



ALPHA HEROES BOOK 9

MAC

ANNA DEL MAR

Mac

Alpha heroes

Elite Team

By

Anna del Mar

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Mac

Alpha Heroes Book 9

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SEAL romance, special forces romance,
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Dedication

To the Ukrainian people, and to all of the innocent people who are being unjustly attacked, murdered, tortured, terrorized, starved, “reeducated,” lied to, manipulated, conscripted, robbed of their freedoms, repressed, and oppressed. May justice and peace prevail.

Dear Reader,

I'm delighted to introduce you to Mac and Danika, the newest members of the Alpha Heroes family. It is my sincere wish that you'll discover in these characters the same sense of purpose, resilience, joy, and hope that I experienced as their adventure kidnapped the pages on my screen. I hope you have as much fun reading *Mac* as I did while crafting this novel.

As always, huge thanks to Donna Alward, Gail Higgins, and Linda Au—for their hard work and outstanding contributions to *Mac*. Thanks also to the Ashton Publishing Group for bringing *Mac* to market. Kudos to my amazing beta readers—Amanda Pizano, Mariangela Pizano, Myriam de Alvarez, Bryan Marshall, John Paul, Donna Bayar Repsher, and author Lissanne Jones. You enrich my life and my stories in wonderful and amazing ways.

A special thanks to you, the reader, for choosing to read my novels. I love writing for you. Keep hoping. Keep dreaming. Keep fighting to create the world you want for yourself. And as always, thanks for coming along on my adventures.

AdM

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Chapter One

Mac

The irony of a warrior's life is that the moment you get a good reason to stay out of the fight you've got something precious to protect. This means you've got to stay in the game or get clobbered. Some call this endless sequence of jumping from one pile of crap to the next the cycle of life. I call it the cycle of shit. So says Mackenzie Cienfuegos, part-time philosopher, full-time idiot.

In my case, the shortest distance to my objective had me entering an all-out war mislabeled as a "military operation." Speed was my priority, so I cut through the red tape and, taking advantage of the contacts I'd made when I worked this theater as part of The Unit, reached out to an old friend. With a touch of luck, networking would get me where I needed to be, preferably with all my essential parts intact.

My frontal assault on a complex problem explained why I crouched at the edge of a dark forest freezing my nuts off in the middle of the night halfway across the world from home base. After a long journey, I was parked on a set of

coordinates that put me on a discreet corner of the Ukrainian border.

The river Dniester flowed quietly nearby, undisturbed by human concerns or by the unnatural thunder that shook the soil beneath my boots. Flurries drifted on the frosty breeze, tickled my face, and settled on the ground as if trying to appease the quaking earth.

Fat chance of that happening at the moment.

An orange explosion lit the horizon above the tree line, announcing yet more missiles raining on schools, hospitals, and civilian shelters. Some town without strategic value was being pounded to dust on the orders of a vengeful bully with a Napoleonic complex and global tsarist aspirations. Fuck the tyrant and all his shit lickens.

Why one of the globe's meanest motherfuckers was being allowed to destroy his sovereign neighbor was beyond my understanding. Fear of nuclear war was one argument, but after studying the tyrant's profile, it made no sense to me. If the son of a bitch decided he was gonna blow the world to hell, he'd do it, no provocation necessary. An asshole willing to obliterate the planet on a whim was not a target for appeasement.

But hey, the politics of this war were way above my pay grade. I wasn't here in any official capacity. Not that I'd ever done anything "official." Black ops were all about "unofficial," "I was never there," and "it didn't happen." This time around, I was putting my ass on the line for a good reason: to reunite my kid with her mother.

Yeah, I, Mackenzie Cienfuegos, aka Blaze, Elite's badass, scourge of my foes, decorated Delta Force, the same operator who'd survived four and a half wars, twenty-two murder attempts, a myriad of HAHOs and HALOs, and forty-three infiltrations into hostile territory—I had a daughter.

And what a daughter she was.

The cold hit my teeth when I smiled at the frozen night. I must've looked like a damn fool grinning in the darkness as I scoured the landscape for enemies and kept an ear out for my ride. But it was true. This lucky grunt had sired the most beautiful little girl in the world.

How the hell had that happened?

Okay, so I wasn't contesting the mechanics of human reproduction or the theory of probability. After all, I've spent most of my adult life playing the field. I lived in a high-voltage, no-commitment, judgment-free zone. You did your

thing, I did mine, and, as long as no one got hurt, we were good. For a guy who liked to have a good time and played as hard as he fought, sex was a lot like breathing. It was necessary. Best form of R&R on earth.

On the other hand, I was meticulous about making sure that I enjoyed my favorite hobby as condom commercials advertised—safely and responsibly. I made sure my flings remained clean, consequence-free steam-busters. The only thing I promised my sexual partners was pleasure. Not to toot my own horn, but I always made sure I delivered on that.

Since I did my part to prevent overpopulating the planet, I'd been mind-blown when I found out I was a father. I wasn't mad at what had to be a condom or pill malfunction. On the contrary, now that I knew I had a daughter, she was everything to me.

But imagine how confused I was on the day that Kenzie first showed up at Elite Team's headquarters in Florida. When asked how she'd come to Crescent Beach, my precocious little genius explained that her mother had put her on a plane in Prague and paid the airlines an extra fee to escort the unaccompanied minor to Wisconsin. The plan had been for

Kenzie to stay in Madison with her great-aunt, Ania, while her mama went to “help some people.”

Along the way, Kenzie had decided on a different destination.

Yup, she was my daughter all right.

When asked why she’d come to Crescent Beach, she’d given a simple answer in her girly, musical voice. “To find my sperm donor.”

Not a compliment, if you asked me.

At that point, the precocious little girl had taken one good look and pointed at me. “It’s you, Big Guy.”

The moment our gazes met, I’d faced off with my memories. The child’s soulful blue eyes stared at me as if they’d been cloned directly from her mother’s face. I’d dreamed of those eyes for years on end, revisiting the infinite shades of blue they could flash to reflect the woman’s changing moods. Since I’d never expected to see those rare hues again, the sight of Kenzie and the realization of who she was short-circuited my brain.

I’d fainted.

Yeah, this uber-charged operator passed out as if I were a dainty Victorian debutante strangled by her corset. Given that I chose to walk around like a billboard for badassery, it'd been fucking embarrassing.

I wasn't too proud of that one, but learning you've got a seven-year-old daughter will do that to a grunt.

After a shot of rum jump-started my brain, I asked Kenzie how she'd found me. Turns out that, during her long plane ride, she had unsealed the envelope that her mother had given her with instructions to deliver it to her great-aunt. Reading through her mother's last will, Kenzie had discovered the name and address of her "sperm donor." Being the clever, willful, independent whiz she was, the kid decided she wanted to meet me.

During a stopover in Tampa, she escaped from the airline's kids-in-transit waiting lounge. Using her mother's account, the peewee savant ordered an Uber and then tugged on the driver's heartstrings and persuaded him to transport her to Crescent Beach.

Alarmed at the thought of a little girl coming to harm, aware of all the dangers that could befall a child on her own, and unwilling to leave her alone at the airport or turn her in to

the cold care of the authorities, the driver, an Afghan refugee with a heart of gold, succumbed to Kenzie's pleas.

Yup. That was my Kenzie for you. Smart as a whip and unstoppable. Thank the universe for upright people like the driver. He'd broken all the rules and gone out of his way to make sure a stranger's daughter was safe.

I immediately got my hands on the legal documents and contacted Ania. Along with the airline, the old lady had been frantically looking for Kenzie and was near her wits' end. Poor woman. I had to clarify who I was. She'd lawyered up in two seconds flat.

Thankfully, Danika's will recognized me as Kenzie's biological father and gave me custody of the child, *if* Danika disappeared or died. Since she had indeed vanished without a trace, the will carried the day in the court's emergency hearing. I made sure Ania knew she could talk or visit with her great-niece anytime she wanted, but Kenzie stayed with me and my friends at the beach.

With the legal stuff settled, I made it my mission to recon my pint-sized surprise. It went fast. Kenzie and I jived right away. Denial wasn't a thing.

A daughter. *Me*. Holy crap. It was still surreal. *I* had a daughter.

Waiting among the trees, I grinned at the crescent moon peeking through the evergreens. My seven-year-old spitfire was insanely clever, gorgeous, funny, and extremely precocious. I couldn't get over the fact that she was mine.

Half mine, I reminded myself.

Fifteen minutes. That's all it took her to wrap me around her little finger. After that, she owned me. While my team and I tracked Danika's ultra-secret whereabouts, Kenzie and I spent time together, swimming, surfing, talking, and hanging out. We watched movies every night, and she even dug *Babylon Five*, an old, kitschy sci-fi show with a cult following that I'd loved as a kid.

I had the best time with her, but how do you catch up with your daughter when you've missed the first seven years of her life?

Kenzie and I made an excellent attempt.

The kid was as expressive as I was and, like me, a hand talker. Her smile was as bright as the Florida sunshine, even though she had a gap in the front where she'd lost her baby

teeth. I loved the way she walked, with her butt in the air and her shoulders squared as if she were a tiny Delta ready to pick a fight. She shared my copper skin and my spiral curls. She laughed like me, too—loud, curt cackles that often startled strangers.

In Spanish, Cienfuegos meant “a hundred fires,” and true to her DNA, she was feisty as hell. A hundred fires burned in her belly as surely as they burned in mine. She was so like me that my friends had taken to calling her Mini Mac.

All of this had happened only a few weeks ago and I hadn't quite recovered from the shock. Cue in the blue little circle spinning on my brain's dark screen.

I was still processing.

Crouching in the woods, hidden in the darkness, my thoughts inevitably drifted to Kenzie's mother. Almost eight years ago, Danika Kos had made me question everything about my life and then dropped me, blocked me, ghosted me—erased me from her life. From her, Kenzie had inherited her reedy, streamlined construction, her Slavic high cheeks, her vivid blue eyes, and her astonishing smarts.

Once upon a time, Danika and I had traveled Europe on a thrilling interagency assignment where she posed as, well,

her diplomat self, and I pretended to be her bodyguard. It'd taken some serious effort to persuade Ms. I-Don't-Break-the-Rules to break the damn rules and sleep with me, but once we got there, man, we excelled at igniting the fireworks. Things had gone so well that I'd been tempted to flex a little, do whatever it took to be close to her.

She'd wanted none of that.

As soon as we nailed the mission, she deleted me from her life. I guess a half-Irish, half-Dominican mutt raised in the projects was not good enough for the likes of her. Even for a happy-go-lucky, no-commitment, "whatever" guy like me, her rejection had been a kick to the nuts. I went back to my life, but the pain never went away. When I realized that Danika had gone behind my back and had my baby, the old wound burst open.

I couldn't resent Danika for bringing such a luminous human being into the world, but for fuck's sake, she should've told me that we'd made a child, a fantastic kid who'd been kept a secret from me for *seven* fucking years.

Seven years where Kenzie had learned to smile, crawl, walk, and run. Seven years of accomplishments I'd missed, of

talks and games and cuddles. Seven lost years I wasn't getting back and could've used to get to know *my* daughter.

A growl rose in my throat, but I managed to keep silence discipline. I relaxed my clutch on my carbine. Danika owed me an explanation, and believe me, she was gonna give it to me, even if I had to go to the pits of hell to get it.

No worries, Mac Idiot. You're on your way. Almost there.

Leaving Kenzie in the care of my best friends, I'd used Elite Team's vast resources to track Danika's path halfway across the world. What I hadn't figured out was why a seemingly sane woman who by Kenzie's account was "the best mama in the world" had given her child to someone else's care and risked the dangers of a war zone.

What the hell was Danika thinking?

The distant sound of an engine drifted in the night. I checked my watch. My ride was right on time. I'd learned a while back that one could always count on a certain Ukrainian special operator to show up when you needed him.

Tires crunched on gravel and an ancient, dark-colored sedan emerged from the shadows, driving slowly along the

deserted dirt track, its headlights off. I waited, hidden between the trees until the car came to a full stop at the agreed-upon coordinates.

The flicker of a small flame broke the darkness inside the vehicle three times, briefly illuminating the sharp features I remembered so well. The flame died, leaving behind the red dot of a lit cigarette glowing in the dim interior.

I punched the side button on my smart watch and started my chronometer. My eyes roamed the woods and the road listening for threats. *Nothing*. Exactly twenty-six seconds later, the shadow of the economically sized figure sitting inside the car leaned over and popped open the passenger side door.

The carefully orchestrated sequence was my signal to move. Adjusting the ruck on my back, I stopped the chronometer and stole through the woods, keeping my profile low to the ground. Coming to a halt at the edge of the forest, I took one last look up and down the road and cleared myself for boarding.

I dashed the last three feet to the car, took a knee by the chassis, and, after widening the door, leaned forward to take a

peek. Carbine up against my cheek and ready to fire, I swept the vehicle's interior.

It took me less than a second to visually confirm my contact's identity. Behind the formidable Glock he pointed at me, I met the man's shrewd gaze. He welcomed me with one of his sarcastic smiles, a tight pull of thin lips bending under the curve of an intrepid septum.

"It's a long haul," he announced in his Ukrainian-accented English. "You'll have to walk a lot if your finger twitches on the trigger."

"My finger doesn't twitch." I kept my M4 on target. "It either pulls or not, nothing in between, but you know that."

"I do indeed, my old friend." The man settled the Glock on his lap, picked up his cigarette from its perch on the console's ashtray, and after taking a long pull, let out a cloud of smoke. "Get in or get out, with the second option being the smartest."

"I call myself all kinds of names, but smart ain't one of them." I lowered my weapon and unslung the ruck from my back. "Efficient? Check. Dangerous? Yeah. Handsome? Hell, yeah."

The man let out an amused chuckle. “And modest as always.”

“Modesty is for fools who don’t got the goods.” I dumped my ruck into the vehicle. “Me? I’m loaded.”

It was good to hear my old friend’s quiet laughter. Chortling, I climbed in, settled the carbine by my side, and shut the door.

“Blaze.” The driver kept the cigarette between his lips and offered me his hand.

“Cyborg.” I shook with him, taking in the dark circles beneath his eyes, his scruffy beard, and the short carbine propped up by his right leg.

It was easy to see that the war had taken a toll on Cy. A decorated intelligence operator for the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces, he was now a high-ranking commander in the thick of things. We’d met years ago when I’d been assigned to train his team on counter-insurgency techniques. We’d struck a friendship that defied time and distance.

I released his clasp and got busy clicking on my seat belt. “I’m glad to see you alive.”

“No shit. Me too.” Cy pressed on the accelerator and spun the wheel to turn the car around. As we sped down the dark road, he offered me a pack of cigarettes. “Smoke?”

I shook my head. “Still trying to commit suicide the slow, painful way, I see.”

“No point in kicking a bad habit when life is short and death is at your heels.” He transferred the cigarette to his left hand and filled my nostrils with the stench of more smoke. “The coast is clear for the next few kilometers, but you’re on overwatch.”

“Got it.” I unholstered my Sig Sauer and, imitating Cy, settled it on my right thigh. “In other news, it’s good to know that the wolves still prowl this land.”

The wolves were a reference to the emblem of the Ukrainian Special Operation Forces, a silver wolf wearing a gold belt standing on a wreath above their motto: *I come at you.*

“We are still coming at the sons of bitches.” Cy’s tone firmed.

I glanced at his sharp profile. “Sitrep?”

“Welcome to the apocalypse.” All hints of his smile were gone. “They’re pounding us. We’re giving as good as we get, but we need weapons, ammunition, air support, and intel.”

“What a clusterfuck,” I muttered, scanning the night for drones, planes, helos, ambushes, you name it. “I’m sorry that you and your country have to go through this.”

“We warned the world Putin couldn’t be trusted.” He kept his eyes on the road. “I wonder if anyone in Europe and America has learned the lesson.”

“I sincerely doubt it.”

“Why do you say that?” Cy asked, curious as always.

“We’re too busy watching reality TV, obsessing over the latest celebrity breakup, and beating each other over the head with rhetoric that means shit.”

It was always a shock to me that, while people like Cy were fighting for country, life, and limb, the governments and citizens of the prosperous West could be so thoroughly dedicated to shallow bullshit and detached from the misery of others.

“In America, microaggression is all the rage,” I continued. “We’re trying to kill each other with words.”

Meanwhile, the Europeans are parked in endless meetings with their fingers stuck up their asses to stop themselves from crapping their pants.”

Cy spewed a spurt of smoke and smirked. “You are a muscular ray of sunshine.”

“Just telling it like it is.” I pretended to cough and waved a hand to dispel the stink of Cy’s nicotine addiction. “On the other hand, the nonconventional cavalry stands squarely with the Ukrainian people.”

Cy glanced at me. “Battle Brothers and Elite Team?”

“One hundred percent at your side.”

Battle Brothers Inc. was one of the world’s premier global security firms. Hidden behind the facade of a profitable outdoor gear co-op, BB ran a private military organization that specialized in conducting the most complex and dangerous humanitarian missions on the planet, operations no one else dared to execute.

To that effect, BB recruited the top performers from the special operations community. I was damn proud to have been wooed away from Delta Force and assigned to Elite Team,

BB's foremost fighting unit. Simply put, we were the best of the best.

Yeah, I wasn't shy about tooting that horn, either.

"I brought you a gift." I extracted a square case from one of the pockets in my tactical vest. Popping the lid, I showed Cy the solid-state drive neatly cushioned in the box. "It's from all of us at Elite."

Cy's eyes lit up. "Is it loaded with candy?"

"Hell, yeah, and it includes uplinks to BB's satellite network. As you know, we've got eyes where others don't. Hey, with a little tweaking, you might be able to watch Putin shit, and even monitor his hemorrhoids popping up live if you'd like."

