuts if he saw it, and he'd insist that I leave him to go get help—and there was no way in hell I wouldn't finish this through now.

“Can you finish clearing this floor? Just the last two bedrooms in the back,” I mouthed.

He nodded, and after one more worried look, he moved toward the rooms.

Commotion came through the radios as I was halfway up the stairs.

“Asshole charged me with a fucking sword,” Wells growled as he breathed heavily into the mic. There was the sound of a grunt and then a half chuckle.

“People are fucking crazy,” Jones said as he too breathed heavily into the mic. I heard the sound of something thudding to the floor and hoped that it was one of the traffickers and not one of my friends.

“I located some of the victims.” Garcia’s voice was filled with relief and regret. The women must be in gruesome shape.

“Christine, go ahead and raise the anchor and bring the yacht through. Be careful,” Wells said.

“Got it.” Her voice came through the earpiece crystal clear. She sounded cool, calm, and collected. Like she was made for shit like this. I was proud she was on our side.

I made it to the top of the last set of stairs and dropped to the ground to avoid the chair that flew my way. I pushed myself onto my feet and swallowed my painful grunts. My shoulder burned like a Fourth of July firework.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

abby

“**Y**ou stupid bitch. You ruined everything!” Ricketts’ brother spat. “You were supposed to enter this house tied up like the little skank you are.”

“Yet here I am. Not to fuck you, but to fuck you over. I must say how nice this feels,” I said as I shot him a predatory grin. I took a steady step toward him, not showing him just how much effort it took. I was losing blood. I hoped the dark would conceal my feet and the path I took to get here. In the right light, he would surely see a blood trail.

I watched his face go white.

“You’re fucking insane,” he said.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I retorted. I barely held back an amused snort. I was probably certifiable, a psychiatrist’s bad dream.

I aimed my Glock at his chest. “You have two choices. Put your hands behind your back and come peacefully, or we can do this the hard way—spoiler alert, I’ll still win.”

He looked down at my arm, which had my blood soaking the fabric. His eyes flashed back up to my face, and he said with a grin of his own, “I’ll take my chances.”

“You’re going to regret that.” I waited for him to rush me. I braced my feet and made sure my finger was steady on the trigger. I wasn’t going to kill him if I didn’t have to. I was hoping he’d sell out his brother when he was interrogated by investigators.

He did exactly as I expected him to: he pulled out a switchblade and charged. I was about to step aside and disarm him, but a set of hands grabbed my upper arms. I was jerked backward, and I cried out in pain. My shoulder was so fucked. My gun clattered to the ground at my feet.

The asshole kept me still against him. Ricketts continued rushing me. I pulled my feet up at the last second, relying on my captors' hold to keep me upright.

Ricketts grunted as the air left his lungs from the force of my kick. He fell backward to the floor, and the knife slid to the other side of the hall. I dropped my feet down to the ground and then stomped on my captor's foot. At the same time I smashed my head back into his nose. I felt it crunch against my hair, and his blood ran down the back of my neck.

"You bitch!" he howled. The sound pierced the quiet that had fallen in the house.

"Are you okay?" Adam asked through the mic. He sounded winded as if he was in his own brawl.

"Fine," I grunted as I broke free of my captor's arms. I bit my lip hard to suppress a scream.

I heard loud footsteps ascending the stairs and was relieved to see Adam. He charged, tackling the guy bleeding from his nose. The sound of bone crunching continued behind me as I turned around to face Ricketts. He was on his feet, and if looks could kill, I'd be dead. He held his knife, and he sized me up—likely learning from his first mistake. He wouldn't charge me a second time. I squatted down and picked up my gun. I turned it in his direction.

"Drop the knife and put your hands behind your head," I ordered. My voice was filled with a quiet venom that I hoped would haunt him in his nightmares. I wanted my voice to haunt him in his cold, dark jail cell.

"Are you stupid? Not a chance in hell," he spat.

"Oh, that's right—you wanted to do things the hard way. Let me clue you in on your little situation." I pointed my finger at him and made a circle, referring to his whole

presence. “You are threatening a federal agent with a knife. I could put a bullet between your eyes right now, especially if you take a single step in my direction.”

“Then do it,” he challenged. He called my bluff. He knew I wanted him alive. The information he was sitting on was valuable, and he was no use to me dead—just a lot of paperwork.

I put my finger on the trigger and aimed it directly at his face. I made a show of moving my trigger finger. Then I shot the wall right beside his ear.

“Drop the knife, now! This is your last warning!” I screamed at him. I no longer cared for the nice cop routine. I was going to make him shit his pants.

He didn’t.

I aimed at the hand that held the knife and pulled the trigger. The knife dropped from his hand as the bullet met its target, the meaty part of his forearm.

“Fuck you!” he howled. He pulled his arm against his chest to protect it.

Now we matched.

“I bet you wish.” I took him to the ground. I pulled my good arm back and punched him several times in the face. I felt his tooth break against my hand, lacerating my knuckle. He turned his head to the left to avoid another hit, but it didn’t matter. I chewed the inside of my cheek as I used my bad hand to hold his head in place. He struggled under my weight. He tried to push me off of him, but I wouldn’t budge—my legs wrapped around his. I shifted my bad arm and dug the elbow into his wounded arm. He tried to grab for my throat, and the motion triggered something in me that caused me to snap. I threw another punch to his face, and instinct took over. My fist kept flying, over and over. I had no real purpose except to extend his suffering, to make him pay. I sank into a rage as I imagined how many women he choked out. I imagined the women that may never be found, and I completely lost it. My

vision turned red, and my chest burned with a hatred so raw, I could have breathed fire.

It was like I slipped back into the person I was after my deployment.

“Abby.” The word came from behind me, but I couldn’t be bothered to turn around. It was like I didn’t know how to stop hitting the man. I wasn’t physically capable of self-control.

“Abby!” Adam yelled at me.

I still couldn’t stop. All I could focus on was Ricketts’ pain. I never got this kind of satisfaction in New York—I watched as my colleagues busted in the back door of the hidden floors of the high rise and arrested everyone.

I felt another set of hands grab me by my arms. I screamed in pain. Yates and Guy appeared in front of me looking startled—like I was a rabid animal. They shook their heads when Adam cleared his throat behind me. They grabbed Ricketts, cuffed him, and then dragged him down the stairs and out of my view.

“Bring him back! I haven’t killed him yet!” I shouted. I pushed against my restraints. The words flew out of my mouth, but they didn’t feel like they belonged to me. I was like a woman possessed.

“Abby, you’ve got to get it together. Boss is going to be here any minute. Do you want him to see you like this?” He didn’t sound angry but sad. Sad for me—as if it hurt him to see me like this. “It’s all over.” His tone was soft, as if he was speaking to a small, scared child, not a raging woman.

It worked, because he stirred something else inside of me. He reached inside my chest to find something other than rage.

He sighed as I slackened in his arms. The insides of my cheeks were raw after biting through the pain in my shoulder. “I’m going to let you go now. Don’t go chasing after him,” he warned.

“I won’t,” I promised. The fight left my body completely, and a weight was lifted from my chest.

“What the fuck happened to your shoulder?” he growled so low, I could barely make out the words. It was as if he took my rage from me. I sucked in a deep breath, the same moment he poked the area next to the wound.

“Exactly what it looks like,” I hissed.

“Holy shit, we need to get you checked out.”

I shook my head wildly. “Not yet, we are going to go find those women.”

“You were shot, Abby. That’s serious!” he argued. “Look how close it is to your heart!”

But it didn’t hit my heart; it was my shoulder. My lungs and feet still worked, so I was going to look for the victims, whether he helped me or not. “What else is serious is the fear those victims are probably feeling—wondering what’s going on out here.” I shifted on my feet and looked away. Hopefully a subject change would make him forget about my shoulder, at least temporarily. “Did they find any in the other houses?”

“Yes, they found around twenty in each house, but that’s not surprising. Those houses weren’t as large as this one. We expect to find more here. The problem is they haven’t been in any of the rooms we cleared,” he said.

“Where were they in the other two houses?”

“In the back of the house in the upper floors.”

“At the furthest point from the exit,” I commented.

“Yeah.”

I thought about the layout of the house. It was massive, and on stilts, so there was no basement to check. So we needed to look up. We were on the fourth floor, and the house looked even taller than that from the outside, like there would have been room for an attic.

“I know where they’re at.” I walked around, staring at the ceiling.

Adam watched me for a moment.

“You think they are in an attic?” he asked.

“That’s the only place they can be. It’s probably soundproofed and everything. We just need to find the door.”

There were no open and obvious doors. I searched each room, looking for hidden switches or latches. After fifteen minutes, I started to consider the possibility that I was wrong. I circled back to the last bedroom, and there was still no door. I threw open the closet door, feeling frustrated. I tipped back my head while I let out a frustrated sigh.

I opened my eyes and grinned.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

abby

I found it tucked away in the closet ceiling.

“Come press this button.” My voice wavered with repressed excitement. Once we got all the women rescued, then it would feel like it was really over. Then I could finally take a breath and take a step back.

Adam stepped behind me, his front pressed against my back. His body was warm and solid, lending me the last bit of strength I needed to see this through. What I was about to witness was likely going to be rough. Phantom smells and sounds filled my memory and caused me to shiver. Adam put a hand on my shoulder to reassure me as he reached out to press the button next to the attic door. I was too short to reach.

The latch released with a quiet click. The door opened a crack, and Adam pulled the ladder down. I heard whimpers coming from space. Foul smells slowly got stronger. I regretted not taking one last deep breath.

“My name is Special Agent Abby Brookes. I’m with the FBI. We just arrested your captors, and you’re safe with me. I’m coming up, slowly.” I kept my voice gentle. These women were traumatized, and the last thing I wanted to do was spook them further. I perfected a soothing tone during my time in the high rise in New York. I held several women at night when they’d cry on my shoulder. I’d whisper reassuring words and promise them that one day things would get better—and they did. For this new set of victims, things would get better too.

I stepped onto the ladder.

“Be careful.” Adam’s hand rested softly on my back to make sure I didn’t fall.

“You’re telling the woman with a bullet in her shoulder to be careful on a ladder,” I told him with a smirk. I wasn’t a piece of delicate china, but I still liked the fact that he cared. I didn’t know if I’d ever get used to someone caring for me. I’d been so self-reliant that I had to remind myself that someone trying to take care of me is a reflection of their character, not my ability to fend for myself.

“Yup,” he said with a goofy grin. I rolled my eyes and tried not to smile. It felt good to be cared for by Adam. I tucked the thought away to digest later.

I peeked my head through the hole and instantly wanted to puke. The first thing that hit me was the smell. I’d smelled portable toilet stalls in the summer that smelled better. There wasn’t a single bathroom, just a couple of buckets. My eyes watered at the stench as they searched the room. There were fifty women. Fifty fucking woman in an attic without a bathroom. It was stiflingly hot, with not even a box fan to help cool the space. It was a wonder they were still alive—it was heatstroke conditions.

The women were dirty and smelled strongly of body odor. Their clothes looked like they hadn’t been washed in weeks. Their hair was in various stages of tangles—but one thing was consistent. None of these women looked older than thirty.

They all remained silent as they studied me. “I know you are all probably terrified right now, but I’m here to help,” I told them. I was careful not to move too quickly. Slow, gentle movements were what they’d need to feel safe.

My eyes sought out the woman who found my note. She gave me a small, sad smile.

“Are they really gone?” one of the women whispered. She had tear stains on her face, and her eyes were red.

“Your captors? Yes, they’ve all been arrested. Right about now they are probably dealing with some pretty pissed-off FBI

agents,” I said with a chuckle. I hoped the soft, relaxed gesture would put them at ease.

“We aren’t safe!” another woman shouted. The rest of the women in the room tensed and scooted further away from me.

“What do you mean?” I was saddened by their distrust, but I knew this wasn’t about me. This was about the rogue agents.

“The FBI, they’re in on it,” she whispered. I actually couldn’t hear her, only read her lips.

“I’m not with them, I promise.” I held my hands up in a pleading motion. “You’ve seen agents here before?” I asked.

Several of the women nodded their heads sharply.

“They aren’t good men. You don’t want to know what they did to us,” a blonde spoke up from the back.

“I’m sure I have an idea,” I said, noticing her ripped clothing.

I studied the room, and the longer I observed, the more appalled I felt. “Let’s get you out of here, shall we? There will be some good agents who you can speak to about what happened. We will put together a case and prosecute all those involved, agent or not,” I promised.

Slowly they moved from their spots and headed toward me. They looked like terrified puppies afraid to leave their crates. I slowly descended the ladder. Adam had his hands on my waist to steady me the whole way down.

“How’s your shoulder?” he asked.

“I barely feel it,” I lied. I was in agony, and I was definitely going to need a trip to the ER, and very likely surgery.

“Liar,” he accused.

I wanted to resort to my signature shoulder shrug but caught myself before I made the pain worse. The women came down the ladder one by one and crowded into the room. Adam stayed behind to make sure that all the women made it down

safely. I led the victims out of the house and out into the back yard.

The place was a fucking zoo. I severely underestimated the amount of agents that Bob was sending. Holy hell.

“What about the rogue agents?” I asked Bob when I found him. He barked out orders as others moved around him. There was no missing the *I’m in charge* aura that he projected.

“Already detained. That video you sent was enough to hold them on suspicion while the raid took place.”

I grinned. “You’ll have a lot more than suspicion soon. The victims shared that the rogue agents were in on it. On top of that, it seems like they participated in the assaults. Make sure you get every last victim’s statement.”

His eyes narrowed in on my shoulder, ignoring my words completely. “Are you all right? You have an awful lot of blood on you,” he said.

I nodded. “I’ll be fine.” I didn’t want to worry him. The focus needed to be on the victims. I was still standing, and as long as I sought attention soon, I’d be okay. I knew that the round missed everything vital. Bob’s attention was diverted by another agent, so he left me with a soft squeeze on my good arm, and a proud expression. It warmed something cold and hard that rested where my heart should be.