Cy laughed and pocketed the SSD. "Thanks. You didn't have to do this. Our deal was you'd help out while on the ground and we'd get you to where you needed to go."

"I know, but my mom raised me right. I never show up for a party without a gift. By the way, Druid got all that shit together for you. He says hey."

"How's Elite's top intel asset doing?"

“As sharp, kickass, and ferocious as you remember.”

Time to get down to business. “What can you tell me about my target?”

He flashed me an ominous glance. “You’re not gonna like anything I have to say.”

“Say it anyway.”

“The latest information we’ve got has her in the Donbas.”

I made an effort to close my mouth. “For real?”

“For real.”

“*Mierda*,” I cursed—*shit* in Spanish.

The Donbas region, also known as the Donets Basin, was located in southeastern Ukraine, along the border with Russia. It was known for its extensive deposits of coal and its sprawling steel industry. Putin had coveted this heavily industrialized area with greed that rose my hackles.

The SOB had forcefully occupied some of the region in 2014 when he invaded Crimea. Now he’d failed in his bid to take Kyiv, so instead, he’d unleashed a vicious attack on the region to rip out the Donbas from the Ukrainians. Worst news? Danika was in the middle of that clusterfuck.

“What the hell is an American diplomatic attaché stationed in Prague doing in the Donbas?” I asked.

Cy rolled his eyes. “You know that your attaché is not what she seems.”

Cy was smart as they came. He excelled at his job. He’d just confirmed that he was in the loop. Since Danika and I had worked our mission together years ago, I’d known that she worked with the Diplomatic Security Service—DS for short. It was the State Department’s intel group and it was in charge of defeating attempts by foreign spies to infiltrate our diplomatic services abroad.

Even though I couldn’t see a role for a DS agent in a war zone, this was not a good time to lose Cy’s trust by denying something he already knew.

“Fine, so she’s DS,” I countered. “But she’s not trained as an operator. She’s got no business being there.”

Cy raked a hand through his short curls and grimaced. “I guess you don’t know the rest.”

This didn’t sound good. “What do you mean?”

“Your attaché is more than Diplomatic Security.”

I blinked. “Come again?”

“Danika Kos is also working for the Defense Intelligence Agency.”

I kept my face blank, but my brain came to a screeching halt.

DIA was the Pentagon’s top spy agency. It collected and analyzed intelligence regarding foreign militaries to prevent and win wars. The reason Danika had moved so deeply into enemy territory now became clear to me. If she was DIA, then she was in Ukraine gathering intel on Putin’s military assets. To do that, she needed to get close to the action.

Too close.

I trapped a snarl at the back of my throat. The things that woman did. Like having my kid, not telling me about it, and then joining DIA. Fine, she’d arranged for our daughter’s safety, but surely she understood the dangers she faced?

When I caught up with her, we were gonna have a talk.

“How come we at Elite had no idea that Danika was DIA?” I asked. “I mean, if what you say is true, Druid would’ve known.”

“Druid is tops, but he had no reason to look into the Pentagon’s intel teams when researching Ms. Kos,” Cy explained in a show of total trust. “Danika is a very recent addition to DIA. Given that we’re on the brink of World War III and Putin is itching to go nuclear, your government has made every effort to keep her new role under wraps. If the Russians find out... well... you know what will happen.”

A shiver crawled up my spine. “And you know this... how?”

“She’s working for the Pentagon, sure, but she’s also working for us.”

His words felt like a punch to the gut. *What the fuck?* “Elaborate.”

“Her Russian is impeccable and so is her Ukrainian,” Cy said, stuff I already knew about my multilingual, high-value target. “She has local roots and she’s smart, skilled, and capable. Plus, we’re not turning away volunteers these days.”

“She *volunteered?*” Any time now, my head was gonna explode. “For what?”

“To work in partnership with us.” Cy smothered the butt of his cigarette in the ashtray. “To infiltrate the Russian

forces on the ground in order to extract intel that can make a difference in the battle for Ukraine.”

Damn the woman to hell and back. Danika was much more involved in the conflict than I’d imagined. At last, I understood why she’d sent Kenzie to the States. She feared the effects that the use of nuclear weapons would have in Europe, and she didn’t want to expose Kenzie to the dangers that her new job entailed.

On the other hand, fury bubbled in my stomach like a witch’s cauldron. I was not okay with Danika’s reckless decision. Did she realize that the moment she volunteered to infiltrate the Donbas she risked making *my* daughter motherless?

“Let me see if I get this.” I massaged my temples, trying to stem the headache blooming behind my eyes. “You allowed her to go into the Donbas. As an operative. To infiltrate a bunch of bloodthirsty turds who will skin her alive if they find out she’s working for your side.”

“‘Allowed’ is not the right word.” Cy shot me an annoyed look. “You do know she’s not one to ask for permission, right?”

“Right.” Sounded as if Danika hadn’t changed much in the last few years.

“We’d been sharing intel since before the Russian invasion,” Cy continued. “Once she was boots on the ground in Kyiv, she volunteered for the mission. The Pentagon approved. We realized nothing would stop her. So, we gave her the go-ahead.”

“How did she infiltrate occupied territory?” I demanded.

“We hooked her up with a business owner who’s been spying for us since the Crimea invasion. We assigned her a go-between to bring back intel. The info she’s delivered has made a difference.”

Damn the woman’s *cojones*. This was a big pile of shit. Danika’s mission was beyond perilous. It was ridiculously dangerous. She was a mother, for fuck’s sake. Was she out of her mind?

“Fuck this,” I snapped. “She’s not a full-fledged spook. She’s an intellectual, an academic, trained to process info, not to fight. She’s a ballet-and-opera kind of gal, a wine connoisseur, and a fashion enthusiast. If she ever considered carrying a carbine, it would have to be designer.”

Cy agreed with a nod. “This is why she was ideal for the role.”

“What fucking role?”

“She’s working at an upscale establishment that serves the needs of Russian officers who pride themselves on enjoying the same luxuries Ms. Kos is an expert in.”

I choked on my own words. “Are you telling me she’s working in a whorehouse?”

“It’s not your run-of-the-mill whorehouse, Blaze. It’s one of those luxury, exclusive establishments, a club that is a bar and, yes, a high-end pleasure house. Perfect placement, if you ask me. Putin’s officers can’t live without sex and vodka. They protect their watering holes and their luxuries. She’s safer from missiles where she’s at than if she was stationed in Kyiv.”

Safe from missiles, maybe, but not from the rest.

My mouth soured and my dry gulp tasted as if a ton of putrid garbage had been shoved down my throat. Danika was hanging out in an upscale whorehouse. Among Russian officers. In the Donbas. How the fuck could this scenario get any worse?

I evened out my voice. “We need to get her out of there stat.”

“Agree.” Cy turned in to another dirt road. “As you Americans like to say, the shit is getting hot. We’ve been trying to extract her for the last few days, but the fighting is fierce. Russian intelligence is working overtime, and most of us have a kill order next to our photos on their list.”

“You need me to get her out.” Heat ignited my face. “That’s why you agreed to help me get in so quickly when I contacted you.”

“Don’t get mad.” Cy cased me with a glower. “My country can be blown off the face of the earth any minute now. Ukrainians are dying fighting a ruthless collision of enemies that want to destroy not only our country, but the entire free world. I’m not gonna apologize for using every resource at my disposal to end genocide and win this war. *You* called me. *You* asked me to get you to Kos. That’s what I’m doing.”

I put a lid on my fiery temper. Cy was right. The fight for Ukraine was the battle for our lives, for democracy and freedom. No need to blow my chances just because I was furious at Danika, or because I was using Cy and he was using me.

For a second there, the personal side of this mission had scrambled my wits, but I knew better. This arrangement served Cy and me both. I couldn't fault him for doing his job. Besides, if someone had to go behind enemy lines to extract Danika, it should be me.

"They know my face," Cy said. "They know my teams. They don't know you and they won't expect that someone of your caliber will show up in what they deem as 'their' territory. If anyone can recover this joint Ukrainian-American asset, it's you."

Fair enough. "You got a plan to get me in?"

"I do, but it's a risky one."

"I give zero fucks about the level of risk," I said.

"When do I infil?"

"As soon as we get to your designated insertion point."

Cy sped around the craters on the highway. "We're running out of time. The Russian offensive has intensified. Our go-between has not been able to reach Danika for days. And... there's worse news."

"How is that possible, considering all the shit you've told me?"

“The Bruckner Group landed in the area yesterday.”

I croaked. “*The Bruckner Group?*”

“Yes.”

Worst-case scenario ramped up to nightmare scenario.

I sensed Cy studying my profile. “It’s okay if you change your mind.”

“I’m *not* changing my fucking mind,” I ground out. “If anything, we need to get there faster.”

The Bruckner Group was Putin’s personal killing corps, a murderous assembly of mercenaries from all over the world under the guise of a private militia, linked to the Kremlin and unaccountable to anyone but the tyrant himself. Putin’s collection of assassins and psychopaths didn’t follow the rules of engagement and relied on a scorched-earth approach to devastate and depopulate their territorial objectives. Wherever they went, they cut a swath of death and destruction in humanity’s fabric.

I’d faced off with Bruckner in Africa, where they’d wiped entire settlements out of existence and raped women who’d just given birth in a maternity ward; in Syria, where they’d deployed chemical weapons to kill women and children

in the light of day; and in the Donbas, where they'd raped, tortured, and pillaged entire villages before they'd melted away into the guise of the Russian resistance.

They were killers, plain and simple, and they were despised wherever they went.

My gut squeezed into an icy fist. If the Bruckner Group was on the ground anywhere near Danika, she only had a few more hours to live, if that.

“Step on it,” I said.

Cy put the pedal to the metal and gave me a cursory look. “What is this woman to you?”

“Would you also like to know what brand of toilet paper I use to wipe my ass?” I glowered. “When did you turn into a nosy *babusya*?”

“I’ve never seen your happy-go-lucky self this riled up before about... anything,” Cy said. “Do you have skin in the game? Does this woman mean something to you?”

“She means nothing to me.” I looked out the window and watched the night pass me by, ignoring the steel band constricting my chest. “She means everything to my daughter.”

“Oh, shit.” Cy reached out and squeezed my shoulder.

“Sorry, man.”

I had to make sure his condolences were premature.

Cy grew quiet as he navigated cratered roads and Ukrainian checkpoints, evading Russian surveillance and artillery. Trusting him to do his thing, I leaned back in the seat and ramped up my vigilance, even though my mind kept churning.

If I was gonna be honest with myself, I feared that no matter how hard I tried, I was not built of high-grade fatherhood material. I couldn't shake the suspicion that Danika had known this and kept Kenzie a secret from me on purpose, so I couldn't screw up our daughter's life.

Was Danika right in making her decision to keep me out of the loop? Did she know that a hard-going, nomad warrior like me was not fit to be part of Kenzie's life? Hell, could I ever be *the* father Kenzie deserved?

All good questions I couldn't answer.

On the other hand, Danika sounded like a great mother. Kenzie certainly thought so and even though I was furious

with Danika for keeping Kenzie a secret from me, I knew firsthand that she was a hell of a woman. Bottom line?

Kenzie needed her mother.

Maybe, if I managed to retrieve Danika, I could get my daughter to like me. Hell, perhaps someday she'd learn to love me. I hoped that by doing the right thing I would elevate my status and my little girl would stop thinking of me as her "sperm donor" and calling me "Big Guy." Perhaps I could work my way to a more paternal designation like *Papi*—Spanish for "daddy."

Whether I lived or died, I had to make sure my daughter got her mother back.

Well, then. Hello, cycle of shit.

Chapter Two

Danika

Standing behind the bar at The Pravda in a pair of toe-crushing stilettos was my personal act of defiance. It was also my way of fighting for peace and trying to avoid nuclear catastrophe. This sounded like an oxymoron, but the world teetered at the edge of destruction and the only way to ensure my daughter had a future on a viable planet was to stop this awful war.

The Pravda had once doubled as the town's only motel and local pub. These days, it had morphed into a club with an eclectic offering of services that catered exclusively to the needs of the high-ranking Russian officers leading the brutal invasion of Ukraine. No lowly enlisted soldiers or conscripts here. Only the cream of the crap.

The town's location, roughly halfway between occupied Donetsk and Mariupol, made a convenient pit stop for the officers shuttling through the region. Liquor, drugs, sex — the Russian Army encouraged and sponsored the corruption that made sure The Pravda was well supplied. If you were one of Putin's upper-tier dogs, you could buy whatever you wanted here.

The company was vile and the work dangerous, but the vital intel I collected was key to holding back the Russian tide.

When I wasn't manning the bar at The Pravda, I made it my business to take pictures, photographic evidence of every type of equipment the Russians were bringing onto Ukrainian soil. The rest of the time, I bartended in the cellar of the old roadside motel, where the leadership felt safe to discuss tactics, secrets, victories, and failures. Dressed in a spandex mini-dress that etched its seams into my skin and pouring drinks for Putin's marionettes, I was all ears.

Weeks into my assignment, I was due out of here and pushing my luck. I should've gone two days ago, but my contact hadn't shown, and word was the Russians were bringing in some "surprises" for the Ukrainians. A new, powerful weapon would be arriving soon. The Russians expected it would devastate Ukrainian defenses and turn the tide in Putin's favor.

I needed to know what kind of new weapon was entering the battlefield and document it with pictures if possible. It could be the proof we needed to counter the attack and publicly unmask Russia's secret arms supplier, the

government of a nation that claimed neutrality but was far from neutral.

If I left my post now, I would not be able to bring the tangible evidence we needed. Lots of innocent people would die, Ukraine would disappear from the map, and the war would spread like wildfire over the planet.

The next few days could be key.

I'd just finished pouring a tray of vodka shots when the conversation in the room waned. Bottle in hand, I lifted my gaze and realized that the ominous vibe that ran through the place had nothing to do with the electronic music throbbing from the speakers or with the fact that a Russian convoy had been blown to pieces, not thirty miles from where we stood.

Instead, the fear that rippled over the place had everything to do with the new arrival standing at the bottom of the stairs. One look from him had the crowd of Russian officers parting like the Red Sea before a beast of a man.

Orcs giving way to Orc kings was never good news. A portent of disaster raised the hair on the back of my neck.

I took in the tall, thickset man stalking toward me. His chest swelled over his bowed legs like an oak barrel. He wore

a black beret over a shaved pate and a set of military fatigues without patches or insignias. His weathered skin reminded me of tanned leather and cured mummies. His squared jaw was the human version of a brick.

A shiver of dread crawled down my spine when his wide mouth twitched and his thick, freckled lips expanded to leer at me. His nicotine-stained teeth looked like chicklets staked in his gums—large, squared, and spaced far apart. His poor excuse for a smile made me think of a hippo flashing his fangs in an overt show of dominance. If I had any doubts as to who he was, the pair of swastikas tattooed on either side of his neck confirmed his identity.

All the heat in my body escaped via my toes. The voice of reason in my head screeched a warning to get the hell out of this place. My courage snapped, but my intellect kept its cool. Drawing from my pre-mission briefings, I put a name to the killer: Stanislav Kozlov, butcher-in-charge of the Kremlin's mercenary assassins, the Bruckner Group.

I had not expected Kozlov to land anywhere near me. The shock etched on the faces around me was evidence that the Russian officers loitering at The Pravda had not expected him either. If the news that the Bruckner Group was on the

ground didn't push me to the edge of hyperventilation, the cruelty that flared in Kozlov's dark eyes as he approached the bar sent a million spiders crawling down my vertebrae. I repressed the urge to flee. Running from this predator would surely trigger his chase reflex.

I braced my heels on the floor, sank my nails into the bar's wooden top, and, making a deliberate effort to appear unfazed and ignorant of who he was, met his vicious stare.

"Hello, blue eyes." Kozlov greeted me in his Siberian-accented Russian, parked across from me, and rapped his gnarled knuckles on the bar. "I'll have a bottle of Dom Perignon. Now."

His raspy voice reminded me of crunching gravel. It was hoarse and strained, as if he had to make an effort to get the sound through his throat—a possibility given that an old scar slashed his skin horizontally at the base of his throat.

"I'm sorry, sir," I managed in my best Muscovite Russian. "Our champagne shipment has been delayed. One of our supply convoys was ambushed. May I offer you something else? A full-bodied French Bordeaux, perhaps, or a most excellent German Riesling?"

“You like your fancy wines, don’t you?” He leaned over the bar and snatched the bottle of vodka from my hands. “I’ll have this, and I’ll have you as well. Come on, pet, follow me.” Bottle in hand, he started to walk away.

Had I heard right? Had the beast just called me “pet” and ordered me to go with him? Yeah, no. I was not on board with that.

When I didn’t move, he whirled on me and, knuckles whitening around the neck of the vodka bottle, singed me with his glare. “What are you waiting for?”

“Apologies.” I forced the words through my suddenly parched throat. “I’m in charge of the bar. I can’t leave it unattended.”

“Of course you can, especially if *I* say so.”

He lumbered over, leaned over the bar, and, reaching out, locked his painful vise around my upper arm. He marched me down the length of the counter. I cringed and resisted his brutal hold, but I was no match for his strength. While I tripped and stumbled on the rubber mats, he dragged me to the swinging gate at the end of the bar.

With a harsh wrench, he pulled me to him. Wincing, I bounced off his rubber-hard chest and tried to get away. He didn't let go. Kneeing his balls would probably get me killed, so he had me. For now.

“You are not very good at following orders,” he snarled, a low hiss that unleashed a severe case of halitosis to bluster over my face. “Are you now?”

I fought the panic that closed my throat. With a little help and a lot of wits, I'd managed to avoid this fate so far, but Kozlov didn't seem like a man who could be persuaded from taking what he wanted. The pain of his fingers digging into my bicep only confirmed my violent forecast. Had my luck finally run out?