“There you are. I heard things went a little haywire,” Christine said as she came up and gave me a hug. “I’m so glad to see you’re okay,” she said mid-embrace. Then her hand slid across my shoulder.

I grimaced, and she pulled away. She looked down at her hand, which was covered in my blood.

“Depends on your definition of okay,” I said through clenched teeth, trying to make light of the scenario.

“I guess so,” she said as she grabbed my arms, spun me around, and inspected the wound closely. She sucked in a surprised gasp.

“It’s that bad?” I asked.

“I’m trying not to pass out right now. It’s pretty bad.” She sounded nervous and a little out of breath.

“Figures,” I retorted, trying to brush it off. That was just my luck.

“We need to get you to a hospital. Now,” she said and grabbed my good arm, trying to tug me to the boat.

“Yeah, not going to happen. Not until all the victims are out of that house and taken care of,” I said. I put my foot down dramatically for effect.

The victims were scared and confused. They needed someone like me to help them adjust, to help them trust the assistance from the rest of the bureau. I could reassure them that the agents that surrounded us were there to help them, not the opposite.

“The victims will be fine, thanks to you and the rest of the guys. I’ve got resources from my people on the way. I’ll make sure every last one of them has everything she needs. Now you need to help yourself.” Her tone was just as stern, and her tug on my arm was just as dramatic as my foot stomp.

“I promise I’ll go once I see that everyone has been helped.”

Garcia stepped up in front of us. “Great work.” He slapped his hand down on both of our shoulders, including my injured one.

“Fuck,” I screamed. Tears immediately sprung to my eyes, and I struggled to blink them back. It was an accident, and I knew he was going to feel horrible about this if he made me cry. There was no telling how Adam would react. He didn’t need to beat up his friend on my account.

“What?” His face was panicked. He turned pale as a ghost from the blood on his hand.

“Did you get hit?” he asked. His tone was barely controlled. I could see the worry deep in his eyes. I was touched that he cared about me to feel that way. This group dynamic was so different and difficult to adjust to. But I’d be

damned if I didn't feel like I was a part of the group. They made me feel as if I was always one of them.

"Yes, and she's refusing treatment," Christine tattled.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Garcia asked me, his eyes narrowing in anger.

I felt a presence behind me. I didn't need to look behind me to know who it belonged to. His possessive hands on my waist brought me a comfort that I didn't want to admit to. "She's fucking hard-headed."

"I'm okay. When I'm about to pass out, I will let you know," I told them.

"No, you won't," Jones said as he joined us. "I heard the whole exchange through the coms. If Adam doesn't drag you to the hospital, I will." His concern mirrored Garcia's. I could see just how serious his threat was.

Yates jogged over. "Holy shit, you did a number on that guy's face." His eyes snapped down to my hands. I forgot that my knuckles were swollen and bleeding. The pain barely registered over my shoulder.

"I guess I did." I felt slightly proud but mostly ashamed. I let myself lose control, and that wasn't like me. I was always in control.

Mendez, Wells, Guy, and Jasmine joined us, and we all stood on the lawn of the compound.

"Okay, how many of us were injured this time?" Mendez asked as he glanced around. Was this normal for them to discuss? Was something to brag about? Men were so fucking weird.

"Did someone get injured in Vegas?" I asked.

"Jasmine took a shot to her vest," Jones volunteered. He shot her a look, meant to discipline her for that.

"Bad ass." I winked and nudged her arm with my good one.

“I know I am—but look at you. Standing like you don’t have a bullet in your shoulder. I went down from a head injury more than anything,” she said.

“I actually took two.”

“Wait, what?” Adam asked, his face turning white again. So did the rest of the group.

“One to the vest,” I clarified, and some of the color returned to their faces.

“I took a couple,” Garcia said, pulling the scrap out of his vest.

“Same,” Mendez said and dug out his.

“Only one to the back—fucking asshole. If you are going to shoot me, at least have the decency to do it to my face,” Wells said as he turned and showed us the hole in the back of his shirt.

“For once, I came out clean,” Jones said with a chuckle.

“I swear we are cursed. The newest woman in the group always gets injured,” Christine observed. She pursed her lips, unable to shake her concern.

“You’re right! It’s like a rite of passage,” Jasmine said with a laugh.

“I’ve got to ask. You’re going to warn the next one, right?” I tried to bite back a pained smile. I hid the action by glancing around to observe the work of the team Bob brought with him. The agents moved quickly. The victims were already wrapped in blankets and sipping from bottles of water. There was a first-aid station with a line, and several medical professionals were tending to some of the worse-off victims.

“You mean you’re going to warn the next one?” Christine brought my attention back to the group.

“No, I mean you. I’m heading back to my field office. Bob’s got a lot of work to handle between the NYC takedown and now this investigation. I’ve got to do my part while looking for our next lead.” I planned to use my resources to try to find Brent Ricketts myself.

Christine and Jasmine narrowed their eyes, like they wanted to say something, but they held back. Christine chewed on her lip, then looked in Bob's direction.

“Does anyone want to dig this out of my shoulder?” If the bullet wasn't lodged too deep, then removing it without hospital involvement was ideal. As nice as it would be to be numbed and have strong painkillers, they'd put me out of commission longer. I needed to get back to work; I needed a new mission—a new purpose. My doctor back home could write me a script for antibiotics and painkillers.

Mendez shook his head like he wanted to lecture me about avoiding a hospital, but he didn't bother. He sighed instead. “Let's take a look.” He sat me down on a chair that Garcia pulled out of one of the houses. Wells pulled the first-aid kit from the boat and handed it to Mendez. Wells turned on a flashlight and pointed it at my shoulder.

“Have you been shot before?” Mendez asked as he opened the kit and pulled out the disinfectant. The strong smell burned my nose.

“Yeah.”

“Then you know this is the worst part.” He laid his left hand flat against my back, next to the wound. “Brace yourself.”

He poured the alcohol on the wound. I stuffed the bottom of my shirt into my mouth and then screamed into it. Adam grabbed my hand and held it. Maybe we should have gone to the hospital; at least I would have gotten anesthetic.

I could feel the heat of Mendez's face near my shoulder as he looked at it closely. “Did this graze the edge of your vest?”

He tapped the bullet with a pair of tweezers. “Yes,” I hissed.

“You got lucky. It definitely made this a lot better for you. If it hadn't, you'd be on a gurney and in emergency surgery at the closest hospital, if you survived the impact. It's in the muscle, and it's missed everything major. I'm going to dig it out, clean out the area, and close it up. You still have to go to

the hospital. You'll want x-rays to make sure there were no fragments left behind and strong painkillers to put you on your ass for a few days. They may even want to give you a transfusion. You've lost a lot of blood," he commented.

The sun was rising, and it blinded me. I closed my eyes and nodded. I wanted this over with, and if I fought him, it would drag out the pain longer.

The tweezers poked around again, and I thought I was going to lose my shit. And in that moment, I completely regretted not letting the hospital take care of the removal.

"Fuck!" The fabric of the shirt muffled the sound.

"Almost got it," Mendez mumbled.

Adam squatted in front of me. "You okay?" he asked. I wasn't going to lie to him when I visibly wasn't. I shook my head but declined his offer to have Mendez stop.

A minute later, he dropped the bullet into my hand. He poured alcohol in the wound again, and I almost vomited from the pain. It was a wonder I didn't lose consciousness. Adam held me in place so that I wouldn't thrash around.

"Just hang in there. You're almost done. I just need to close this up," Mendez said softly.

"I didn't realize they taught non-medical soldiers how to run surgeries. This is more than basic combat lifesaving skills," I joked through gritted teeth.

"They don't. I learned this on YouTube," he replied.

"What?" I asked in shock. I tried to look at him behind me, but Adam caught my head between his hands and held me still.

"I'm just kidding, Abby. This is basic lifesaving. This isn't ACL surgery. It's removing a bullet—common in combat," Mendez said with a snort.

"Have you done this before?" I asked.

Maybe I shouldn't have asked. If the answer was no, I was going to be terrified.

“Yes, but really it wasn’t much of a removal. Guy had a round graze his arm. It was more of cleaning and stitching than anything.”

“So I’m the guinea pig?” I frowned.

“An adorable and feisty one who had the opportunity to go to the hospital but opted out. Therefore you take what you get,” he answered.

I felt the sting of the needle. “Fair enough.” He was right.

After he finished stitching the wound and bandaging it up, I felt a lot better.

The commotion began to settle around us. Of course all the neighbors on both sides of the canal stood on their properties and watched everything going on around them. I was sure they’d be questioned to see what they knew. The investigation was going to be never ending. There were a lot of people in this rich neighborhood. Not only that, but there would be a shit-ton of agents to interview to determine if it was the entire field office involved or just a rotten few. Not to mention, there were going to be investigations into the local police. It was an international affair and was going to become very complicated. My face would be plastered all over this news story too, and that was really going to affect my ability to go back undercover. I’d find a way, though—I had to.

I remembered the employer and hoped now that the whole operation was shut down we’d be able to get her official statement too. I fired off a quick text to Bob to let him know about her.

The agents loaded up the last of the suspects in a van and the victims on several boats. They were going to be provided medical care at the local hospital, and then they’d be given lodging and food.

“There’s not much to do now,” Adam said as a new wave of agents came through and started taking photos of the compound.

“I guess you’re right.” There wasn’t much for them to do now that it was officially handled by my colleagues.

I never quite knew what to do when assignments were over. I had time, and I wasn't quite sure what to do with it.

“Let's go back to the resort. We could all use a nice long nap, and you could use a trip to the hospital,” Adam suggested.

I nodded, finally comfortable with leaving the scene.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

adam

The day flew by in the blink of an eye. Abby agreed to go to the hospital after she spent two hours trying to nap but couldn't sleep a wink due to the pain. The emergency room staff looked at her like she was crazy when she said she let a friend remove the bullet and clean up the area without anesthesia. The doctor who checked out the patch job actually laughed and told her she had balls. I didn't miss the proud expression on her face. The chick was tough, and no matter what she said, she was mine. I wouldn't stop fighting for her, just like she wouldn't stop fighting for those she thought needed her help.

Now that we were through the scariest part of the injury, and the mission, I could see just how much pride she took in appearing tough. She seemed to bloom when other people noticed or acknowledged that. I was far from a psychologist, but it appeared like she was compensating for the vulnerability caused by a uniform that couldn't protect her. As someone who wore a similar uniform, I learned that it wasn't what protected me—it was brothers. Abby joined the Navy and was taught she had to protect herself. She grew a hard outer shell, and when someone recognized the bravado, it was confirmation that she was succeeding—that she was more than her assault.

Our drive back to the resort from the hospital was quiet. Abby took a painkiller, which put her at ease. I followed her upstairs to her room and locked the door behind me. I wouldn't put it past Christine or Jasmine to barge in and check on her. It came from a place of caring, but I was a selfish

bastard. I wanted alone time with her; who knew how much of it I had left? She made it abundantly clear that despite what we built between us, all we'd be was a casual fling she had while on assignment. The idea of that fucking stung.

What we found was the real deal, she was the real deal—but she was in her own head about the semantics. I was a firm believer in, “*Where there's a will, there's a way.*” She clung to her career like it was her seatbelt, protecting her from the horrible things life would throw her way—like heartbreak and failure. She was more than enough for me. She was perfect. The only way we failed was if we didn't try.

She dropped onto the bed, careful not to land on her bandaged shoulder. She was practically asleep before her head hit her pillow. I pulled her phone out of her back pocket and laid it on the nightstand.

“What am I going to do with myself when you're gone?” I asked her quietly. Her soft snores were the only response.

The afternoon went quickly, and before I knew it, the sun was setting. Abby woke up looking like she slept for days. Drool rested in the corner of her mouth, and she wiped it away in a rush. “What time is it?”

I looked at my watch. “Eight.”

“Holy shit, I need to get packed and catch my flight.” She jumped up in a panic.

Confusion and hurt smacked me in the face. I thought I might have another couple days before she'd be okay to fly. “You're leaving so soon?”

Why would she leave so soon? Why go through the extra discomfort? It wasn't like she hadn't earned a real vacation. In fact, she was probably owed several. She was instrumental in the take down of two large human trafficking rings within months of each other. That had to be some kind of record. Add to that impressive resume a successful investigation into a rogue FBI office that knowingly abetted the kidnapping and selling of women—she was unstoppable. She was going to

take that momentum and roll it into an excuse. She was going to use her work to run away—to hide from me.

She stared at me as if I might break. No, not me—just my heart. “Yeah, I told Bob I’d help him with the processing back home. And I want to be there when the rogue agents are interrogated. They’ve already been flown back to the States, and questioning could start in a matter of hours.”

Bob would wait a few hours for her if she asked, but she wasn’t going to. “I knew it.” My fists clenched. I wanted to be calm and collected. Sure, she was wounded pretty badly, but that didn’t give her a free pass to sabotage her life.

“Knew what?” she asked. Her forehead creased in frustration. We both geared up for the blow that would end everything. It was going to end exactly how she wanted it to, and I’d give it to her. I’d always give her what she wanted, even if it wasn’t me.

“I knew you were going to make excuses to leave. I just didn’t expect it so soon. I thought I’d have at least another couple of days.”

“You always knew I was going to leave. It’s better this way.” She turned and started tossing clothing into her bag.

“Better for who?” I challenged. My heart beat hard in my chest, demonstrating just how much power she had over it.

“For all of us.” Her tone was flat. Distant. Emotionless. The exact opposite of how I felt.

“Oh, forgive me. I didn’t realize you were kind enough to save my friends from the heartbreak too?” I scoffed.

“Our friends,” she corrected. Her lips were in a firm line. I knew that my jab hurt her. Good. It was only a fraction of the hurt I felt.

Only silence fell between us. The air felt heavy, like a horse was sitting on my chest. It was suffocating and intense. I wanted to look away. I was uncomfortable with letting her see how much she hurt me, but I didn’t want to be the coward in this situation—that was all her.

“Look, I know you want me to stay. I hear you loud and clear, but can you try to understand that I am doing what’s best for me?” Her voice was softer than before but filled with more quiet passion and determination.