“Excuse me.” Oksana materialized by my side, stepping out of her small office. “Svetlana, my dear, where do you think you're going?”

“I... um...” I glanced at Kozlov and then back at her, hoping she understood my predicament.

Pursing her painted lips, her astute gaze bounced from me to Kozlov. “I see.”

Svetlana was my covert name and Oksana was my boss, the current operator of The Pravda. Russian-born, Oksana had lived in the Donbas most of her life. She had always been an opponent of Russian aggression and, unbeknownst to anyone, she had been working for Ukraine's intelligence service since the Federation's invasion of Crimea.

A vivacious blonde of undetermined age, Oksana had hooked up with a powerful Russian general. He'd set her up in this strategically located town, rerouted the army's supplies to the club, and shared liberally in her profits. Her status as the general's lover ensured her reputation as a loyal Russian patriot in the Donbas. The joke was on the general. He had no idea of her covert pursuits.

Oksana had facilitated my infiltration, employed me at the club, and collaborated with my intel-gathering efforts. Her ears were as good as mine and the officers talked freely in front of her. This meant that her contributions to my reports were invaluable. She'd gotten me out of hot water before, but this time around, I wasn't sure if she'd be able to help me, especially without blowing her cover.

"Stanislav, you old dog." Her face split into a flirtatious smile and her malachite eyes twinkled. "You can't

have this one. She's the only one here who can mix a decent cocktail."

"Find someone else to tend your stupid bar," he grumbled, keeping his grip on my arm. "I like this one. She's got solid Russian looks, long sable hair that begs for a good yank, good pale skin that bruises quickly, and high cheekbones begging to be slapped."

"You do know how to woo a lady." Oksana fingered the pendant that hung between generous breasts and winked at the beast. "I have someone upstairs who might enjoy your style."

"I'll stick with this one." He shook me so hard that my brain rattled in my skull. "She's wild. Untamed. And she's got a good, pliable ass."

I flinched when he landed a not-so-playful spank on my spandex-covered derriere.

"Come with me." Oksana coaxed the man to release his hold on me. When he did, I took a step away from him and rubbed my throbbing bicep. "You'll find several willing beauties eager to play your games."

“I don’t want willing,” the man growled, undressing me with his stare. “I prefer unwilling. Plus, this one wrinkled her perky nose at me.”

“Are you sure about that?” Oksana asked. “She’s one of my most agreeable girls.”

“This snooty Muscovite whore thinks I’m a fucking peasant.” He unscrewed the top of the bottle and drew a long drink. “She thinks she’s too good for me. I’m gonna enjoy putting her in her place. I want to fuck her. Now.”

I’d made a strategic blunder, allowing my personality to supersede his. In trying to hide my fear, my defiance had provoked the beast.

Crap.

Although none of our agents had managed to get close to the elusive Kozlov, the profile that the Ukrainian Intelligence Service had shared with me indicated that the monster walked around with a giant chip on his shoulder.

According to his dossier, Kozlov had been born to a poor family on the Siberian fringes. As a young man, he had emerged from obscurity when he enlisted in the Russian Army. Judging by his fitness reports, during his first years in the

army, his superior officers considered him little more than a peasant—dumb, uneducated, and coarse.

His luck changed when he blew the whistle on an assassination attempt on Putin's life. Putin liked Kozlov's swift and brutal elimination of his foe and gave him the opportunity to leapfrog over his superiors by sending him on "special" assignments that required Kozlov to break the rules of professional soldiering.

The man proved so adept at doing Putin's dirty work that he soon became the operational leader of the Bruckner Group. He'd committed genocide all over Africa and also in Chechnya, Syria, and Crimea to cement his status as Putin's killing machine.

No wonder his fellow military officers hated and distrusted him. The hatred was mutual. Kozlov despised Moscow's "educated elites," including his military counterparts. This explained why my uppity attitude had triggered him.

Damn me, my Muscovite accent, and my fancy wines. I reminded him of the "educated elites" he loathed so much. He needed to punish me. As to his methods, his sadistic preferences were well documented all over the world.

Oksana worked to avoid disaster. The pleasant expression on her face never changed, but I could sense her wheels turning. “I promise, my dear friend, you will have her.” She widened her smile. “After midnight, when her shift is over, she’ll come up to see you in my best suite. It won’t be long now.”

“I don’t like to wait,” the man muttered through stiff lips, his predatory eyes on me.

“How about a free appetizer, on the house?” Oksana batted her lashes. “I have a wide selection of sturdy Russian stock upstairs. Think of it as a warm-up to this one.” When Kozlov hesitated, she winked again. “My sweet Dimitri will appreciate it if you keep his cash flowing this night.”

The casual mention of Oksana’s high-ranking lover seemed to do the trick. With a huff and a snarl, Kozlov addressed me. “You will come to me. At midnight. Do you understand?”

“As you wish.” This time I lowered my eyes, playing the unfortunate hand I’d been dealt.

“Come, Stanislav.” Oksana pulled on his arm and gave me a hard look over her shoulder. “Svetlana, don’t forget to

replenish the vodka stock before it's too late. I can see we're running low."

Her words iced my belly. It was code for "get away, now." When Kozlov paused to watch my reaction, I jumped into action. Making myself small, I scurried toward the back office, pretending I was rushing to do my employer's bidding. Moving swiftly, I crossed Oksana's little office and entered the storage room, where under the dim illumination of a single light bulb, boxes of liquor piled up against the walls.

A small bench and a coat rack lined up against the far wall. The entrance to the service staircase that led to the upper floors was located to my right. A pair of sturdy cellar doors stood to my left. The metal doors allowed for the unloading of the liquor and the supplies needed to run the club. They were also the fastest way out of this place.

My mind raced. Adrenaline flushed through me in waves. With the Russian Intelligence Services at high alert, getting out of the Donbas was going to be hard, but waiting for my turn with Kozlov was not a viable alternative. Or a survivable one.

I snatched my coat from the rack where I'd left it when I returned from doing field surveillance work earlier today. I

threw on the coat and zippered it all the way. There was no question that I had to disappear, but not even the terror of facing Kozlov's violence managed to smother the beginnings of the dangerous idea forming in my head.

Oksana told you to go. You have collected important information that you must deliver. And yet...

Kozlov was here, now. No one else had ever been able to get close to him. Catching him would be the ultimate intel coup, a game-changer. Danger aside, I couldn't pass on this opportunity.

I was also worried about Oksana. She was smart, experienced, and shrewd. The general's protection gave her the power to control the officers that frequented her premises, but Kozlov was a bloody, unpredictable SOB.

What would he do to her when I didn't show up at midnight?

In addition, I fretted about the fate that my temporary replacement might suffer at Kozlov's hands. His reputation for cruelty was the stuff of nightmares. The men and women who worked upstairs were volunteers. They identified as professional pleasure givers who made a living out of fulfilling

their patriotic duty to the motherland, but were their lives less valuable than mine?

No, they weren't.

I was not a reckless operative. On the contrary, I always thought things through. This time around, I did the same, but fast. I had to get to Kozlov.

If I could pull this off, my actions could decapitate Bruckner, thwart the mercenaries' purposes in the Donbas, and gain invaluable insight into the Russian strategy. I may or may not have time to get pictures of the Russian's new secret weapon, but by being here, the elusive Kozlov had become my priority.

I unzipped my jacket and returned it to the hook. Rolling the hand truck across the room, I parked it at the bottom of the laundry chute. I planned to neutralize Kozlov, use the upstairs laundry cart to move him to the utility room, and drop him down the chute. Once in the cellar, I would haul him in the hand truck through the loading dock and transport him to the free territories in the trunk of Oksana's car, which was parked in the back of The Pravda.

It wasn't a perfect plan and it required lugging around a huge beast who was three times my weight, but it was a plan.

I retraced my steps to Oksana's little office and grabbed her keys. Rummaging through her desk, I opened the first drawer and, pressing the button at the back, released the false bottom and snatched the little plastic bag where she kept her "forget-me-pills."

The Rohypnol tablets were dissolvable, highly concentrated benzodiazepine pills with fast-acting tranquilizing properties. Oksana used them as a method of last resort to quiet down troublemakers who could not be controlled any other way. I shook three white tablets onto my palm, clicked open the black oval of my oversized ring, and dropped them in there before I shut the little compartment.

I intended to fix Kozlov the cocktail of a lifetime.

Having secured my supplies, I now needed something for personal protection. Oksana kept a weapon hidden in her office, but where the hell was it?

I searched the little office, drawers, surfaces, nooks, and crannies. As I did this, Kenzie was, as always, on my mind's forefront. My parental anxiety flared when I thought about facing off with Kozlov. I'd been exacting at my job, careful to stay alive for Kenzie's sake, but if I made a mistake,

if I got myself killed tonight, I'd never see her sweet face again and she would grow up without a mother.

My heart shriveled in my chest.

I loved my daughter more than anything else in the world. She was the reason for everything I did. I'd volunteered for this mission to keep her and her generation from becoming victims of oppressive regimes that could decimate Europe, destroy the United States, and unleash a holocaust. Our intel suggested Putin was dangerously close to escalating the war in Ukraine into a nuclear conflict. If he did, the world as we knew it would become history.

The stakes were *that* high.

Kozlov was no weak or idle foe, and yet, if I managed this, I could help end this war and maybe even change the course of history. I wanted Kenzie to have a future, to have a chance to make her mark in the world. Knowing the risks, I'd made arrangements for her before I took on this assignment. I'd left her in the care of Ania with a sizable trust that would see to her education.

Perhaps I should've told her about her father, just in case. The old guilt stabbed me between the ribs. *Too late now.*

At least I'd included his information in my will and granted him custody. If something happened to me or Ania, Kenzie could always resort to him.

If that happened, I prayed he would forgive me.

The other reason I'd volunteered for this mission was personal. It was also a moot point now. I shook off the grief that flooded my heart and focused on my search. I wasn't the only one who'd lost loved ones to Putin's brutality in Ukraine.

My fingers tripped over the cushion that made the seat of Oksana's chair. I unzipped it, dug beneath the foam, and extracted a Beretta Nano from within the padding. The tiny gun fit in the palm of my hand. Unfortunately, it didn't come with a sound suppressor. Making sure the safety was engaged, I checked the mag and counted a full clip. Fifteen rounds. That's all I had to work with.

I rose to my feet, readjusted the tight little black dress, and straightened my fishnet stockings. Holding the little gun in my right hand, I dipped my other hand into the cups of my bra and rearranged the girls for maximum visual impact. I wasn't super-busty, but the pushup bra functioned as its name indicated, granting me the sort of cleavage that would hopefully distract a testosterone-driven beast like Kozlov.

I was still fiddling with the fit as I rushed out of the office, turned the corner into the storage room, and came to an abrupt stop. A hulking figure leaned casually against the wall, blocking my access to the stairs. Shadows concealed his face, but the dim light revealed an expansive chest decked in Russian military fatigues.

“Don’t move.” I cased Kozlov with the Beretta in my hand. “If you take another step, you *will* die.”

“Well, hello there, Dani.” Amusement deepened an already low bass. “No need to improve perfection. You *and* the girls are looking mighty fine in that dress.”

The big man sauntered forward. His cocky stride was far too confident for my taste. I braced my feet apart, holding the gun with both hands now.

He raised his hands in the air, but the outline of a formidable gun was visible as he kept advancing on me. He could’ve shot me even before I noticed him.

Why didn’t he?

Belatedly, my multilingual mind noted that he’d spoken in English. My heart accelerated. That rumbling, teasing voice. I’d tried to forget it, but I’d never succeeded.

Dani. Only one person in the world had ever called me that. Newsflash. It wasn't Kozlov.

Still, I stood my ground. "Stay back."

"No." The man kept coming at me, slowly, deliberately, until his chest met the Beretta's muzzle, and he towered above me. His deep voice tingled over my skin. "You won't shoot me, at least not yet."

Fighting disbelief, I took in the man's copper complexion and his chiseled features. His wide forehead, the dark shade of his five-o'clock beard, and the slight crook at the bridge of his otherwise straight nose were all familiar. My fingers twitched. I longed to touch him, to trace the strong line of his jaw and confirm I wasn't seeing a ghost.

"Yeah, it's me." He nodded knowingly. "Take a good look."

Moving slowly, he broke through into my personal space, obliterating my boundaries, until my inhalations shared the heat of his exhalations. Oblivious to the gun pressed against his heart, his gaze remained locked with mine.

Amber flecks sparkled in his caramel irises, igniting the fire in my blood and setting my body ablaze. The heat that

shot through me wasn't just a sign of recognition. It was an all-out celebration. My pulse gained speed as he narrowed the distance between our faces. He leaned down until his lips were only an inch or so away from mine and his mouth hovered dangerously close to mine.

Don't let him get any closer. Don't let him touch you. And above all, don't let him kiss you. You know what happens when he kisses you.

“Just in case you don't remember me,” he rumbled, unaware of the fact that I'd tried to forget him a million times and failed. “Perhaps you'll remember this?”

Don't let him. Do not let him. Do not—

His mouth parted right before it settled on my lips, claiming my mouth with the vital warmth of his. I wanted to protest, to push him away, to send him to hell, but as he deepened the kiss, my body surrendered to his.

I'd never been able to resist him.

The contact overwhelmed my senses and spread through me in prickles of pleasure that thrilled even my smallest molecules. His tongue swiped over the seams of my mouth, a silent question, an enthralling proposition. I opened

for him, only to be rewarded with an invasion of the unique flavors I remembered so well: cinnamon, vanilla, and caramel —crème brûlée, my favorite dessert, in delicious man form.

Time slowed down, turning a few precious seconds into a gift. For a cherished moment, I savored his possessive lips and the gentle voracity of his mouth, allowing him to deepen the kiss, giving permission to my tongue to roll around with his.

You are such a fool. The logical part of me rebelled.

Shut up, you uptight bitch, my heart cried out. *Your brain cells are a commune of sourpusses. Enjoy.* All other thoughts disappeared from my mind. *Just... enjoy.*

I was already there, seizing on the exquisite exchange of lust and passion that locked us together in a loop of pleasure, reliving the past, realizing the present, and ignoring the future.

“Do you remember me now?” he mumbled against my mouth, even as he continued to kiss me, a soft, possessive suckling that kept my lips too busy to reply.

Yes, I remembered. *This.* What he did to me. *Him.*

For over seven years, my long-neglected libido had been dead. It felt like a bunch of dry roots clinging to my soul's parched soil. But now, watered by this man's kiss, my passion revived. The memories of a time when I was a firestorm burning out of control between his arms swarmed me. The old me bloomed beneath his lips. I felt alive again, my flesh burning with amazing sensations, my heart alight with joy.

The kiss lasted ten seconds, no more, but the power that coursed through my veins unleashed bliss to remind me of the complete person I'd once been. For those ten seconds, there was nothing but him and the memories of us rising above all else.

Mac was the only person in the world who had the power to disrupt my internal discipline and make me forget my duty, myself. Mac. No one else.

My legendary common sense broke through. I remembered we were in the cellar at The Pravda, in a building packed to the brim with occupiers, and that Kozlov waited for me upstairs.

Goodbye, Dani—Mac's passionate lover. It was nice to feel you again. Hello, Danika killjoy. You're here to get the job

done.

It took all I had to wrench my lips from his. I barely managed an inch, maybe two, and even then, my breath came in gasps and every part of me protested the forced separation.

“*Mac,*” I rasped, barely able to believe that he was here. “Mackenzie Cienfuegos.”

“Well, lookee here.” His deep-set eyes caught the light and his honeyed irises lit up with his smile. “You remember my full name. I’m honored.” He paused for a moment and I could’ve sworn he breathed me in as if I were the oxygen in the room. “How about you lower that gun now.” He tapped a brawny finger over the Beretta. “I’d kinda hate for you to drill a hole in my chest for no reason whatsoever.”

I gawked at the weapon in my hand and immediately engaged the safety and lowered it. My heart beat out of control. What was I thinking? I could’ve killed the man!

You were not thinking, old gal. You were feeling. A very dangerous thing.

Taking a couple of steps away from him, I tried to collect my wits and jump-start my brain. It wasn’t so easy. Of all the contingencies I’d considered, of all the twists and turns

I'd anticipated, the return of Mackenzie Cienfuegos to my life was not one of them.

The years had etched a sunburst pattern at the corner of his eyes and honed his stare into a weapon that lasered through me. The boisterous, free-spirited operator who'd set my nights on fire and haunted my dreams was here, and so was the lover who'd taught me the merits of lust and the pitfalls of falling in love.

What I wouldn't give to spend another night in his bed.

He still wore his hair long. A messy man-bun trapped his rebellious brown curls. I remembered how those coils had felt between my fingers, vital, springy, exciting, like tiny silk ropes that anchored me to him as his tongue and lips pushed me from one orgasm to the next.

I recalled how those same lips sucked my nipples to perfection and taught my mouth how to kiss beyond the boundaries of respectability, propelling me into a world of sensations I'd never felt before or after him. Standing so close to him, inhaling his scent, I had to repress an urge to kiss him again or to lean into his steel frame, embrace his fiery heat, and surrender to his strength.

Earth to Danika's brain. Crackle, crackle. Please respond.

Mac made me forget my priorities. I couldn't afford to do that now. Or ever.

I put even more distance between us and mustered enough breath to demand an answer. "What are you doing here?"

He grinned, a full-on, maximum Mac Charm Offensive that threatened to melt my spine and undo what little remained of my composure. "I was passing by and decided to stop by for a kiss. By the way, that kiss?" He gave me the thumbs-up and winked. "We still got it, woman."

"Tell me why you're here," I snapped, as irritated at him as I was at myself for agreeing with him about the power of that kiss.

"Any chance you could get me back in touch with the sweet woman kissing me thirty seconds ago?"