“I understand that. You have the best intentions, but I think you are running from what’s best for you.” I softened my tone too. I wasn’t going to get through to her by shouting. No one ever saw reason when they were being screamed at. It was in the moments of quiet sincerity that the truth sank in.

“Why would I be running?” Her eyes brimmed with tears and implored me to understand her choice.

I was going to hit her with her truth, whether she was ready to hear it or not. “Because you’re terrified that you’ll get hurt. You’re scared that our relationship will be just like your time in the Navy, nothing but a huge disappointment. I wouldn’t do that to you, Abby. You’re beating me to a punch I never intend to throw.”

She sucked in a shocked gasp. “You don’t hold back, do you?”

“No, but neither do you,” I answered. “That’s why I’m surprised you’re doing that right now. Holding back, preventing something that could be the best thing to ever happen to you. I wouldn’t hold you back. I’d only push you forward in the direction you want to go.” Those words were my truth. I know she felt it, because her lip trembled slightly. She sucked it between her teeth to keep me from noticing. Then she let out a huff as she pushed her hair back off her forehead. She winced when she moved the injured shoulder.

Her voice was a sad whisper. “Adam, we’ve been through this over and over. Why don’t we make the most of this time instead of arguing?” Her lip trembled again, and I wanted to press it against mine. But I didn’t know if she’d let me, since she was trying to put distance between us. “I’d rather our last hour be spent fucking instead of arguing.” She gave me the saddest smile. I didn’t realize that sentence could break my heart and make it soar at the same time. I was never going to recover from that, but I’d give it to her anyway.

Her shoulders slumped—she let her guard down.

“I’ll fuck you into oblivion, but don’t think this is it for us. I’m not going to let you fly away into the sunset and disappear forever. It’s not going to be like that,” I told her.

“Of course not,” she said with another sad smile. I quickly put my lips on hers to erase the sadness from her face. “You want to try to fuck in that huge-ass tub?” she asked, breaking our kiss.

“Whatever you want.” She always got what she wanted—and that worried me. If she really didn’t want a relationship with me, there was no way for me to win here—to be happy. I would have followed her anywhere if she asked, but that wasn’t the problem. I wasn’t asking her to give up her career; all I asked was for her to love me back, accept me by her side. In her head, it was an either/or situation—she couldn’t possibly have both. It was a fucking shame because she deserved both; she deserved to have everything she’d ever wanted. I deserved it too.

She grabbed my hand and tugged me into the bathroom. She quickly stripped out of her clothes, and I practically tore mine off my body. If this was going to be our last time, I was going to make it count.

She turned on the hot water and then stepped into the tub. She grabbed my hands and tugged on them, wanting me to join her. I stepped over the edge, and we both stood there looking at each other. Her lips landed on my pectoral muscle, and her teeth lightly grazed my skin. Her hand reached out and grabbed my shaft. That was all it took and I was hard as a rock, sadness be damned.

I gently grabbed her arms and guided her to the edge of the tub where she could sit. She was injured, and no matter how rough she liked things, there had to be a limit. I spread her legs wide, knelt down, and put my tongue on her clit. I felt her legs shake. I placed my hands on the top of her thighs and held them firm to keep them in place. I moved my tongue in circles, and she shook. Her head tipped backward, and she said, “Don’t stop,” with a moan.

I pulled my right hand away from her leg and began to finger her, and the tub filled. She fisted her hands into my hair as her body shook. She let out a scream, and I felt her clench around my fingers. Then her upper body leaned over mine as she caught her breath. She winced as the movement hurt her shoulder.

“Are you sure that this is a good idea with your shoulder?”

She nodded. “Yes, the painkillers help. I just moved too fast and stretched the stitches.” She slowly righted herself, and I turned off the water. If it got too high, she’d get her stitches wet, which she was supposed to avoid.

“Get in,” I ordered. I helped her swivel her legs around so that they were in the water. She eased herself in. I stepped into the tub, and she reached for me, grabbing me and bringing me to her. She took me into her mouth. My eyes rolled into the back of my head as she pleased me. Our argument was forgotten. All I could focus on was the feel of her lips wrapped around me and the way she used her tongue.

All too soon I had to stop her. I was afraid that the moment we stopped what we were doing, making love, that she’d leave. She could lie to herself all she wanted—I loved her, and she loved me. I just needed her to feel that; I needed it to be so great that she realized she couldn’t live without it.

I sat down in the tub and pulled her on top of me, so that she straddled my lap. I lowered her onto my dick and fought the urge to groan. I felt her lips latch onto my neck as she roughly kissed the skin. She lightly bit me, and then her tongue soothed the area. I used my hands on her waist to guide her up and down at a steady rhythm. Her hands trailed over my pecs, occasionally pinching my nipple.

I did my best to live in this moment, to savor the pleasure that Abby caused. It was better than thinking of the heartbreak that would be coming in only a few hours.

I raised Abby off my lap slightly and thrust upward with my hips to meet her halfway. It didn’t take much more than that for Abby to find her release or me to find mine. She let out a cry at the same time I saw stars, my balls tightened, and

a deep growl ripped from my throat. Abby sank her nails into my chest, leaving angry red marks. She even drew blood. The woman understood me, and my need for pain didn't bother her. She willingly gave me what I needed, except for her heart.

We sat there for a few minutes, soaking each other in. So many emotions flickered across her face before they disappeared. I saw how scared she was. Scared that she was going to make the wrong choice. Any choice where I wasn't in her life was the wrong one, and I hoped to God that she knew that. Or that eventually she'd realize it. I loved her, and I didn't want to let her go. I didn't have what it took to let her go.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

abby

I sat down in my seat after a disastrous go through security. I had to explain to the TSA agent three times that I was an FBI agent and required to carry a weapon at all times. He thought my badge was a fake and asked for a supervisor. When the supervisor saw my badge, he asked the idiot to step aside. He personally apologized to me and said the agent would undergo some additional training to correct his knowledge.

I grabbed the largest iced coffee the cafe had. No matter what I did, I couldn't get comfortable, and I couldn't ignore the tightness I felt in my chest. The goodbye had been hard. I could still smell Adam on me, and it did nothing but make me restless. I waited impatiently until the boarding announcement was made. The stewardess looked at me with sympathy I didn't want nor need. Instead of a witty remark, I dropped down into my seat and waited for the plane to go wheels up. I looked around and thought about how different this flight would be from my last. I'd be missing a rather large and intimidating seatmate. I sighed hopelessly. Who was I kidding? I was going to hurt either way.

My last look at Adam through the taxi window nearly destroyed me. He looked stoic, as if he was accepting the decision I made. Getting shot had hurt less than the coldness. His friends had been kinder. They hugged me and told me they were always there if I needed them. I was part of the crew, even if I didn't choose to stay with them. I planned to keep in touch, but I was hurting too much to consider texting any of

them now. I didn't know that I'd be able to pick up the phone and select their name without crying.

An older lady approached my mostly empty row. "Can I sit here?"

"Sure," I answered with a fake smile.

She put her small bag in the overhead luggage area, then plopped down into the seat next to me. She smelled like lilacs and vanilla; it was nice. I instantly considered myself lucky. The opposite alternative would have been someone with nasty body odor. "Oh honey, why do you look like you've been crying? So sad to leave paradise?" she asked. Never mind, she was a chatty Kathy. Maybe I wasn't that lucky.

"Something like that," I mumbled.

Her eyes held sympathy as they scanned my face closer. "Oh no, that's not it. That's the look of heartbreak," she pressed. She might as well have rubbed salt into my wound, because metaphorically, that was what she did.

I didn't answer her. I just stared stupidly.

"Let's try that again. I'm Monique." She extended her hand. She looked to be in her fifties, and her dress looked like it was meant for someone ten years younger. At least she could pull it off, maybe better than I could.

"Abby." I grabbed her hand and only held on for a second.

Her body pivoted to face me, and I knew I was in trouble. She was in this for the long haul. "What's got you so down, Abby?"

I was quiet for a moment, considering my options. Somehow ignoring her didn't seem like a good one. There were so many things I could hit her with, because my mind was still reeling. I had so many things on my plate now that I was returning home to face reality, one of those being Lilith. Not only was my heart breaking because of the attachment I developed to Adam, but I was going to have to say goodbye to Lilith. I didn't know her for years like Adam knew his friends, but it was enough to know her. Enough to know that I was going to miss her, and regret that I couldn't help her, for the

rest of my life. That was too heavy for a stranger on a flight. She was going to want to know how Lilith died, and I couldn't talk about that. So I went for the easy way out. "I'm just wondering if I made the right decision."

"Tell me all about it. We have a few hours," she said with a kind smile. She was one of those *fixer* types.

"It's kind of a long story," I started. I took a deep breath and then word vomited the whole fucking thing, leaving out the human trafficking or the investigation into the FBI. When I was done, she sat there open mouthed. She looked like she was grasping for words, like a fish gasping for water.

"I need a minute," she finally said.

I laughed for the first time in hours. "Tell me about it. I've needed a lot of them."

She finally strung together some words, but I wasn't sure if I was ready to hear them. "Abby, it sounds like what you had was special. He liked you, his friends liked you, and he was on board with your career. Not many men would be," she prefaced.

"I know, but my career is my purpose. It's my higher calling, to help those who can't help themselves. If I don't have that, I have a relationship that could end at any time, for any reason. That's a hell of a risk to take...for love." Why I voiced my deepest fears to a stranger, I couldn't tell you.

"Not any more of a risk than the rest of us take. Do you plan on retiring when you get older? You won't have your youthful appearance forever. What would you do then? What would make you happy after you could no longer be an agent?" she asked.

"I...I don't know. I never really thought about that day," I told her. I'd always lived in the present. It was what my missions usually required of me.

She sighed as if she was explaining rules to a toddler for the third time. "You live in the here and now. Maybe you should think about the long game, like your friend Christine did. She created her own way to help others, and you could

too. You don't need a badge to rescue those in need. You're the one who decided you need to choose between love and a career. You don't need to. He accepted your job and its unconventional nature." Her eyes pleaded with mine—she wanted her words to sink in. "That's so rare, it would be a shame to waste it," the woman said with a soft shake of her head.

I shook my head. She didn't understand *why*. "If I kept my job—kept using my body to seduce secrets from nasty men—that wouldn't be fair to Adam. It doesn't matter what he says he's cool with. He deserves better than that."

"Who are you to decide for him? He's a grown man who can make his own decisions. If he's decided he can handle it, then trust that. He gave you his heart, and he trusted you not to break it. You broke both of your hearts in fear of the unknown, when you could have it all," she said.

That wasn't fair. That was a harsh characterization of what happened. "I didn't want to hurt him. I warned him from the beginning..."

"And yet fate had different plans," she cut me off. "You can control a lot of things, Abby. You are a strong woman. However, there are two things you can't control: love and fate. Why make yourself miserable when you can be happy?" she asked.

"Why?" I asked myself. *Why make myself miserable?* I thought I was protecting Adam, and myself, the same way he protected me.

I allowed myself to imagine what it would be like to have both my job and Adam. To come home from assignments and have Adam there waiting. For us to share more adventures together. We might not be able to have a traditional family—at least until I felt I had fulfilled my purpose at the bureau. If Adam was adamant that was something he could handle, then who was I to argue? I hated when someone tried to step in to tell me what I was capable of, what I could or couldn't be. Yet here I was—the hypocrite. I told Adam he couldn't be happy with me if I was an undercover agent. He was stubborn like

me. No wonder we had the same fight over and over. We ignored what the other said they needed. Mainly me, I ignored what he said he wanted, while he worked to be what I wanted. Yet I gave nothing back in return, except my body. It was all I'd known how to give.

I fucked up.

"You look like you've had an epiphany," Monique said. Her eyebrow perked up as she waited for me to share it with her.

"I think...I think I have." The emotions settled into me like the wood pieces of a puzzle, making the picture complete. It was worth the risk of loving Adam. If I didn't, I was going to suffer the same heartbreak, and I'd be the very thing I hate. I'd be my own villain. I couldn't have that.

"You have to tell them to turn the plane around," Monique said with hushed excitement. Her hands grabbed mine as she smiled. Genuine happiness beamed across her face. I felt regret for the judgmental thoughts from the beginning of the flight.

"Don't be silly, Monique. This isn't a romantic comedy." I shook my head and suppressed a laugh. Instead, a smile tugged at my lips. "The pilot won't turn the plane around because he's a romantic at heart. When the plane lands, I'll catch the next flight back to the island."

She leaned forward. "I'm so happy for you." She pulled me into a hug. Her hand hit my shoulder. I winced, but she didn't notice in all her excitement.

My stomach dropped, because I still had to find Adam and ask for forgiveness. "Me too, I just hope he's happy to see me after I broke his heart."

"If it's love, he will be," she whispered.

God, I sure hope so.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

abby

Once I made up the decision to return back to the island, and more importantly, Adam, time seemed to move very slow. I was even more anxious and nervous to pour my heart out and ask for forgiveness for being so stupid.

Shortly before takeoff, my phone vibrated with a text message.

Adam: Does your heart hurt like mine does? If so, good. You did that to us both. Despite all of this, my only regret is that I should have tried harder to convince you not to go.

My heart plummeted and soared at the same time. I had so many responses to his short text, but I kept them to myself. Life was not a romantic comedy. No one would clap for me when I got off the plane, but I was an underdog. We didn't need that.

Instead of responding to Adam, I left him on read. The only part of our whole story that would mimic a movie was our ending. The last five minutes where the man says he screwed up and begged for forgiveness, that was about to be me. In person. I sent a text to Christine. Within seconds, the typing bubble appeared.

Me: Where will Adam be in a few hours?

Christine: Does this message mean what I think it does?

Me: Please answer the question.

I didn't have time for Christine's meddling or for girl talk. I didn't want any of that; I had enough of it from my seatmate. I wanted Adam, I wanted to make up, and then I wanted him inside of me. In that exact order.

Christine: Likely on the beach. He took the rest of today off. We all did. I think you leaving really upset him.

Me: I'm about to fix that, but don't tell a soul, not even Wells.

Christine: Your secret is safe with me.