"I didn't kiss you!" I protested. "You kissed me!"

"Maybe I kissed you at first," he countered, "but I'm pretty sure you kissed me back."

“Mac, stop this!” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Answers. Now.”

He contemplated me for a moment, then seemed to make a decision that kept his grin intact on his face. “Okey dokey, Dani Dragoness. If you must know, Cyborg sent me to get you out.”

“*Cyborg?*” I drew back. “You know him?”

“Of course I know Cyborg.” His huff carried a whiff of impatience. “Knowing people like Cy is my job. He wants you out of here, stat.”

“Why did he tap you for the mission?” I asked, confused and still trying to wrangle my overstimulated hormones into some sort of order.

“What can I say? It’s slim pickings these days.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

I spoke through my teeth. “Cienfuegos...”

“Okay, all right.” He motioned with his hands to temper my impatience. “Cy and his people can’t get here without getting killed in the process. The Russians are on the lookout for them. They’re not expecting me, so, here I am.”

I frowned. “Are American Special Forces on the ground in the Donbas?”

“That’s a negative, but you know that, Dani. What I wanna know is what possessed you to volunteer for such a dangerous mission.”

“It’s my job, but if you’re here, you already know that.”

“Yes, I do, but I also happen to know that your grandmother lives nearby.” He fixed his gaze on me. “I think that you volunteered for this mission not only because you saw yourself as suited for it, but because you saw the chance to help your grandmother get out of the occupied territories.” He paused and stared me in the eye. “Am I right?”

I dug my teeth into my lip and said nothing. This was something I hadn’t told anyone, not even Cyborg, although he’d know my family hailed from the Donbas when he cleared me for the mission.

My daughter loved my grandmother so much. Before the war, we’d traveled to Ukraine often to spend time with Baba. I’d gotten stationed in Prague to be closer to the woman who’d traveled to America when my parents died, raised me

there, and then returned to her people and the country she loved once I was old enough to care for myself.

“Baba raised me. I owed it to her to try to help her.” I owed it to Kenzie as well. “Was it wrong of me to want to rescue her from the Russians?”

“No,” Mac said. “It wasn’t wrong. Is she...?”

“Alive?” I closed my eyes, a long blink that prevented my tears from spilling. “No. She was dead by the time I got here. I arrived too late. Her town was bombarded to ruins because the old folks there tried to defend themselves from the invaders.”

Mac had the decency to say nothing, but empathy flashed in his deep-set eyes.

“Her house was gone, but I found what remained of her in the basement.” I managed to turn the sob in my throat into a croak that sounded more like a dry swallow. “She was fierce. Did you know that my eighty-three-year-old Baba still had her old Makarov pistol clutched in her hand?”

“Bravery runs in your family,” Mac offered quietly. “So, yes, I believe you.”

I exhaled a long sigh. “I buried her three days after I got here.”

His gaze broadcasted compassion I couldn’t handle at the moment. “I’m so sorry.”

He reached out for me, but I stepped away from him. “Don’t.”

Kenzie would never get to see Baba again. Neither would I.

“Dani, I—”

“Stop calling me Dani!” I spoke sharply. “I don’t wanna talk about this anymore. I’ve got a job to do and I will do it.”

He sighed, as if he understood that I couldn’t accept his compassion or his pity right now. If I allowed my emotions the slightest berth, they would destroy my fortitude.

“Okay, then.” He moved on, much to my relief. “This sketchy joint is making me jumpy as hell. Might have something to do with all the Russkies upstairs.”

“Yeah, no kidding, Mac Genius.”

“Look, I won’t deny that you look hot as fuck in that micro dress and those daggers you’re wearing as shoes, but

you're not exactly decked out for the elements, so I suggest you sacrifice hotness for practicality." He tilted his head toward the coat rack where I'd also stowed my purse, leggings, and boots. "Me being so bright and light on my feet, I figure, get dressed, talk later, leave now. Are you with me, Pumba?"

I finally got my head on straight. "Sorry, Mac Dumb, no can do."

"So, you hate my guts." He braced his feet apart and, keeping his weapon in his hand, crossed his arms over his chest. "Message received. We can do some spectacular headbutting upon request, the kind we used to excel at. Remember?"

I scoffed. "How could I forget?"

"Your memory honors my lowly person." He teased me with a smirk. "For now, I'm gonna suggest we save the quarreling for later when this shitshow is over."

"Never would be better." I tried to sidestep him in an attempt to get to the stairs, but he blocked my advance with the fortress of his body. "Get out of my way."

“I don’t think you understand.” He didn’t move an inch. “The occupiers have just unleashed a new offensive and the Bruckner Group is on the ground.”

“I know that,” I grumbled, annoyed. “What do you think I’ve been doing here? Taking a damn vacation?”

“Only if you count hell as a luxury destination,” he shot back. “Time to put an end to this adventure of yours. We gotta go now. I’m not gonna say it again, Dani.”

Dani, with a strong ‘Da’ and a soft “ni.” The way he kept saying my nickname disarmed my knees and reminded me what a great lover, competent operator, and excellent ally he’d been. That he was here now was not the best news, given that, for Kenzie’s sake, I needed him to outlive me. I amended my strategy to benefit my mission while returning him to safety.

“Go back to Cyborg, tell him I’m on the way and give him this.” I took off my right shoe, extracted the thumb drive from the top of the hollow heel, and after handing it to Mac, slid the stiletto back on. “It contains pictures of new weapon technology the Russians are putting in the field. Tell Cy I’m coming with cargo and to send a squad to meet me at the spot. He’ll know what I mean.”

Mac pocketed the thumb drive and tilted his head in that very Mac way that said, “I only do things my way,” but I had to give him credit because he asked. “Why are you refusing to exfil?”

“I’ve got my reasons and you’ve got your orders.” I moved past him.

He trapped my arm in his grip. “I don’t gotta follow your damn orders.”

“Yeah, you do.” I lifted my face to his. “Right now, in this theater, I outrank you.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” He released his hold on me and threw his hands in the air. “You’re gonna do that thing you like to do.”

I jutted out my chin. “What’s that?”

“You’re gonna try to witchy-talk yourself out of common sense. Aren’t you? You’re gonna give me all kinds of crap just because you think you can. Well, I warned you. My mission is to get you out. You leave me no other option.” In one swift move, he scooped me up and threw me over his shoulder as if I were a sack of potatoes.

“Get your paws off me!” I slapped his back and kicked my legs, but it was like striking concrete. He didn’t even flinch.

“I get you don’t want me to boss you around.” He strode across the room. “I remember how batshit angry you got whenever I had to pull rank on you, but I’ve got my orders, too, so we’re leaving, and there ain’t nothing you can do about that.”

“Cienfuegos!” I whisper-shouted, slapping his back. “Put me down. Now!”

“In your dreams, Dani Delish.” He didn’t slow down. “We’re going home. *I’m* taking *you* home and that’s the end of this clusterfuck.”

How could I be both batshit furious and supremely turned on at a time like this just because this big oaf had called me a ridiculous nickname like Dani Delish?

“Stop.” I groaned aloud. “You’re acting like the stinking sack of testosterone you are.”

If the insult fazed him, he didn’t show it.

When he ignored me and kept going, he left me no choice but to tell him the truth. “Stanislav Kozlov is here, in

this place, right now. Does your monkey brain understand the magnitude of what that means?"

Every muscle in his body tensed beneath my weight.

"Kozlov?" He halted mid-stride. "He's here?"

"Yes!" I smacked my hand on his back. "Now put me down you big, bossy gorilla. Can't you see? I can't leave until I get him."

For once in his life, Mackenzie Cienfuegos did as I asked. He plunked me down on my feet and confronted me with his glower.

"Is it true?" he demanded. "Are you sure?"

"Of course it's true!" I countered, incensed. "Do you think I'm stupid or what?"

"Stupid? You? Ha!" He barked a single laugh. "You don't got a stupid hair on you. In fact, you're the smartest person I know, much to my disadvantage. But..."

"But what?"

"You're also devious, as sly as only you can be."

The accusation made me queasy, but maybe that was just guilt making the rounds, a distraction I couldn't afford at

the moment. “Why the hell would I invent a story like that?”

“All right.” Mac clasped his hands behind his back and, holding his gun, began to pace before me. “Let’s say you are not lying to me for a change. Were you planning on killing Kozlov all by your lonesome self?”

“I don’t want to kill the son of a bitch,” I spat. “I want to capture him and take him to Kyiv.”

“*Capture him?*” He came to a dead stop and stared at me as if I were insane, which was not entirely impossible given the difficulties of my self-imposed task. “Do you have any idea of how dangerous the motherfucker is?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, I do.” I stepped up to him and got in his face. “I happen to know quite well how dangerous Kozlov is, especially since he’s waiting upstairs to rape me as we speak.”

Mac’s eyes bulged out of their sockets. “*He what?*”

It was my turn to cross my arms. “What you heard.”

“*Maldito hijo de la gran puta,*” he snarled—*damn son of a bitch*. “I’m gonna shred that animal into strips and feed him to the rats. You can’t be contemplating—”

“I know what I’m doing,” I spoke over him. “And you’d be doing the human race a favor if you use that pea mush you’ve got instead of a brain to think this through and let me do my job.”

“Hmm.”

It was such a Mac sound, annoying but thoughtful at the same time, and capable of driving me nuts on the spot. He considered me carefully, but something irritatingly akin to mirth flashed in his eyes. Or was it something else?

Admiration?

No freaking way. The only person Mac admired was Mac.

“You never did like my pea mush of a brain.” His grin turned roguish and he eyed me in that odd way that sent heat sparking through my body. “You always found it somewhat deficient, but we worked well together, and you enjoyed my dick well enough. Remember that?”

“Really?” I sank my nails into my palms. “Now? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“You’re right, Ms. I’m-All-About-Duty.” He knuckled his chin and flashed his super-sized grin. “You’ve got a villain

to net and the world to save.”

“This is some serious shit.” I poked a finger on his tactical vest. “I can’t afford to slow down to hang out with a freaking clown.”

“Hey!” The drama king rubbed the spot where I’d touched him, but the scowl on his face was real.

I’d scored a low blow with my words. I regretted this as much as I hated the fact that Mac was here, now, in grave danger, courtesy of Cyborg. I also had to recognize that Mac’s appearance was timely. Cy knew what he was doing when he put Mac in charge of assisting me in what was likely a difficult exfil. What he didn’t know was just how dangerous The Pravda had become with Kozlov’s arrival.

I faced a dangerous opponent in Kozlov, and Mac could make the difference between me dying or me living to bring Kozlov to justice and see Kenzie again. As if my decisions hadn’t been hard enough, I now realized I *had* to fit Mac into my dangerous equation.

I didn’t have a choice.

My regrets regarding Mac kept falling one after the other like dominoes in an endless row. It had always been like

this between us, intense, painful, and glorious.

Not now, Dani. Put the glorious away.

“You remember how to make me bleed quite well,” he muttered before he rallied back to his cocky self. “You might be wrong about me, but you’re not wrong about Kozlov.”

“So?” I crossed my arms and lifted my chin in the air. “What are we gonna do about it?”

“We?”

“We, as in the old times. Together.”

“Your brain, my brawn.” Something new sparked in his eyes. “I like it.”

“This is not about the past,” I clarified in a stern voice. Realizing that my snooty tone was a little out of control, I dialed it down. “It’s about the future and bettering my odds for success.”

“Glad to see your exquisite mind has found a good use for this clown.” He offered his hand. “I second this collaboration. I’m happy to put my muscle to your service, but only if you swear that, after we’re done with Kozlov, you’ll allow me to escort you out of Ukraine and back to the States.”

I took his hand and shook it, fighting to ignore the chemical reaction that destabilized my molecules. “Deal.”

“Okay, Dani Delish. We’ll do it your way.” He held on to my hand for a moment longer than necessary, then released it. He shouldered his ruck and his carbine, morphed into the lethal operator he was, and bared his teeth in a bone-chilling smirk. “Take me to Kozlov.”

Chapter Three

Mac

Danika came to a stop at the top of the stairs and peered out into the poorly illuminated hallway. Her caution caused me to have a close encounter with her spandex-encased ass, a perky pair of perfectly rounded glutes that earned my “most beautiful ass” designation on the spot.

Her dress was probably outlawed in at least forty countries. The intimate way in which it hugged her form had me craving a reunion with the body so graphically outlined beneath the hot little number.

Stop catering to your dick and slobbering like a feral animal, Mac Prick.

I needed to crush my grossly inappropriate cravings and get my head in the game. The memory of our kiss and the sight of the shimmering fishnets encasing her long legs did nothing to rid me of my lurid thoughts. An image of me sliding down those silky stockings didn't help, either. It was a curse. Whenever this woman was around, horny became my permanent condition.

Shoot me now.

Kozlov. Exfil. Reunite Kenzie with her mother. Focus, Blaze.

I climbed the last few steps and stood next to her.

“Third door from the left,” Danika whispered. “I’ll knock and—”

“Why don’t I knock instead?” I suggested.

“The moment he sees you he’ll go on full alert. We don’t want a fight that will call attention to us. There’s a small army in this building, and it can call in the big army. We have to do this quietly.”

“I can do quiet.” It wasn’t an empty boast.

“My little friends in here will do it better.” She slid the stone of her ring and showed me the tablets she intended to use to subdue Kozlov. “Less of a commotion and more time to execute.”

“No problem,” I said in a low voice. “I can cram those down his throat, easy.”

“Right.” She rolled her eyes so hard they probably somersaulted in her skull. “Because he’s going to open his beak like a little bird and take the worms from Mac Daddy.”

I pursed my lips and whispered. “Twit, twit, twit.”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “Do you ever take anything seriously?”

“I take your kisses very seriously.”

“If you don’t stop the bullshit, I’m gonna go at this on my own.”

“I’ve stopped. See?” I straightened my lips, smothering my grin. “This is me, stopped. I’m now officially and totally serious. It’ll make the mission boring, but what the hell.”

“Once I’m in the room, I’ll distract him—”

“How?”

She didn’t meet my gaze. “I have my ways.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.” I loathed the images zipping inside my head. “I’m not cool with you risking your neck and wiggling your booty for that murderous asshole.”

“And I’m not cool with you telling me how to do my job,” she snapped.

Gee whiz. I prayed for patience I didn’t have.

“I’m not telling you how to do your job,” I pointed out—reasonably, I thought. “I’m telling you how *not* to do it.”

“Same difference, so quit the nonsense. We’re doing this my way.”

It was my turn to roll my eyes. “It’s always your way or the highway.”

“Says you, the king of the highway,” she countered, her cheeks flushed. “I’ll go in. I’ll fix him a drink. We wait until the pills take effect. You stay here and wait for my signal. *Here.*” She pointed to the floor. “Do you understand? No independent study for you while I’m gone. I’ll open the door when we’re ready to go.”

“I don’t like your plan,” I rumbled. “You’re hogging the mission. I’m barely in it.”

“You don’t have to be the star of every mission. Plus, once I open the door, you get to lug Kozlov out of the room, down the stairs, and to the car.”

“I do hate it when you relegate me to a support role. I’m more than size and muscle. I’ve got a brain.”

“Then use it to stop running your mouth and wait for my damn signal.” She tucked the Beretta Nano into the middle section of her bra and rearranged the dress’s little front ruffle

to cover the small gun. It was the only place where her skimpy dress would not betray a concealed weapon.

I nudged my chin toward her chest. “That doesn’t look comfortable.”

“What?”

“Walking around with a Beretta Nano tucked between your breasts.”

“I’ll manage,” she said curtly. “I’m going now, and you *will* follow my orders.”

“Aye, aye, Herr Commandant.” I gave her a sloppy salute.

She huffed a suffering breath, strutted her stuff down the hallway, then parked before the door and knocked.

A gravelly voice replied in Russian. “Enter.”

Danika gave me a last look before she turned the knob and disappeared into the room.

Color me weird, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that the room had gobbled her up.

Danika

Kozlov sat at the edge of the mattress on the other side of the bed. His gun lay on the night table and his coat was abandoned on a chair. As I walked in, he threw his head back and guzzled what remained in the vodka bottle. A coppery smell scented the air in the room, making my skin crawl, but I ignored it and marched to the bar cart standing in the corner.

“What would you like to drink?” I asked politely, averting my eyes from him, but sensing his glower following my every movement.

“You,” he drawled. “But I’ll get to that after our business here is concluded.”

His tone almost unnerved me, but then again, that’s what Kozlov did, unnerve people.

“More vodka?” Keeping my back to him, I poured a shot, taking care to slide aside the ring stone and drop the pills into the glass. I needed to give the pills a few moments to dissolve in the clear liquor.

“If I were you, I’d drink that shot myself.” The menace in his raspy voice made me look over my shoulder. He still sat on the bed, but now he picked the dirt from under his nails with the tip of the biggest, most savage combat knife I’d ever seen.

He caught me looking and smirked. “She’s a pretty one, isn’t she?” He twirled the knife between his fingers, moving it back and forth like a magician and somehow keeping all his fingers. “She does a good job. She’s loyal, unlike you.”

Frost snaked up my spine. I turned around slowly. Holding on to the vodka shot, I took in the blade, the man who held it, and the accusations gleaming in his mud-colored eyes. My gaze drifted down to his shoes and to the crimson footprints that marked his trail across the room on the carpet. I tracked the footprints in reverse to the door that led to the bathroom.

“No,” I whispered through my quickly numbing lips.
“No.”

Giving the bed a wide berth, keeping my stare on Kozlov, I inched my way to the bathroom and glanced inside. Slapping my hand over my mouth, I smothered a scream.

The horror.

Oksana’s body lay on the floor, surrounded by a gruesome pool of blood. Her toes and fingers were neatly lined on the edge of the white tub, amputated from her butchered body. Her intestines had been carved out of her stomach and

now rested in a bloody tangle over her thighs. Her chest was cracked open and her heart was partly stuffed in her mouth.

“You killed her.” The shock made me feel woolly, distant, and frozen to the bone marrow. Oksana was dead. Cruelly murdered in cold blood. In less than twenty minutes, Kozlov had done *this* to her.

I was next.

My knees buckled but I held on to the shot glass until I found the wherewithal to confront him. “Why?”

“This is what we do to spies.” His ugly smirk widened. “She was a spy. Like you are.”

“I’m not—”

“Don’t bother.” He got up from the bed, strolled to the door, and flipped the lock. “I suspected we had a snitch in the area. What I didn’t know is that we had two. It took some doing, but Oksana told me all about you, the American bitch pretending to be one of us. Poor Oksana. Pain is the ultimate confessor. She was brave until the very end.”

Every bone in my body rattled in my joints. I pressed my back against the threshold, shifting my gaze between

Oksana's slaughtered remains and the man now ambling toward me.

“Oksana could've died an easy death.” He approached me slowly. “But she chose to go the hard way. You would be wise to answer my question promptly.” He shifted into gutturally accented English. “Who is your employer?”

Shaking my head, I pretended I didn't understand a word he said, but I knew my cover was blown. I had one last chance. My main advantage was that his gun was on the other side of the room. Even so, with that brute of a knife in his hand, he was confident that I was not a threat to him. He could be right. Gathering my courage, I waited until he came closer.

“Come on, blue eyes.” He wiggled his fingers, holding on to his knife with his other hand. “You don't have to die today. You could become a valuable asset to me, to my boss. He might be interested in meeting an American spy face to face.”

“If that's the case,” I said, sticking to Russian, “you'll have to catch one first.”

I hurled the vodka in his face.

My aim was true. The liquor hit him in the eyes. The man stumbled, blinking off the burn, hissing and cursing. The ruse bought me five seconds to whip out the Beretta from my bra.

Knife bared, Kozlov came at me in a full-out tackle. He leaped, shortening the distance between us. I raised the gun and got a wobbly shot off. My last thought before he collided with me was of Kenzie.

Chapter Four

Mac

When it came to my rules for surviving a shitty world, if my orders conflicted with my gut, the latter usually won. Years of death-defying missions had proven that my gut was a lot better than my brain at keeping me alive and breathing. By my estimation, reason worked about sixty percent of the time; but that feeling that yanked on my intestines, advising me as to my perilous status within the cosmic juju?

Priceless.

Invaluable to saving my gorgeous ass with ninety-nine percent accuracy.

Having been in the military for most of my life and subjected to the tyrannies of the infamous chain of command, the gut-over-orders debate presented me with my share of philosophical conundrums. It also allowed me plenty of opportunities to reinterpret commands and work my way out of stupid situations.

This was why Delta Force had been my best fit. Thinking was allowed at The Unit and originality was

encouraged. Outcome was more important than egos. Elite ran on the same kind of smart fuel.

All of this explained why, when Danika went to work, I didn't follow her orders. Nothing about being here felt right to my gut and everything felt profoundly wrong.

As soon as Danika disappeared, I searched for hidden cameras. Finding none, I got busy.

Ignoring the sounds of sex drifting from the doors at either side of me, I sneaked down the hall and found a window above the building's main entrance. Working quickly, I opened the window, extracted the laser designator from my ruck's side pocket, and activated the PRF—pulse repetition frequency. After peeling off the back, I stuck the designator on the outer sill and set my chronometer. I had five minutes to get our asses out of here.

Backtracking, I returned to the door that had swallowed my kid's reckless mother and pressed my ear to the wood panel. Kozlov's rumblings came through, although not clearly. No signal from Danika, but lots of tugs and yanks from my hyperactive gut. Moving carefully, I set my hand on the knob. I was about to twist it open when a *click* locked the turning mechanism.

See? My gut jerked. I told you this was sketchy.

Working fast, I slid out my trusty multitool from my pocket, inserted the pick in the hole, and felt my way through the pins. Picking locks was a required skill for a Delta and one of my personal superpowers. It took me less than ten seconds to unlock the door.

Congratulating myself for my excellent time, I slowly turned the knob. With the door slightly cracked, I brought my M4 forward and held it up and tight against my cheek. My knees flexed and my senses ramped to the max as I stepped into the room, sweeping the space, searching for my target.

Stealth didn't do me any good. A loud *crack* echoed in the space, announcing to anyone with ears that a shot had been fired in suite four.

So much for Danika's "quiet" plan.

Danika. A spike of adrenaline pulsed through me. Had Kozlov shot her?

Securing my rear, I pushed the door with my heel and engaged the lock with a quick flick of my wrist. My eyes worked the room. I immediately located Kozlov lying at my ten o'clock by the bathroom door. He was down. I potted a

hole in the back of his shirt. Blood stained the edges of an exit wound.

I kept my carbine on him, but where the hell was Danika?

The scent of blood and metals invaded my nostrils. *Shit.* My stomach went into freefall. Was she dead?

I tracked the voices shouting in the hallway and the pounding of boots on the stairs, but it was the grunt that rose from Kozlov that got my attention.

What the fuck?

Kozlov moved, but only slightly. I almost shot him again. That's when I spotted the stiletto sticking out from under him. The grunt came again. I grabbed the big man by the back of his collar and lifted him to one side. Sure enough, Danika lay on the floor, partly crushed under the asshole's muscular weight.

“Are you okay?” Aware of my pulse's unusual uptick mid-mission, I slung my carbine over my shoulder, took a knee next to her, and ran my hands over the blood spatters visible on her skin and dress. “You better not die on me.”

I'd promised Kenzie I would bring her mom back in one piece. My daughter would hate me forever if something happened to Danika. Hell, *I* wouldn't forgive myself if Danika got hurt or killed under my watch.

"I'm fine," she heaved, even though a trickle of blood dripped from her nose, her eyes were the size of half-dollar pancakes, and the little gun quaked in her hand. She kicked her legs and scooted backward. "Get this monster off me!"

"Easy, now." I threw the asshole's listless body aside, freeing her from her foul prison. "You're okay. You're gonna be okay."

"Hurry," she rasped. "Help me up."

I picked her up from the floor and plunked her down on her feet, keenly aware of how hard her knees were shaking. A glance into the bathroom showed me the butchered body of a woman. Not a pretty sight. No wonder Danika was in shock. The racket outside required me to accelerate our exit strategy.

I jammed a chair under the door handle, then led Danika to the window and, releasing my grip on her arm, threw open the windowpanes. "We need to get out now."

“Wait!” She turned toward Kozlov, but I caught her wrist and stopped her in her tracks.

“Waiting means dying.” I tugged on my gloves, pulled my rope out of my ruck, and handed her the bulk of the coil. “Hold this.”

She grasped the coil, my tactic to keep her in place, but she shifted on her feet. “What about Kozlov?”

“I’m assuming you shot him?” I secured one end of the rope to the foot of the bed.

“Yes.”

“Then he’s either dead or he’s gonna be dead soon.” I took the coil from her and tossed it out the window.

“You don’t understand,” the stubborn woman protested. “We need to—”

Bang, bang, bang.

The door rattled on its hinges under the force of some violent knocking. She must’ve jumped three feet in the air. Someone called out.

“They want to know if everything’s all right,” Danika translated in a whisper.

“Tell them everything’s fine.” I secured my ruck and my carbine to my back. “Buy us some time.”

Danika called out a few words, but the angry reply she got told me she didn’t fool the asswipes outside. The door began to rattle with the blow of vicious kicks.

“Let’s go.” I reached for her.

“I can’t leave without Kozlov.” She made another attempt to get to him.

“Don’t.” I caught her wrist and dragged her back to the window. “Plan A is shot. We’re on to plan B. We ain’t got time to give the genocidal maniac a ride.”

“Let me go.” She fought my stern hold. “I stayed behind to get him!”

“Danika, listen to me.” I glanced at my watch and, holding on to her shoulders, met her stare. “Exactly seventy-two seconds from now, a laser-guided missile will strike this building. Everything and everybody in it will be flattened. That means us, too, if we don’t hoof it out of here and put some distance between us and that laser-guided bomb.”

Her eyes widened. “Cyborg?”

I nodded. “Cyborg.”

“Shit.”

Now she got the message. With the designator activated, Cyborg and his crew were not gonna miss.

She kicked off her heels and stuck her head out the window. Panic glimmered in her eyes. “How will we—?”

The door buckled and almost gave way.

“Here we go.” I lifted her off her feet, threw her over my shoulder, and, after straddling the window and positioning myself to face the wall, grabbed the rope and initiated our rappel.

“Hang on,” I said. “And whatever you do, don’t let go.”

Danika

Mac pushed off the building and slid down the rope with his ruck and his weapon on his back and me draped over one side. I hung on to him for dear life. It was a testament to Mac’s strength and skill that he could pull a roped descent with a double load. And yet he did it, fast and textbook perfect.

We hit the ground running.

Leaving the rope behind, Mac hooked an arm over the back of my legs and accelerated across the parking lot. His shoulder thumped against my stomach as he galloped into the woods. Willing to exchange the uncomfortable upside-down jolting for the speed that only Mac could give us, I swallowed my groans.

A slew of rounds plinked at his heels, quickening his sprint. I managed a look. Several shooters manned the building's windows, firing at us. I braced a hand on Mac's back, lifted off him, and, aiming with my other hand, I let loose a few rounds. A couple of cautious types dodged to avoid my bullets, but I had no prayer of landing a good shot.

We made it through the woods and across the road as the missile zoomed by somewhere to our right.

Pfsssssst.

Someone at The Pravda must've spotted it coming because people shouted, and I caught a glimpse of several figures jumping out the windows before the structure exploded into an orange ball of fire.

The blast picked us up and launched us through the air. We smashed against something hard. For a moment there, the

primordial big bang played out in my head. A grunt nearby told me Mac had survived the night.

“Are you with me?” He landed a hand on my shoulder and shook me a little.

I tilted my head and found him sprawled next to me at the bottom of the wall.

“I’m with you,” I rasped.

Pfsssssssst.

Another missile hit the flaming ruins. The new explosion reflected on Mac’s face and set his eyes aflame.

“Bullseye.” Mac pushed off from the ground and offered me a hand. “*Vamonos.*”

“Yeah.” I took his hand and made it to my iffy feet.
“Let’s go.”

Chapter Five

Mac

Under the relentless assault of the freezing rain, Danika looked miserable, wearing my oversized puffy, which hung down almost to her knees, and a pair of boots I'd stolen from the ruins of what had once been somebody's home. The boots were two sizes too big, increasing the difficulty of trampling across the muddy field, but they were better than bare feet or stilettos.

Tangles of dark, wet hair stuck out from under the beanie I'd loaned her. Seeing her like this, my heart shrank a little. I remembered her in all her diplomat's glory, dressed to the nines, maneuvering the halls of European power and bending the wills of illustrious leaders as if she were a queen herself.

I had to give her credit. She might look wretched, but so far, she'd kept up with me, and she hadn't complained, not even once. That was more than I could say about many self-described tough grunts I'd spent time with in the pits of hell.

It was cock-freezing cold, and I swore this part of Ukraine had sleet permanently engraved in its forecast. Flooded roads, swamped fields, and swollen rivers slowed us to a crawl. We had not seen a viable vehicle that didn't include a rabble of heavily armed invaders for miles. The Russians had destroyed every single fucking thing in their path, along with their economy, their reputation, and the very land they sought to occupy.

Two days of no sleep and nonstop trudging behind enemy lines had taken a toll on Danika. Hell, they'd taken a toll on me, too. Navigating razed villages and demolished cities while avoiding the bloodthirsty patrols looking for us had me craving the basics we all took for granted—clean water, electricity, heat, a safe roof over my head, and a hot plate of *arroz con habichuelas*—rice and beans.

The death and destruction we witnessed as we navigated the occupied zone rivaled the horrors I'd faced before, and for the record, I'd faced some unspeakable horrors during my long career.

As we made our way across a barren landscape littered with the rubble of what had once been prosperous villages, bodies rotted in the streets. Many of them had their hands tied

behind their backs, executed where they lay. We came across the wreckages of blown-up cars that still contained the remains of murdered women and children. The gruesome stink of death and decomposition followed us for miles after we went by a meat factory piled to the ceiling with the abandoned corpses of Russian soldiers.

It was proof of unimaginable cruelty, of one tyrant's territorial greed and his genocidal disregard for human life. It pained me that, like Danika's grandmother, so many innocent civilians had become casualties of this war. I could see the grief etched on Danika's face, the outrage, and yet we had to set our horror aside and focus on executing our exfil.

We made slow progress. We had to go the long way. The flooded roads, the rioting rivers, and the trigger-happy Russians slowed our advance at every turn.

The conditions required us to detour over the bare fields where we currently waged battle with the mud. Being out in the open was never my first choice. Shitty things happened out in the open. Drones acquired targets and so did snipers. That I had to lead a cold, soaked, and exhausted Danika through that exposed, fallow field killed my mood and soured my sunny disposition.

The slight tremor beneath my boots did nothing to improve my shitty mood. I tilted my head into the wind. The rumble of armored elements reached me. The water pooled over the field began to shake as if the T-Rex from *Jurassic Park* approached.

“To the tree line.” I grabbed Danika’s elbow, and together we sprinted through the mud at a thigh-burning pace, fighting the pull of the sucking muck.

As we neared my precarious concept of safety, Danika’s foot sank deep into the mire. Her boot got stuck. The rumbling grew and I spotted the turret of a tank slowly moving above the clusters of trees before the bend.

“Shit.” She yanked with all she had and yet she was still stuck.

I grabbed her leg and wrenched her foot out of the boot. Leaving the shoe buried in the mud, I threw her over my shoulder and raced for cover. I caught a glimpse of the tank at the head of a column crawling around the bend.

No time for a soft landing.

I dove into the trees, wrapped my big body around Danika, and crashed through a thicket of branches like a

bowling ball. When I finally managed to roll us to a halt, I released her. We ended up sprawled on the ground in a tangle of limbs that put me on my side. She turned out of my arms and fell flat on her back. When she tilted her head, we ended up pretty much nose-to-nose.

I flashed her a lazy grin. “We have to stop meeting like this.”

“Amen to that.” As if making a huge effort, she lifted her hand and wiped the mud off her face, succeeding only at adding a few new streaks to her cheek. “If we could also put a lid on the fireman’s carry, my stomach and ribs would appreciate it.”

“Sorry.” I shrugged, still laying on the damp earth. “It was an emergency.”

“Yeah.” She sighed and dropped her arm to the ground. “It was.”

It struck me how her luminous blue eyes brought light to my crappy day, even though dusk had already begun to darken my soggy world. For a few seconds, I basked in her gaze, in the accidental intimacy of our proximity. Being around her all the time was taking a toll on me. Breathing in her exhalations, I found my eyes sliding down to her lips.

I wanted to kiss her again, to slowly make my way into her mouth and gorge on her flavors. When she licked her lips, the provocation was almost too much. The quaking earth came to my rescue. Yeah, probably not the best moment for a kiss. She might sucker punch me if I tried.

“This way.” I turned on my belly and, crawling on all fours, led her to a depression in the middle of the woods some thirty feet from the road.

The trees and the undergrowth offered decent cover. Danika elbowed her way into the natural trench and I followed. I’d just shed my ruck and my carbine when the first tank paraded before us, slow as fuck as it attempted to find a route around the worst of the muddy road. Using the scrub as visual protection, raising my head until my eyes were at ground level, I observed the Russians’ sluggish advance.

This was gonna take a while.

“Russian T-72s,” Danika pointed out over the clatter as she laid flat on the ground and scooted close to me so we could hear each other. “Nineteen eighties models. Old, outdated, and obsolete when compared to modern mechanized armored technology, but probably modified with some additional armor, which makes them heavier, slower, and more

prone to get stuck. They're marked with the big Z to make sure they don't kill each other."

"Fucking Zimbeciles," I grumbled, extracting the binoculars from my ruck. "Z is for Zombies."

"As long as those zombies have the hardware, the ammunition that goes with it, and the oil and gas that funds their so-called 'military operation,' they will continue to pursue their scorched-earth strategy," she reminded me. "How many tanks do you think we're looking at?"

"I'm counting as they go." I kept my carbine at hand and my binos working the road, tracking not only the hardware but the troops that went with it. "They're taking their time, trying not to sink in the mud. One officer, the rest are all very young. Conscripts more likely, still learning the ropes." I lowered the binoculars and did a visual check on her. "Are you okay?"

"You're going to have to stop asking that question." She huffed. "If your buddies at Elite Team were here, you wouldn't be asking it every sixty seconds."

"Well, lookee here." Returning my eyes to the glasses, I allowed the grin that bloomed on my face. "She knows all

about my place of employment. Should I be flattered you kept up with my promotions all these years?”

“*Flattered?*” She sneered. “I think not.”

“In that case, why did you keep tabs on me?” I ventured a glance.

“I did *not* keep tabs on you, no way, no sir.” She turned up her nose at me. “I’m in the intelligence community. Word gets around.”

“Righty.”

I adjusted the glasses to scout the column further down the road. The “no way, no sir” was one of Danika’s few tells, keywords for “I’m lying to your face” in my Dani translation program.

Battle Brothers closely guarded its operators’ identities. Danika would’ve had to make a very big effort and call in some high-level favors to keep tabs on someone as slippery as me. That Kenzie had found me was the best evidence of all the trouble her mother had gone to have an address on me. In case she died or disappeared. It rankled me that this was the only scenario where, according to Danika’s

wishes, I got to meet Kenzie, if ever. It infuriated me that all I was getting from Danika was static and avoidance.

The minx was not gonna budge easily.