I nervously sucked down my third coffee as we took off. By the time the flight landed, I was a nervous wreck. I was on the verge of tears, and I thought my heart might stop beating from working too hard. That's how I knew I had made the right decision; my responses were because I cared that much. How could I have walked away from him?

The taxi ride from the airport to the resort was quick. With my bag slung over my shoulder, and the taxi driver twenty dollars richer, I stepped foot out on the beach. From behind my aviators, I searched for Adam's broad shoulders and tattooed body. I walked up the beach and focused on taking deep, calming breaths. My emotions spiked at every stray thought that crossed my mind.

I knew he wanted me to stay, but what if he was just saying that? What if he didn't actually mean it? The self-doubt was absolutely tortuous.

He better mean it.

I spotted a broad set of tattooed shoulders and the muscular back that I knew belonged to Adam. He sat on a beach chair, leaning forward with his head in his hands. His

feet were buried in the sand. His body seemed to fold in on itself, as if he was defeated. Guilt gnawed away at my insides. His body language told me everything I needed to know; it reassured me that I made the right call coming back to him.

I walked behind his chair and dropped into the empty chair next to him. I picked up the beer that was in his cup holder and took a sip.

“Where’s mine?” I asked as I held the beer up. I faked confidence and composure while inside I was a fucking shit show. Our proximity had me feeling so happy I could cry—and I never cried from happiness.

His head shot up, and his eyes met mine. They were so intense that I could feel their heat from here. It was like sitting under a second sun.

“You came back?” His voice was quiet, and the question was more of a statement. Then the corner of his lips upturned in a small, suppressed smile.

“My return flight was sitting on the runway when your text came through.” I took another sip of his beer. It was semi-warm, but it gave my hands something to do. I was a bundle of nervous energy, even though I knew Adam wanted me here. Sex I could do. Romance and feelings were all new to me.

“Why? I thought you had to get back. I thought you needed to start your next assignment,” he said. The confusion that pulled at his brows was adorable. He couldn’t see his own worth, just like I couldn’t see mine.

“That was a lie. An excuse I crafted because I had a hard time with the truth.”

“Why would you do that? What made you change your mind?” He fired out the questions without pausing to take a breath. His back was ramrod straight, and his fingers twitched nervously on his leg. It was as if he wanted to reach out and touch me but fought the urge.

“I’m not good with feelings. I bury them as deep as I can and try to forget about them. It’s just how I’ve operated since I was assaulted. Anger and revenge were the only feelings that

got me anywhere. I don't know how to handle anything else. The further I flew away from you, the more anxious I felt." I paused to let the fact sink in. "I also had a very nosey seatmate. She made me realize I made a mistake. After we talked it through, I decided that for once I'm going to do something for myself. I'm going to take a shot at something that could make me very happy...you." My heart hammered in my chest, but the weight lifted off my shoulders with my admission.

"What about your job?" His fingers twitched even more on his lap.

"I'm not sure. I can transfer field offices if I need to, as long as you can still handle my undercover work. I'll talk to Bob and see what my options are with the bureau or another agency. Whatever I decide, it's a conversation for another day. Today we focus on us."

"I'm kind of in shock," Adam admitted with a giddy chuckle.

"I can tell," I said with a smirk and nervous laugh.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"I've never seen you so speechless."

"Then feel free to join me," he said as he leaned toward me. He wrapped his hand around the back of my head and brought my face to his. His lips were soft but demanding. They expressed what he was unable to with words. *I'm glad you came back. I'm glad you're here.*

I was glad I came back too.

His fingers tangled in my hair, and his pinky brushed the back of my neck. He struggled to restrain himself. I knew his reaction was only a very small portion of what he wanted from me. I felt the same way. I wanted to lose myself in him. I wanted to scream his name as he brought me to new heights. This time there would be no games, no lying to myself about what it was. No ulterior motives. It would be me and the first man I'd ever loved, making love. It would be rough—just like we were. I couldn't wait another minute.

“Let’s go upstairs,” I spoke into his lips.

“God yes.” His throaty growl made me want to jump him here, witnesses be damned.

We stood up, and Adam grabbed my bag. As we walked back into the lobby, I saw our friends sitting in the dining area. They were smiling as they picked at the food on their plates. Yates said something, and everyone laughed. Then they spotted us. One by one, their faces turned in our direction. I considered stopping by their table to say something, but Adam grabbed my hand and dragged me straight to the elevator.

When the door closed behind us, his lips found mine again. He shoved me against the back of the car. We were front to front, and I felt his erection against my pelvis. No wonder he didn’t want to stop and say hi to his friends; he had been sporting that monster and didn’t want to show it off.

When the elevator doors opened again, we stumbled to Adam’s room with our lips still locked. His hands were on my ass, and my hands held his head as he walked me backward. My back smashed against his door as he fumbled with the door key blindly. The lock beeped, and the door gave way as Adam pushed through. He renewed his firm grip on my ass, and he dropped my bag in the doorway of the room. The door barely had enough room to close.

He picked me up by my ass, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. My arms wrapped around his neck. I broke our kiss for air—his lips found my neck, and his teeth grazed the skin there. His lips trailed down to my good shoulder, and his tongue did a dance on the exposed skin.

He dropped me on the bed and quickly but carefully peeled me out of my shirt and then my pants. He gazed at my almost naked body like I was a work of art. I was still in my bralette and thong, but I felt naked when his eyes roamed over me.

“I want you,” Adam whispered.

“You have me.”

“No, I mean I want you. I want more than just your body or the physical pleasure you bring me. I want all of you, even

the parts that struggle with real intimacy. I want that, and I don't care how long I have to wait. I want that from you and only you," he said in a voice so low I barely heard it. I felt the words more than I heard them.

He wanted me, even the broken parts that I wanted to fix for him.

"I want you too, even the parts that drive me half insane. I want you, and we will figure out the rest. For now, just show me how much you want me," I said while I tried to catch my breath.

He slid his arms under my back, unhooking my bralette in one swift move, sliding the thong off right after. He pulled down his pants and boxers, and then there was nothing between us. We were skin on skin, and I relished the feeling. This was mine, he was mine.

I squirmed in pleasure as his fingers played with my clit, touching me in all the right ways. He had me climbing a wave of pleasure, and I couldn't wait to find the peak. He brought his mouth down to that sensitive area, and I was unable to control the loud cries. He chuckled but never stopped his new task—to make me come in record time. His tongue moved like it had done this a million times before. He knew exactly where to stroke to push me past my limits. I laced my fingers in his short hair and gripped hard. He had two fingers deep inside me, and I wasn't sure how much longer I could last. With his other hand he grabbed my ass, hard. Then his hand left my ass and trailed up my stomach and then to my breasts where he pinched the nipples. I squirmed in his hold, unable to keep myself from falling over the edge.

"Don't come yet," Adam ordered.

"I don't think that I can hold off." My head dropped back. The pleasure was all consuming.

He pulled his mouth and his fingers away, and I whimpered in disappointment. I had been so close. He aligned himself in record speed and plowed into me. He wasted no time with soft, slow thrusts. His were fast and dominating as he quickly caught up to me, but he wasn't selfish. He played

with my clit, and he braced himself with his other hand. He leaned forward and his mouth quickly latched onto a nipple before swirling his expert tongue around it. He moved to the other and then let go. He kissed a path up my neck, leaving little bites and kisses along the way. When his lips found mine, they locked again in another passionate kiss.