A confession was my preferred route to tackle the matter of Kenzie's existence. I couldn't explain why, but I wanted to give Danika the opportunity to come clean with me. It was obvious she didn't trust me enough to tell me seven years ago. Perhaps I wanted her to trust me now.

Fat chance, Mac Loser.

After seventy-two hours together, I'd given her plenty of openings and yet she was nowhere near a confession. To be honest, I was getting jittery. Since our escape from The Pravda, Danika had not mentioned my daughter, not even once, and any lead-ins that my admittedly clumsy brain had come up with to broach the matter had been rejected, ignored, or both.

"You can lie to me some more if you wish," I drawled out. "But I'll have you notice that we are now executing *my* mission on an active battlefield, meaning *I* outrank *you*."

Her glare could've evaporated me on the spot. "I object to your faulty rationale."

“Object all you want, but I’m in charge and I’m also responsible for the condition of my high-value target, so, Dani Dragoness, answer my simple question. Are. You. Okay?”

“The answer is the same as before,” she spat, unable to hide her irritation. “I’m tired, wet, cold, and filthy, but I’m fine. You, on the other hand, must be freezing your nuts given that I’m wearing most of your cold-weather gear.”

“Aw, thanks for caring so much about my nuts.” I flashed her a placid smile and decided to bait her yet again. “Given the superior quality of the genetic material stored in my gonads, my *cojones* are among the best of me.”

She groaned, a sound between a snort and a moan. “Stop preening, you big dickhead, and pay attention to the Russians!”

“Twelve tanks so far,” I offered. “I’m never not paying attention. As to my dickhead, yeah. It’s true. It’s big, but I’ve never had any complaints.”

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Or perhaps you haven’t checked your reviews on Fling.com.”

“Good try, but I’m not online. Don’t need to,” I added just to needle her. “I can get it for free.”

She looked like she wanted to slap me. “You are a prick, you know that?”

“I do know that I have one of those. Somehow, you keep going back to it.” I queried her with a lift of my eyebrows. “Fond memories, perhaps?”

Another monumental eye roll. “Shut your trap.”

She refused to acknowledge our relationship and the amazing result of it.

“If you must know, my prick is all nice and toasty for the moment, on account of all the running we’ve been doing,” I offered as casual commentary and also to process my frustration. “I’m sick and tired of running from the enemy. Running is not my style.”

“For once we agree on something.” Her eyes narrowed on the truck coming around the bend. “Oh, shit.” She ripped the binoculars from my hand. “Could this be...?”

“What?” I followed her line of sight. “What do you see?”

“Hang on.” She focused the lenses. “Oh, my God. It is!”

“What is it?”

“Take a look.” She handed me the binos.

In the middle of the tank column, I spotted a radar vehicle followed by three trucks. Turning the center wheel, I focused on a trio of transporter erector launchers. Each carried four missiles. I was familiar with surface-to-air missile systems, but I’d never seen one with this profile. Mud aside, the vehicles looked shiny and new.

Danika distracted me from additional observations as she ran her hands all over my ass and groin.

“I’m always game, Dani Delish.” I looked from her frenzied hands to her frantic face. “But this might not be the right time and place.”

“Don’t be an idiot.” She groaned. “Your cell. I need your cell!”

“Why didn’t you say so?” I slid out the cell from my front pocket, typed in my security code, and handed it to her.

She tapped on the camera icon and began to film the slowly advancing column and, more specifically, the missile systems.

“They look sophisticated and almost brand new.” I resumed my surveillance through the binoculars. “I didn’t

know the Russians had a new system.”

“They’re not Russian,” she said. “We are looking at the latest Chinese technology, HQ-22 surface-to-air missile systems. It’s comparable to the US’s Patriot System. We’d heard the Chinese were arming the Russians, but the Chinese government denied it, saying the US was spreading misinformation.”

“Misinformation, my ass.” I clenched hard. “We’re talking about the same government who promised Putin a ‘no-limits friendship.’ The Russians will decimate Ukrainian defenses with those things.”

“They’ll lose the Donbas for sure, maybe even the war,” Danika muttered even as she kept filming. “I heard at The Pravda that something big was coming. That’s why I extended my stay. And here it is.”

“A weapon that can change the balance of the war.”
My mood darkened.

“Evidence that the Chinese government is flaunting the global community and helping the Russians,” Danika added. “The Chinese are testing their latest weapons systems here in Ukraine.”

“And after that...?”

“Taiwan, of course, and the rest of the world, if we let them. Remember the Germans and the Japanese during World War II? We’re looking at the Russians, the Chinese, the Iranians, the North Koreans, and a few other rogue actors who’ve joined forces to create a new axis of power.”

I knew that and still... holy fucking shit.

We waited in silence as the missile systems rumbled by. Danika filmed them until they turned the far corner and disappeared from view. The tank column continued its slow painful parade, but Danika reviewed the clip and met my gaze.

“Can you transmit this clip right now to Cyborg without giving away our location?”

“I have encrypted capability to send this up to BB’s satellites. They can then transfer the info to Cy. But we have to assume that the radar vehicle attached to the missile systems is currently operational and can detect my transmission. Let’s put a few clicks between us before we make contact.”

“Agreed.” She went dead quiet.

“What?” I demanded after a few moments.

She aimed her frown at me. “What about what?”

“What are you thinking?” I asked. “Whenever you don’t fire back with an insult and go all quiet like you just did, my alarms go off.”

“Good to know you’ve got a smidge of sensitivity.” She smirked. “I’m thinking about something interesting.”

“Or dangerous,” I put in.

“Or dangerous,” she agreed with a nod.

The sparkle that glinted in her glacial blue eyes got my gut churning. Knocking her head in the direction of the slow-crawling tanks, her eyes stayed on me.

“No,” I stated firmly.

She widened her smirk.

“No, Danika, no.” My gut churned, but her smirk kept expanding and her eyes glinted with determination. “We are getting out of here. You promised me. We are *not* engaging the enemy.”

“I did promise I’d go with you,” she admitted. “But we have a chance to make a difference here, to mess with the invaders’ minds a little. You called them idiots, zimbeciles, and zombies, young conscripts still learning the ropes—”

“None of that means they are not dangerous—”

“Oh, come on.” She threw a hand in the air. “I’m betting that this is a Russian tank battalion, thirty-one tanks, three companies of ten tanks each, plus the battalion commander. They’re keeping their distance to avoid getting stuck in each other’s tracks and getting pummeled in one shot. The stragglers among them would be an easy target for an experienced Delta like you.”

“I know what you’re doing,” I groused in my best warning tone. “You’re blowing smoke up my ass to get me to do what you want. It won’t work, woman. I might look dumb, but I’m not that stupid.”

“They’re moving very slowly, and in less than thirty minutes, they’ll have to stop for the night along this dark, muddy road flanked by forest on both sides.” The wily witch kept her excellent arguments going. “They’ll start drinking then. You’ve been bitching and complaining about having to hoof it to rendezvous. Well, we’ve got the opportunity to get ourselves a better method of transportation.”

“Or to get you killed by making a careless mistake,” I countered.

“My dear Blaze, if there’s something I *know* about you, it’s that you don’t make careless mistakes, at least not on the

battlefield.” From bicep to wrist, she walked two fingers over my arm, and I swear, her touch seared me clear through the thick fabric of my Russian military fatigues. “I can’t say the same about your personal life, but look, you are already dressed for the occasion. At the rate we’re going, it’s going to take us days to get out of the occupied zone. Every minute we linger here, the danger increases. Am I right or what?”

The crafty shrew made some excellent points, but I’d come all this way to secure Danika for Kenzie, not to further endanger her. And what the fuck did she mean with that dig about me not making mistakes on the battlefield but implying I did in my personal life?

I grunted something obscene. “You’re forgetting about the Chinese missile system and its radar vehicle.”

“No, I’m not.” She flashed me a cocky smirk. “Do you have any laser designators left? You know, the ones you used to guide the missiles to The Pravda?”

I huffed. “Please tell me you’re not thinking about sticking one of those on the Chinese missile systems?”

“Why not?” She lifted a shoulder. “We could repeat the same strategy to take these weapons out of commission even

before they're deployed. Do you have any laser designators left or not?"

"I've got two." I sighed. "But putting them in place is gonna be a bitch."

"As I said, you're dressed for the occasion and I'm all in black."

"Oh, no. No," I repeated firmly. "If we do this, I'll infil. You'll wait for me out of the line of danger."

"Sure, I can do that." She smiled, all too accommodating. "You can be in charge of planting the designators. You are so good at covert ops."

"Huh." I scoffed. "Flattery will not work with me, woman."

I was no fool. This was her sly way of negotiating with me to implement her plan.

"First, we wait for the column to pass." She flashed her fingers as she spoke. "Second, we send the encrypted message, giving BB and Cy heads-up on the plan. Third, you slip in and deploy the laser designators. Fourth, we update our method of transportation."

"You make it sound like a walk in the park."

“My plan makes sense,” she insisted. “We take care of two birds with one stone. We help the Ukrainians. We get ourselves out of here fast. A hit on the missile systems would also help conceal our escape. Face it. If you were with your Elite buddies, you wouldn’t think twice about this.”

“I’m thinking about *your* safety,” I snapped, exasperated by her cunning, her impeccable logic, and her proficiency at persuading the operator in me.

She was right. Had I been on my own or with other experienced operators, I wouldn’t have thought twice about contributing to the liberation of Ukraine and improving our safety and security situation all in one swoop.

Dammit.

The woman had morphed into an operational temptress. I teetered at the edge of the rabbit hole. She was seducing me into action. Worse. It was working. What she proposed made total mission sense.

“We can do this,” she said in that breathy voice she reserved for special occasions to get her way. “*You* can do this. Let’s do it and get out fast.” She lifted her leg, waved her bootless foot in the air, and wiggled her mud-smearred purplish

toes in my face. “What do you say, Mr. Running-Is-Not-My-Style?”

“You...” I wagged my finger at her, but her idea of taking out the missile system and acquiring a better method of transportation was brilliant. “You are trouble with a capital T.”

She widened her grin. “Yes, I am, and that’s how I like it.”

Now she gave me the truth.

And then... she did it. The minx batted her long, dark eyelashes at me, pulverizing my resolve. “So, Blaze, scourge of your enemy and all of that stuff, are you all brag and no swag?” *Blink, blink, blink.* “Or do you care to wreak a little havoc today?”

Fuck this. The knowing smirk, the diamond speckles sparkling in her eyes, the dare she posed to me. This woman pushed my buttons like no other creature on earth. She also had a devastating effect on my defenses.

I wagged my finger again, but I was doomed and I knew it. “We do it *my* way.”

“Sure, Blaze. Whatever you say.” She flashed me an innocent grin. “But don’t forget. It was *my* idea.”

Chapter Six

Danika

Driving a tank was not easy, and yet there I was, doing exactly that, trapped in a Soviet relic, crammed in the cramped frontal compartment of a Russian T-72, enveloped in a case of steel and ceramic. Good thing I wasn't claustrophobic.

Had I really volunteered to spend time in this armored coffin?

Yeah. I had.

Some days I worried about my sanity, but this unwarranted war made me furious. Millions displaced; thousands of innocents dead, my grandmother and her friends among them; the politicians of the world checked out in meetings that offered limited help for Ukraine. So, if I could help, even if it was just a little, I was not going to pass up the chance.

The hatch above my head was the main access point to the driver's station, but since the turret gun blocked any chances for a quick exit, if we took a direct hit, there would be no way out for me. I'd be but a bunch of toasted bones, if that.

No wonder the T-72 crews had nicknamed it “the rolling death trap.”

It was so bad that Russian conscripts typically abandoned their tanks when faced with danger. Nobody wanted to end up like crisped sardines stewing in a can.

No sense in thinking about that, Kos.

Whenever terror—or common sense, in this case—tried to pierce through my armor, I thought of Kenzie, of her thriving in a world without war; of Baba, who’d died protecting the home she’d been born in. The sense of extreme danger quickening my breaths and driving me to the fringe of hyperventilation began to dispel when I visualized both of their smiling faces.

“You’re forcing your respirations.” Mac’s observation crackled over the tank’s shitty internal comms system. “Are you okay?”

My long, resigned sigh also crackled in my ear, and I hoped in his as well. “I’m fine,” I offered too sharply. Was he ever going to stop asking me that question?

“We’re close now,” he said, and I had to admit that his voice reassured me. “Keep to the right of the road and be sure

to work the pedal when you shift. We don't wanna stall."

"You've only told me that a million times." Peering through the rectangular vision block, I pressed the pedal, shifted down the transmission, and pulled on the right lever to take the turn ahead. "I haven't stalled out yet."

"You're doing a fantastic job." He cheered over the comms. "I'm so glad your BMW is manual transmission."

"All the cars I've ever owned were manual transmissions. I love driving, and I mean *really* driving, not just sitting there like a brainless blob and going for a ride."

"You're a driver, all right." His rumbling laughter rang in my ear. "I meant that in all ways."

"Very funny." I straightened our trajectory. "Why don't you stop making fun of me and keep our Ukrainian friends abreast of our approach? Please remind them that, although our ride is Russian, we are not the enemy and there's no need to blow us off the face of the earth."

"No worries. I'm in contact. Cyborg's team is tracking us. But I won't lie. I'm gonna be glad to get out of this tin bucket. You may have to peel me out of here with a can opener."

I giggled a little. The T-72 was infamous for its utter lack of space and Mac was not petite by any means. With great effort, he'd wiggled his enormous frame into the turret compartment and squished into the gunner's station to man the weapons.

I sobered up when I remembered that the ammunition storage carousel was located immediately under the turret and offered absolutely no protection to the crew, a design weakness that the Ukrainians had used to their advantage. It accounted for the high mortality of T-72 tank crews.

A cold shiver snaked up my spine. Sometimes being a weapons expert sucked. Knowledge felt like disaster foretold. I gave the tank a little more diesel. Maybe if we went a little faster...

"Hey, Mario Andretti?" Mac called out. "Watch your speed. No sense in getting stuck when we're so close to our objective."

"Roger that." I eased my foot from the accelerator and concentrated on not making any stupid mistakes. I still couldn't believe that I was driving a tank. Me, Danika Kos, cultural attaché. Before coming to Ukraine, I'd studied the

tank in detail to be able to report back to DOD intel, but I'd never driven one.

Until now.

Mastering the tricky threshold tasks wasn't so difficult, especially after acquiring assistance from a poor, quaking conscript we abducted from camp while his fellow crew members slept off a heavy helping of liquor.

Beardless and pimpled, Ivar was little more than a boy. At first, he was reluctant to help us, but once we assured him that we only wanted to steal his tank and we weren't going to hurt him, he relaxed. If his tank was gone, we reasoned, his superiors might send him back home, since the Russians were losing hardware right and left and there might not be another tank for him to drive.

The argument heartened Ivar, who hated his commander and saw no point in Russians killing their neighbors and close relatives. He switched on the engines and the gear stick and then taught me how to release the brake.

He also gave us an enthusiastic tour of the controls. The driver's control panel was comprised of hundreds of dials, levers, and switches. They were badly labeled and even then,

the abbreviated labels meant nothing to me. Ivar showed me the basics I needed to know to drive the thing.

The brake, shift, and accelerator pedals worked as they did in a car. Instead of a wheel, I steered through levers. It was intuitive, which is more than I could say for the controls of the gunner station that Mac had to figure out.

The Russian conscript was a very nice boy. Once we had the info we needed, I traded him his uniform for my dress, which, once laundered, would fit his girlfriend nicely, he said. He was a dainty thing, selected for driving duty because he could fit in the tank's nooks and crannies. His fatigues fit me a little short at the hem of the pants, but his boots were the perfect size. The rough fabric chafed my skin, but at last, I was dressed for war.

We gave Ivar some of Mac's clothing as well as his puffy so he wouldn't be exposed to the elements. Mac also gifted him most of the freeze-dried rations he carried in payment for his services. The kid was so happy he invited us to come to dinner at his parents' house in Rostov once the war ended.

My heart squeezed when we said our goodbyes. Given Putin's practice of using conscripts as cannon fodder, the kid's

odds of surviving were bleak. However, we made sure he survived the day. We didn't tell him that Mac had infiltrated the Russian defenses and planted the laser designator on the missile systems. Or that, in the next few minutes, the Ukrainians were going to take it out. But we did tell him to run away from his camp and take his young friends with him.

Once Ivar and his crew cleared out, we started to move. Along the way, Mac took out every tank we found parked on the side of the road, destroying the battalion's ability to fight, but sparing the sleeping soldiers' lives. Well, except for Ivar's bully commander. Mac did take him out when he attempted to mount his tank.

No way around that.

Minutes later, the Ukrainian Himars landed on their designated targets. The Chinese missile systems were destroyed. We watched the spectacular explosions from several miles away. It was our small contribution to David when facing Goliath.

Once the sun came up, we'd met Russian forces along the way, mechanized and otherwise, but they hadn't given us any trouble. The Russians were moving equipment back and forth from many areas in the Donbas. Most checkpoints waved

us through without asking questions, given that we were marked as friendlies.

We'd been on the go for several hours now. My bones rumbled at the same frequency as the tank. My cramped joints clanked and clinked, and my brain suffered the jolting effects of the armored vehicle's terrible suspension. As we approached the Ukrainian lines, the most acute danger we faced continued to be our friends and allies. If Cyborg and his team failed at communicating with other surveillance teams in the area, we could get painted and taken out without ever knowing that death was coming.

A huge sense of relief descended on me when we crossed the last Russian checkpoint and advanced into Ukrainian territory. Within minutes, we were surrounded by a camouflaged unit that sprang out of the forest. I lifted my foot from the accelerator, switched down the gears, and after engaging the brake, came to a full, slightly jolting stop.

Not bad, Kos. Not bad at all.

Clank, clank, clank. Someone knocked on the hatch above my head. I disengaged the hasp and pushed it out. Mac was already there, helping me squeeze out of the narrow opening.

“Hey.” I wiggled one shoulder out of the hatch and then the other. “How the hell did you get out so fast?”

“I left half my ass stuck on the seat when I ejected from that metal trap.” He lifted me out and, walking down the V-shaped front of the tank, deposited me on firm ground.

“Didn’t wanna be in there a second more than necessary.”

“I hear you.” I stretched out my cramped body.

“Where’s Cy?”

“Right here.” Cyborg stalked out of a group clustered around a portable command and control center set in the woods under the concealment of a camo net. His face was tense, his lips straight. “Welcome home. Great job at locking our targets on The Pravda and the Chinese missile systems. And now, get your asses out of Ukraine.”

“*What?*” I drew back. “I’m supposed to return to Kyiv. What about debriefing?”

“What do you have for me?”

“Mac?” I put out a hand.

He slid out the thumb drive I’d given him at The Pravda and handed it to me before I delivered it to Cy.

“You’ll find lots of pictures in there,” I reported. “GPS info and lots of potential targets, ammo depots, battalion quarters, transportation routes, tactical plans, the works. I photographed the Iranian-made drones and the North Korean workers building defense emplacements in the Donbas as you asked. Mac already sent you the clips of the Chinese missile systems through his encrypted messages. Now you have proof that the Chinese, Iranians, and North Korean regimes are supporting Putin’s war against Ukraine.”

“I’ll share this information with the Americans and the UN. Leave it with me. Your work here will not go to waste. Now we need to get you out of Ukraine in a rush.”

“Why?”

“The Russians have mounted another offensive.” The concern that tensed his features sharpened his accent. “Troops poured in through the Belarusian border last night. The Russians are blowing every bridge they can find to pin us here. We’ve been ordered to get out before we’re trapped in the Donbas.”

“We’ll go with you, then.”

“No can do, Kos.” Cy shook his head. “Russia is claiming that a female CIA spy is active in the Donbas.”

“*What?*” I drew back. “I’m not CIA!”

“It doesn’t matter. You are a spy and they’ve got a physical description of you from some of the survivors of The Pravda. To discredit these rumors, we need to get you out of Ukraine and get you to appear before the press anywhere but here.”

“But—”

“No buts, Danika. The Spetsnaz is hunting for you. They’ve put a price on your head, encouraging bounty hunters and collaborators to turn you in. They say you planted the bomb that destroyed The Pravda, and also, that you killed Oksana.”

“That’s preposterous!” I protested. “Kozlov killed Oksana!”

“*Kozlov?*” It was Cy’s turn to draw back in surprise. “From the Bruckner Group?”

“The one and only,” Mac chimed in.

“He was at The Pravda?” Cy’s stare bounced between Mac and me. “You saw him?”

“That’s two affirms.” Mac offered me the hose of his hydration pack.

“Fuck.” Cyborg cursed in Ukrainian as well. “Where is he now?”

“Dead, I hope,” I grumbled as I sucked in some much-needed water.

Cy looked at Mac. “Confirmation?”

“We had no time to collect DNA.” Mac accepted the hose back from me and drew in a sip. “If he wasn’t dead, then you killed him with the pair of LGBs that demolished The Pravda.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice?” Cyborg sighed. “We’ll get to work to confirm his death, but there’s more. Russia claims that a group of American special force operators sent by your government took out an entire armored division and a Russian missile system.”

“It was only a battalion and a Chinese missile system,” Mac quipped, “but whatever.”

“If they catch the two of you in Ukraine territory, they’ll use you to prove that the United States has deployed forces on the ground. The diplomatic situation will go down the drain fast. They could also designate you as a mercenary,

not protected by the Geneva Convention. The Russians could execute you on the spot.”

“You shouldn’t have come.” I exchanged an alarmed look with Mac. “You need to get out.”

“Ditto in reverse.” Mac returned his attention to Cyborg. “Can you get us out?”

“Our resources are sorely stretched.” He looked over his shoulder. “We’ve been ordered elsewhere. I’m also worried about Russian moles. You’d be best protected if no one knew where you were.”

“How are we supposed to get out then?” I asked.

Cyborg’s stare fell on Mac. “I believe Blaze here always has a plan B.”

Blaze smirked. “You’re damn right I do.”

“What do you need?” Cy asked.

“A ride to Odesa Oblast, or the means to get there.”

Cy smirked. “That, I can do.”

Chapter Seven

Mac

The fourteen-hour drive took us around the occupied zone, through multitudes of checkpoints, and to the port city of Odesa. The home of one million souls was decked out for war. From the outskirts to the city center, it was prepared for a Russian attack that could begin at any time or not happen at all. The blackened scars of Russian missile strikes dotted several neighborhoods at random.

When we stopped to fuel the car and get some food, I was able to ascertain the mood of the place. Ukrainian troops manned checkpoints, coastal defenses, and all entries to the port. Signs warning about the presence of mines, barbwire, and sand bunkers kept the once popular beaches deserted. Russian ships could be seen not far offshore, prowling Ukrainian sovereign waters like sharks on the hunt.

And yet the people of Odesa went bravely about their days, trying to live their lives, even though they knew they could be attacked or shelled at any time as they'd been before. They were alert but not cowering. I admired them for that.

Once reprovisioned, I took another turn at the wheel of Cyborg's sedan. We drove some forty miles south to a tiny seaside enclave near the small town of Sanzhiika, population 715 before the war. Now it was a ghost town. Most of the inhabitants were gone, forced to seek safety elsewhere after the area had been arbitrarily bombed a few weeks ago.

Located at the top of a bluff some twenty feet above sea level, the place had once been known for its lighthouse and the beaches that spread at the base of its clay cliffs. These days, the beaches were empty, and the only visible humans were members of the local civil defense who patrolled the hills on the lookout for Russian attacks.

“Here.” Cyborg broke the silence in the car. “Make a left.”

I turned the wheel and drove around the crater that had destroyed a block where a few humble houses lay in ruins. Looking at the rearview mirror, I checked on Danika. She'd slept on and off during the trip. Now she seemed alert but rested. I, too, had gotten some shuteye as Cy, Danika, and I took turns driving and keeping watch during our journey.

After we'd put some distance between us and the Donbas, Cyborg procured Ukrainian military uniforms for us.

Once we arrived in Odesa, Cy's team stayed behind, now assigned to the defense of the city, but Cy insisted on driving us to our destination. He didn't want any Americans killed or missing under his watch. He wanted us out of Ukraine as fast as possible.

Me, too.

"Park behind the building." Cyborg pointed at the small police headquarters ahead, surrounded by sandbags and guarded by a lonely sentinel. "Wait here," he said before he got out of the car and stalked into the station.

"Are you going to tell me what we are doing here?"

Danika met my gaze in the mirror.

"We're trying to get out of Ukraine." I tapped my fingers on the wheel. "Isn't that obvious?"

"Yes, but how?" she asked.

"I'll let you know as soon as I know."

I slid my cell out of my pocket and checked for encrypted messages. I'd set in motion plan B over Battle Brothers' encrypted messaging app two days ago. In reply, I'd gotten a set of coordinates that had narrowed down our

destination to this general area. I sent another encrypted message, confirming our arrival. Now it was watch and wait.

“Nothing?” she asked.

“Nothing concrete yet,” I replied.

She sighed and I was pretty sure she didn't trust me with the arrangements. Not that I blamed her. I was going on pure faith that the impossible could become viable, but I didn't tell her that.

Cy stalked out of the building followed by an older man with a chunk of unruly white hair and the eyebrows to match. He wore a tattered bulletproof vest and held on to an old Kalashnikov rifle. He had to be pushing seventy, and yet here he was, defending his town and his country. The two men came around to Danika's side of the car. She lowered the window.

My Ukrainian was awful, but I caught the gist of the introductions. If I got it right, the man went by Alexievich and was in charge of the town's civil defense. I grunted when Cy pointed at me. Cyborg, Danika, and the man had a quick exchange, then the old warrior ambled back into the building, holding his rifle in a two-handed grip, ready for whatever threat came his way.

“What was that about?” I asked as Cy climbed back into the car.

“Go straight, take a right at the next corner.” He waved his hand forward.

I engaged the transmission and drove on. “Well?”

“I told him that Danika worked for me.” Cy slid a cigarette out of his pack, lit it, and drew a hard pull before he let out a toxic cloud. “I explained she’s on a top-secret, classified intel-gathering mission in the area. I ordered him and his men not to interfere with her work. He was a special forces operator in his day, so I trust him. Now, on my authority, you two are clear to act.”

I got that Danika had to be the officer. My Ukrainian was nearly nonexistent so I couldn’t pass for a local, but, “Did you tell him I was her bodyguard?”

“Nope.” Cy puffed on his cigarette and smirked. “I told him you were Danika’s chauffeur, that you were kind of useless and not too bright, and that you were mute to boot.”

He and Danika burst out into laughter.

“You’ve turned into a regular comedian.” Although the joke was on me, being mute provided excellent cover for my

inadequate language skills. “I bet you really enjoyed that performance, Danika.”

“You bet your ass I did.” She giggled some more. “I’m officially your superior officer and don’t you forget it.”

“You two.” Cy shook his head and *tsked*. “I do hope you don’t kill each other, at least not on Ukrainian soil.” He waved his cigarette in the air, gesturing for me to turn in to the parking lot of an old, abandoned motel. “This is the place.”

I parked the car and engaged the brake. The three of us got out of the vehicle. The difference in temperature between here and the Donbas was significant. It was much warmer, and the clouds billowing over the Black Sea contributed to a warm breeze and a surge of humidity that made me feel hot and sweaty beneath my fatigues.

I stretched out my back, popped my neck, and surveyed the place—a squat, two-story building surrounded by abandoned houses and stores. The location provided visual protection from maritime and aerial surveillance. I grabbed my ruck and my weapon from the back seat, shouldered my pack, and came around the car to stand between Danika and Cy.

“Your safe house for now.” He dangled a key in the air. “It’s not the Ritz by any means. No electricity, but the place’s

got running water. The owner evacuated to Liev, as did most of the inhabitants here. Alexievich will send word if his men spot anything suspicious. Otherwise, it's just the two of you and his civil defense forces. We need every defender we have." He directed a stern stare at me. "Don't shoot the good guys. Okay?"

"You got it, man." I took the key from him.

"If you hear explosions or alarms blaring, assume missiles are coming your way and head for the basement," he cautioned, even though it wasn't necessary. "Alexievich made sure you're provisioned for two days. I don't recommend staying for that long. If the Russians get wind that you're here, it won't be good for you or the people deployed here."

"Understood." I didn't want to endanger Alexievich, his men, and Danika by lingering here a minute more than necessary.

"Thanks for your help." Cy turned to Danika. "Your work here made a difference."

"I hope so." Danika hugged him and then let go. "I'm sorry I have to leave in the middle of the fight. May we meet again in peace."

“May it be so.” He gave a small incline of his head.

Danika gave him a last smile, grabbed the key from me, and marched toward the motel’s side door.

Cy smirked at me. “You do like them pretty; and gutsy, I may add.”

“I’m a glutton for punishment,” I admitted, meeting his stare. “Will you be all right driving back on your own?”

“Of course I will, my American *babusya*.” We shook hands and then embraced in a full-on bro-hug. “You take care of that fiery lady.”

“I’ll try.” I hadn’t come all the way out here for nothing. “Don’t die in this war. Don’t give the zombies the satisfaction.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Cyborg waved me off and back-walked toward the car. “You were always such a happy-go-lucky dude. These days, you worry too much. What happened to the old Mac?”

“People change.” I snapped my heels together and, angling my hand over my forehead, gave him a proper salute. “*Sláva Ukrayíni*.”

“Glory to Ukraine,” he replied in English and returned the salute. Then he got into his car, turned on the ignition, and, after driving out of the parking lot, got lost in the penumbral twilight.

I took a deep breath.

And now, for the second act of Danika and Mac’s most excellent escape.

Danika

Taking advantage of the last light of the day, I unlocked the door and made my way through the back entrance of the small motel. Just as Alexievich had said, I found a big nylon bag full of supplies tucked behind the check-in counter. Next to it was a flashlight. Way to go, Alex. I liked people who thought things through.

Shouldering the bag, I clicked on the flashlight and slid out my gun. With the Beretta at hand, I inched my way down the first-floor hallway. The place was eerily silent. The only sounds came from my boots rustling over the linoleum.

I stopped before the door marked as number four. It stood in the back of the building and any light in the space

would not be spotted from the sea. Sure, the sea views would be better from the other side of the hallway, but we weren't here to take in the sights. Room four was also sandwiched between other rooms on either side and across the hall. This could improve our odds of surviving a missile attack.

I suddenly recalled the strikes that destroyed The Pravda. Terror kicked in through my mind's back door. The sounds of the missiles and the ruckus of the explosions echoed in my head. Images of humans jumping out the windows returned to haunt me. Some of those people had been on fire. My heart pounded against my ribs. Anytime now I was going to scream.

Don't fall apart, Kos. Not now. Not ever.

I rested my forehead against the door, closed my eyes, and conjured Kenzie's face behind my dark lids. Forcing my respirations, I breathed through my spike in anxiety.

Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out.

Seeing Kenzie's beloved face, basking in her smile, helped calm me down. She was safe. and I had to concentrate on the now. Alexievich had reported that they hadn't been bombed in weeks. Still, I hadn't survived the Donbas by being oblivious or reckless.

We had to be cautious.

I set down the bag on the floor, inserted the master key in the hole, and unlocked the door. Slowly pushing it open, I waited at the threshold, surveying the place with my ears. When I didn't hear a sound, I aimed the flashlight forward and entered the room.

The stale air hit my nostrils, but the sharp notes of cleaning agents also hung in the air. Someone had lovingly cleaned the room before evacuating. That was hope for you, readying your place of business for when you came back even when the odds were against you.

My heart ached for all the Ukrainians whose lives had been upended or ended for the sake of a tyrant's greed.

I picked up the bag and moved forward. The closet to my left and the wall to my right formed a small corridor that opened up into the room. The whole space stood to my left. The flashlight's circular beam swept over a studio that was a touch dated but had everything we needed.

I put the gun away and took in the place. Wedged between two windows, a double bed and two small night tables stood against the east wall. A small kitchenette faced the bed, a row of white Formica cabinets that had seen better days.

The electricity had been knocked out weeks ago, so the small fridge would be of no use to us, but if the gas was on, the burners on the counter would come in handy and so would the little sink.

A bistro table and two small chairs occupied the room's left corner, set beneath a picture of a lighthouse. On the north wall, the door to the bathroom was open. I wandered in there. The beam of the flashlight revealed a sink, a commode, a shower, and, much to my surprise, a huge bathtub. A profusion of gold fixtures and gilded jets dated it to the eighties or nineties when this place must have been a small luxury resort.

Bang, bang, bang.

The harsh knocking startled me. It came from one of the windows in the bedroom. Since enemies didn't typically knock, I could well imagine who was causing the ruckus.

Willing my pulse to slow down, I left the bathroom, went around the bed, and threw the curtain aside. Mac's grinning face materialized before me. He pressed his nose to the windowpane, crossed his eyes, and stuck out his tongue.

"You look ridiculous," I mumbled, but I had to chuckle.

Mac had a talent for making me laugh through some of the tensest moments in my life. The incorrigible clown managed to bring humor into the bleakest settings. Shame I couldn't tell him how much I liked that about him. Emotional distance was the only weapon I had to protect my secrets from him.

I opened the window.

"Is this where we're staying?" he asked, dropping his ruck on the ground outside.

"It's the safest location in the building." I took in the small parking lot behind him and the dark houses beyond his shoulder. "It's the most protected spot in town."

"I concur." He took a knee and began to pull out some stuff from his ruck.

"What are you doing?"

"Securing our secondary exit and placing motion detectors to alert us to intruders." He reached out and stuck something above the window before he picked up his ruck. "I'll do the same on the other side of the building and we'll be good to go. See you soon."

“I left the motel’s back door unlocked for you,” I called after him, leaning out of the window. “Don’t forget to lock it when you come inside.”

“That was an unnecessary reminder to a professional like me, but roger that,” he returned crossly as he got lost in the darkness.

I blew out a breath. There was no way not to hurt that man’s ginormous pride.

I closed the curtains. Under the glow of the flashlight, I unpacked the contents of the bag and lined up our supplies on the kitchenette’s counter. As soon as I found the candles and matches, I lit up a taper and clicked off the flashlight to conserve the batteries.

The yellow flame imbued the room with a warm light. It also softened the angular lines of the furniture, mellowing the austere look of the space. I tested the burners. They worked. My stomach rumbled. A warm dinner was in order.

Looking through the cabinets, I found pots, pans, glasses, plates, and cutlery. I took inventory of our food supplies, then ran the faucet, filled up a pot, and turned on the burner. When the water began to bubble, I dumped a box of pasta in the boiling water.

A knock at the door announced Mac's arrival. I let him in, then closed the door, engaged the lock, and hooked the door chain to the track.

"We are secured for the night." He settled his ruck and his carbine on the floor and took in the place. "That's an itsy-bitsy bed."

"It's a European double," I pointed out, stirring the noodles and suddenly feeling self-conscious about him and me sharing the same motel room.

Self-conscious or excited? a voice I hadn't heard in a long time asked in my head.

Self-conscious. For sure. Right?

The bitch in my head laughed and laughed.

I had to put an end to this now.

"If you don't like it here, you can pick a different room," I offered. "I believe there's plenty of vacancies, you know, on account of the war?"

"I just spent half an hour installing security technology and trip wire to protect this place with this room as the central defensive objective," Mac grumbled. "So, no thanks. This is where you and I will both be staying tonight."

“If you say so.” I shrugged as if I didn’t give a damn that we might have to sleep together in the small bed tonight.