His thrusts kicked up a new speed that was going to leave me incredibly sore tomorrow, but I didn't care. I wanted this.

Adam grunted with effort, and I knew he was close. He held himself back as long as possible; he wanted to be the last to come; he wanted all the control. Instead of giving him control, I figured we could compromise.

“You have me right here. Come with me,” I ordered.

I felt myself tip over the edge of pure ecstasy as lightning zinged through my body, and my muscles tightened. Even my toes curled from the feeling. Adam's thrusts became erratic, and his breaths came in uneven bursts, until he stopped thrusting all together.

After a moment his head rose from my chest where it had laid, and his eyes met mine.

“That was incredible.” His eyes were full of devotion and lust. “You're incredible.”

I realized then I was a liar all along. I wanted this from the very beginning. I just didn't know how to admit it. But as I laid there with Adam as he leaned over me, still sweaty from the incredible sex we just had, I was happy. For once, everything felt perfect.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

adam

Three months later

I laughed as Jasmine, Christine, and Abby beat us to the mountain peak. They put us soldiers to shame. We were far from our prime, and most of us were injured in some way, shape, or form. Jones had his bad shoulder, and Yates' injury didn't need explanation. We weren't in the same shape we used to be. We wouldn't be able to continue with our lifestyle for a whole lot longer. Our days hunting down the ugliest of humanity would one day come to an end, whether we were ready for that or not.

"We won," Abby taunted.

"Well, you beat a bunch of injured veterans. Congratulations," Wells countered with an annoyed grunt.

"Only two of you are over thirty-two. None of you are old," Christine retorted with a snort. Laughter danced in her eyes.

"The military ages you twenty years," I added.

"I've never agreed more with anything said, ever." Yates laughed.

"I don't want to fucking hear it. I played professional football after I left," Jones bitched.

"And you were paid well for your time," Mendez sassed with a grin.

I missed this. After we caught Brent Ricketts' brother, we split into groups and began tracking down trafficking victims. Some of the victims had been shipped out to nearby islands, to the areas sick rich men vacationed or lived. Christine and Wells traveled to Florida to locate some women who were taken there. Jones and Jasmine went to the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. Garcia, Mendez, and Yates went to a number of countries in Central America. As for Abby and me, we traveled throughout the continental United States looking into the potential buyers. We worked with a number of law enforcement agencies to investigate suspected buyers and search their homes.

As a group we were extremely lucky Ricketts kept immaculate documentation of his sales. It was all turned over to the prosecutors, but Abby was able to view it and copy down her own list.

Guy accepted a private IT gig, which paid well. No one could blame him for taking it. It was a networking opportunity that he couldn't turn down; when Uncle Sam called you back, you went. He mentioned the possibility that the job would lead to other opportunities for us to come together again, and we trusted him.

Life was a whirlwind lately. Abby and I spent most of our time together. She was finally opening up to me. We talked about what she needed and what would make her happy—I couldn't be happier.

Last night was the first time we've all been together since the Bahamas. This was probably our only chance to get together before the new set of upcoming trials, but who knew exactly when those would be? Things always seemed to be changing these days.

When we left our rented vacation home in the mountains, we would go back to our day jobs. For most of the group, they'd use their free time to locate additional trafficking victims or look into where Brent Ricketts could be now. Abby would continue that work with the FBI, and I'd be right beside her. We went to a BBQ at Boss' house last week, and I was pleasantly surprised with how much he seemed to like me and

how fond he was of our group. He talked about waiting Brent Ricketts out, letting one of his business partners turn on him for the cash reward. I cringed at the thought of how many people could go missing in that amount of time. I was working on accepting it and instead chose to focus on those we could locate and reunite with their families. We recovered only a small portion of the expected victims, but we hadn't given up yet. Christine's organization helped those we found walk along the path of recovery. They worked with the victims and law enforcement agencies to generate more leads.

"Is anyone else's knee bothering them?" Jones asked as he got down on one.

I tried to hide my smile because I knew what was happening next, all of us did, aside from the girls.

"No," Garcia and Yates said as they playfully shook their heads.

"Are you okay?" Jasmine asked with a concerned tone. Her eyebrows pulled together with worry.

He looked up at her with a mix of adoration and smugness—something that only he could pull off. "No. I think the only way it will be better is if you agree to marry me." He smiled as he pulled a ring out of his pocket. He squinted into the bright light to see her reaction.

"Are you serious?" Jasmine asked, and she placed a hand over her mouth in surprise. "This isn't a cruel joke?"

"Deadly serious. I never imagined that we'd have this kind of life when we were just teenagers trying to survive. Now that we are here, I wouldn't have it any other way. Jasmine, you challenge me, you love me, and you make me a better man. Will you marry me?" he asked. The romantic in me actually had to blink back a tear. The moment was just filled with pure love.

"Yes! Yes, I will," Jasmine answered with an excited shriek. She held her left hand out as she smiled down at him.

I felt Abby nudge my arm. She smiled at me, and I returned the gesture. "I'm not crying," I mouthed to her.

“Sure you aren’t,” she mouthed back with a smirk.

Jones slid the ring on Jasmine’s finger, and then she tackled him. They began to make out. I had to turn my back or I was going to become uncomfortable.

“Oh my God, Mary is going to kill you. She’d want to be a part of this,” Jasmine said as she broke their tongue-wrestling contest. She smacked him on the shoulder.

“Do you actually think I’d leave her out? I don’t want to endure her wrath. She’s almost as scary as you,” Jones said with a chuckle. “Mary, it’s safe to come out. She said yes!” Jones shouted.

Mary’s form appeared from the right of a large rock formation. She barreled straight into Jasmine and Jones and smiled the whole way to them.

Jasmine squealed a sound I’d never heard come from her before. Mary wrapped them in a hug. When she released them, she grabbed Jasmine’s hand to look at the ring. Christine crowded them right after.

“Go on, go fawn over the shiny rock,” I suggested to Abby.

“What makes you think I care about the ring?” she asked me with a grin.

“Because I see you excitedly tapping your foot. You were wondering if it would be appropriate for you to go and join the fun—even as the new addition. News flash, you’re part of the group. Go check it out before I toss you over there.”

“If you insist.” She shot me a smirk before she rushed over to Jasmine and the other girls.

One day, it would be Abby’s turn, and it would be damn special—just like her.

A rescue diver is in danger of drowning. Her near death isn’t her only worry...the other is the man who saves her.

afterword

Readers!

Thank you for sticking through Adam and Abby's story. I hope you liked a big, bad, and tattooed gentle giant. Abby might be my most capable and independent heroine yet. Getting her and Adam to see eye to eye was a challenge. They are both stubborn and alike, but in the end love won out.

I hope you enjoyed the book enough to stick around for book four. Yates is up next—and he's about to show you he's more than his injuries, pretty face, and sense of humor.

In the meant time, if you want more updates on upcoming releases, you can catch me here.

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