The bitch in my head kept laughing. *You are so full of shit, Kos.*

Chapter Eight

Mac

The bistro chair creaked beneath my weight, but it held. Sitting across from Danika, I twirled my fork in a bowl of pasta, shook off some of the canned sauce she had poured over the noodles, and swallowed a mouthful of overcooked spaghetti. Overcooked, but not bad. I would've preferred a plate of *arroz con habichuelas* and fried *tostones*, but anything hot and plentiful worked for my belly.

The slurping sound I made broke the silence in the room. Danika kept her eyes on her plate, and I cringed, reminding myself that her manners were always impeccable. No slurping around Lady Danika.

Now that we were the safest we'd been in a while and had to wait for our go-ahead, we had a little time to spare. One would think it was the perfect time to tackle the serious talk that had motivated me to cross an ocean, risk my life, and make my way through a vicious war.

But something was off. More specifically, Danika was off.

Taking small forkfuls, she ate her pasta with a hearty appetite. This was good news, but I'd seen that faraway look dimming her eyes on the faces of many grunts after a bloody battle or a deadly raid. It was the troubled stare of someone processing unimaginable danger and violence. It betrayed the haunting that taunted a warrior's mind after the danger receded.

The last thing I needed to do right now was to force a confession out of a woman who'd been through hell and back and was now dealing with the shit.

I finished my noodles and washed down the last forkful with a gulp of boxed fruit juice that probably contained zero percent fruit. I might be mad and frustrated with her, but I had to do something to take care of her.

"Hey, look at me." I waited until her blue eyes met mine. "What happened back there? It was necessary."

"I know." She settled down her fork and wiped the sauce from her lips. "It's just hard... you know?"

"Yeah, I know." I knew so damn well. "If it's any consolation, time helps, and so does a few sessions with a competent mind monkey. Meanwhile, you've got to set guilt and regret aside and concentrate on the here and now."

“For a soulless hunk, you’ve got some insight.” She flashed a semblance of a smile. It was an iffy one and didn’t reach her eyes, but it was better than nothing. At the same time, it wasn’t enough for me.

“How about a bath?” I pushed off the table and gathered the dirty dishes.

“*A bath?*” She frowned. “Here?”

“In case you missed it, there’s a monster tub in there.” I cocked my thumb toward the bathroom, dropped the dishes in the sink, and rinsed them quickly. “No electric, so the jets won’t work, but the rest should.”

She became smaller in her chair. “It doesn’t seem like the right time for a bath.”

“Do you have any other place to be at the moment?”

“No.” She hesitated. “But what if we’re attacked?”

“I reckon we’ll have some warning.” I set the dishes to dry on a towel on the counter. “So, now is the perfect time for a bath. It’ll help you relax, which in turn will help you sleep.” I glanced at her. “I seem to remember you loved your baths.”

The flush that crept up her neck and blushed her face told me she remembered, too. Way back when, we’d made a

habit of transforming showers, bathtubs, and hot tubs into our private playgrounds.

“It’s probably a bad idea.” She looked down at her lap and, after sliding off her ponytail band, hid her face behind her hair. “The water will be too cold.”

“No problem.” I looked through the cabinet and pulled out the biggest pots I could find. “The weather is balmy down here. I can’t guarantee hot and steamy, but warm I can do. We’ll go old school on this one.” I filled the pots with water, settled them on the burners, and turned on the flames. “I’ll heat some water to add a touch of warmth.”

Without waiting for her approval, I lit another candle, went into the bathroom, and settled the taper on the far corner of the tub. After pushing in the plug, I opened the faucet, letting the water run until the tub was about half full. Six pots of hot water later, the temperature was just right, not too cold, but not too hot, either.

“Ready,” I hollered.

“Wow, what service.” She came into the bathroom, and this time when she smiled, her eyes sparkled.

“I live to serve.” I knocked my fist to my chest and offered a bow before I left the bathroom, closing the door behind me. I could’ve sworn her eyes followed me out with something akin to longing, but that was probably wishful thinking on my part.

“Take your time,” I called out through the door. “Don’t drain the tub when you’re done. I’m next.”

“Got it,” she returned.

The rustle of her shedding her clothes was followed by the gentle splash that told me she’d eased into the water. A memory of her bare skin gliding beneath my hand as I soaped her breasts about killed me.

“Ah.” Her relieved sigh drifted through the thin door.

Damn. The things those sounds did to my body. My dick turned into a pole ready to hoist a battle flag. The quiet rippling of water tortured me. Days living in close proximity to her combined with years of unfulfilled fantasies to torture me. I willed my painful erection to subside, feeling like a total dickhead, which, at this very moment, I was.

I needed a distraction. I stalked to my ruck and got busy cleaning my carbine.

Danika

The water felt good to my weary body. Mac was right. This had been a good idea. I opened the little soap box provided by the motel and lathered my body from head to toe, inhaling the floral scent, washing off the smell of Cy's cigarettes, and enjoying the feeling of being clean again.

As I soaped my privates, I brushed my fingers over my clit. Need sparked from the little bundle, leaving me buzzing with a charge that hummed through my body. I toyed with the idea of giving myself a quick release, but the door was so thin that I could hear the clicks and clanks of Mac cleaning his weapon and even his heavy exhales drifting from the room. The man had radars for ears. I bet that even if I tried to be very quiet, he'd hear me come.

Mac's presence nearby upped my arousal. I was naked in this big tub all by myself and he was right there, just outside the door. It was enough to drive me crazy, but I couldn't allow myself to entice a man whose libido was triggered by a sigh, a blink, or a lick of the lips. I knew. I remembered how in tune he'd been with my body, how he'd always been ready for me.

Frustrated with myself, I dunked myself under the water. Maybe if I held my breath long enough, oxygen depletion would diminish the pervasive need punishing me twenty-four-seven. Being around Mac was simply too much for me.

My hyper reactions to him were one of the reasons I decided to never see him again all those years ago. I couldn't fight the effect he had on me. At least not for the long term. I didn't need a scientific study to know that a clenching pussy could drive a woman bonkers. I refused to put myself in a position where I was at risk of jumping my daughter's father if he came to visit her.

No way, no sir.

Back then, I'd decided that it was better he didn't know she existed so that he could continue to live his life and I could concentrate on being the mother Kenzie needed me to be.

I allowed my face to float up to the surface and took a big breath. Apparently, lack of oxygen didn't have any effect on reducing my lust. Too bad. I couldn't yield an inch of my body to Mac and expect to keep up the walls I'd built between us. I had a lot of self-discipline, but I had experience with Mac. One touch from him, and I'd be a goner.

Relax, Kos. Your pussy is quivering like the vibrator that could really help you if you had it at hand. You need to talk yourself off the ledge. Don't think of Mac.

Laying back in the refreshing water, I closed my eyes and tried to ease my body's tension. It worked for the first few minutes, but then storm clouds gathered at the edge of my mind, taking over my thoughts.

Visions of the horrors I'd witnessed in the last few days trickled in, first slowly, then faster—Kozlov's bloodcurdling smirk, Oksana's butchered body, the missiles, the explosions, the destruction, the many dead and rotting bodies we'd come across during our escape.

I'd fired a gun. *Me*. I'd taken Kozlov's life. I'd had no other option. He'd killed my friend, a woman I admired, and he would've killed me if I'd let him. *No*. I gritted my teeth. I couldn't feel too guilty about shooting Kozlov.

I'd also been responsible for the destruction of The Pravda and the loss of life there. If all of that wasn't enough, I'd kidnapped a poor Russian conscript, stolen his tank, and driven it across the Donbas. On the way out, Mac and I had unleashed havoc that had taken I didn't know how many lives.

For a peaceful cultural attaché who made her living by attending parties and museum openings, and an intel analyst trained to scrutinize photos and satellite footage on the side, this live-action encounter with war came damn near to being traumatizing.

Okay, it *was* traumatizing.

I dug my teeth into my lip and swallowed the tears. No crying. Crying was not within my personal parameters. That's why the sob that drifted out of my throat and echoed in the bathroom surprised me.

“What is it?” Mac came through the door like a battering ram, handgun up and sweeping the room. Once he realized that the sink, toilet, and shower offered no threats, he lowered the gun and stared at me. His jaw unclenched and hung a little. “Are you crying?”

“Me? Crying? No.” I wiped my face and showed him my palm. “Bathwater. See? No tears. I'm fine.”

“I'm pretty sure those are tears.” He took a step toward the bathtub and then another one. “It's okay if things got to you. You are a caring, empathetic person. It's only natural.”

“I’m not upset,” I lied, trying to hide my body in the water. The level was too low and he could see me beneath the clear surface anyway. I was keenly conscious of my nakedness, of the bristled patch of pubic hair I’d allowed to grow out while I was in Ukraine, and also of the effect my nudity had on him. The erection that tented his pants was no joke. It looked as giant as he was. It also looked... delicious.

I licked my lips, then lost my mind and waved a hand vaguely over his form. “Would you mind terribly?”

He frowned. “Would I mind terribly what?”

“Undressing.” *Did I really just say that?*

“You want me to undress.” The shock that slacked his jaw and widened his eyes felt like a triumph to me. “As in, take off my clothes?”

“Yes.” Surely my mouth had kidnapped my brain. “I want that.”

This time, when I pointed to him, his incredulous stare bounced from my face to his bulging zipper, and back to my face.

“Are you...?” It was him hesitating now. “Are you sure?”

“I can’t think of any other way of getting you out of my system.” I let out a long sigh. “Can you?”

His frown deepened, but he shook his head. Wearing a tan T-shirt, camouflage pants, and no shoes, his big feet seemed rooted to the bathroom floor. I had to wonder if his hesitation had to do with his strict safe-sex practices.

“You don’t have to worry,” I offered to ease the doubts tensing his face. “I’m clean and I got my birth control injection right before I started this mission, as required.”

“*As required.*” His mouth set into a straight line and I swear, I had no idea what was going on in this man’s head. There was something critical about the stubborn angle of his chin, something akin to disappointment, exasperation, or both.

The Mac I knew would’ve jumped in the tub three minutes ago.

“Come on.” Frustration and impatience conspired to irk me. I’d already made my decision. What was taking him so long? “Say yes or no, but don’t keep me waiting. You said I should relax. So, I want to relax. With you.”

Mac

Well, fuck me sideways. Had I fallen asleep? Was I having a wet dream? *She* was asking *me*. To take off my clothes. To join her in her bath. To help her relax. Following my cock's lead, every muscle in my body tensed in anticipation of realizing my cravings. Then my mind interfered.

Slow it down, Mac Prick. You came out here to get an explanation from Danika, claim your rights as a father, and take her back to Kenzie. To achieve your objectives, you need to talk to the woman and get that confession you want, not jump into bed with her. Or in the tub.

My brain made all the sense in the world. My cock, on the other hand, didn't wanna hear it. It wanted her. *I* needed her.

There's always more than one way to achieve an objective, the voice of my lead Tradecraft instructor whispered in my ear. A difficult mission required strategic flexibility. When a door closed, a competent operator found an alternative way to accomplish his goal.

Looking at Danika, knowing she wasn't ready to be honest with me, I had to find a different approach. Perhaps if I could earn her body's trust, her mind would follow.

I liked my new plan.

My dick seconded the motion with a new flood of blood. I saw stars and repressed a wince. So, okay, I was being self-indulgent, but what the hell. I'd never been in the run for sainthood and pragmatism trumped nobility any day.

Then there was reality staring me in the face—Danika lying naked in the tub. Her puckered nipples bobbed in and out of the water. Her sapphire eyes sparkled with desire. The candle's coppery light highlighted the harmony of her features, added a feline quality to the oval shape of her eyes, and reflected on her long legs and slender body.

She looked as if she was made of gold.

For fuck's sake. How was I supposed to resist her?

I pulled the T-shirt over my head and dropped it on the floor. I unzipped my pants, pushed them down, and stepped out of them. Since I went commando on missions, this left me naked and unable to hide the horn sticking up between my legs.

It only got harder when Danika's eyes caressed it from afar. She curled her fingers and I, who usually had so much trouble following her orders, stepped forward, an eager volunteer.

Before I could get into the tub, she stopped me with a lift of her finger. I parked in front of the tub and waited for her next move. The waiting tightened my erection. My body vibrated with anticipation.

The water swirled all around her as she swept her wet hair away from her face and went to her knees. Balancing on her shins, she leaned slightly over the edge of the tub. Sexy rivulets dripped over her breasts and down her back.

Was she gonna...?

I hissed when her hand appropriated my dick. Clamping down on my teeth, I kept myself from coming, but barely. She caressed my shaft, brushing her thumb around my helmet and over my slit, sending a shiver of delight screeching through my body.

“Well, hello, big boy. It’s been a while,” she whispered as she ran a soaped washcloth over my erection, my balls, my groin. She rinsed the washcloth in the tub, then wiped the soap off my cock until it glimmered. A rush of her warm breath caressed my wet skin right before she kissed my cockhead and smiled up at me. “All clean.”

Holy shit. Her lips seared me with a surge of need. A drop of pre-come bubbled at my tip. Groaning, I wrestled with

my control, cursing and praising the vixen at the same time.

“I know, right?” She glanced up at me. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

Her breath blustered over my sensitive cock again. The sensation almost wiped off my wits. I managed a neutral “If you want it, I ain’t gonna stop it from happening.”

“I should,” she murmured, forming a circle between her thumb and the rest of her fingers and sliding it up and down the length of my shaft.

“Then stop it, right now,” I ground out. “Cause in five seconds, there won’t be any going back for you or me.”

“Bossy, so bossy.” She *tsked*. “It infuriates me in life, but it turns me into a lit match in bed.” Her admission had my cock yanking in her grip. “One night, for old time’s sake. One night to put all other nights to shame.”

“Well...” I pretended to think about it. “If you insist.”

She took my cock in her mouth and gave it a long, wet kiss. *Well, hello Danika of my fantasies.* I steeled my knees and commanded my legs to stand the onslaught.

The pleasure of her lips and tongue working in tandem over my hard flesh almost undid me. It reminded me that, for a

brief moment in time, I'd lived to worship the woman kneeling at my feet.

Her lips formed a circle of bliss gliding up and down my erection. Her tongue traced the lines of my veins and coated my dick with her warm saliva. The way she twirled her head ensured that her strokes drove me to madness. That such a small mouth could swallow me with such skill had always been a mystery to me, more so when she cupped the halves of my ass, pressed my groin to her face, and swallowed until I could feel the muscles of her throat closing about me.

I groaned. She felt so damn good.

Her hand slid around down the curve of my glutes, brushed over my hip, and cradled my heavy balls. Kneading them lightly, she kept sucking me with increasing urgency. It was as if she wanted to drink from my fountain.

Great idea, but maybe later. I was hungry, too, and I wasn't going to miss my one chance at my favorite snack.

Danika

He pulled out of my mouth and, ignoring my protests, stepped into the tub. Before I knew it, he reached down, lifted me from

the water, and perched me at the edge. I braced my hands on the tile ledge and found a semblance of balance, but I lost it as soon as Mac lowered himself into the water and knelt before me.

“Not this,” I heaved. “You know I can never win at this.”

“I remember.” He caressed my thighs and separated my knees. “It’s one of the reasons I loved to eat your pussy so much. You get your way often enough. You don’t get to win all the time.”

He lowered his face to my obscenely bared sex and covered it with his mouth.

“Oh, Mac.” I entwined my fingers through his hair.

His tongue slid between my folds, collecting my juices with twirls and swipes that stole my breath. His lips slid over my intimate surfaces, kissing, sucking, teasing. His fingers pinned my folds aside, facilitating the thorough ravishing of me. I decided on the spot. Every woman in the world who wanted it should be ravished like this.

I trembled when his tongue went around my opening, dipping in between swirls. I arched and groaned when his lips

trapped my clit and sucked the most sensitive part of me. This man was so gifted at sex. I remembered firsthand that oral was one of his specialties.

“Hello, Dani Delish,” he mumbled against my pussy. “You taste so damn good. If there’s such a thing as a nectar of the gods, then you’re it. How I’ve missed getting drunk on you.”

That did it. A quiver started at the back of my sex, a trickle of pleasure flowing directly into his mouth. It grew into a tremor that raged through my body. Over seven years of restraint and longing came to an abrupt end. I surrendered to the orgasm he swigged from me, unable to resist the pull of his long, exquisite drafts.

“Oh, God. Oh, Mac,” I whimpered as his tongue dipped inside of me and his thumb strummed my clit. “Yes. Yes!”

The powerful orgasm washed over me, reminding me that only Mac could make my body detonate like this. I’d lived for so long without this, without him. My body had missed him. My heart had died a small death every day that went by without him.

Lost in a storm of pleasure, I barely noticed when his mouth relented, or when he slid me down the tub's angled back. I landed open-legged on his lap, trapping his erection between our bodies.

Holding on to me, he turned us in the tub and leaned against the porcelain back. We faced each other. He reclined in the tub, where the lukewarm water barely came up to his hipbone, and I sat on his lap, keenly aware of his sex rubbing against my lower belly.

He pulled my face down and kissed me. He tasted like old longing and new hope, but then again, maybe that was all on me. He traced the contour of my face with the side of his fingers, softly, sweetly. Continuing his slow descent, he brushed his fingertips over my clavicle and down to my breast.

My pale skin lifted with a slew of goose bumps as he drew circles on my flesh. Moving his hand in a slow spiral, each circle became smaller, and smaller, until his blunt fingers traced the outline of my areola. The pink flesh contracted at his touch, tautening my already hard nipple.

The tease was irresistible. The anticipation was killing me. I sighed when all of his fingers finally converged on my textured bud.

Using both hands, he strummed my nipples at the same time, plucking and stroking as if my body were a string instrument. I moaned, encouraging him to play me some more. The music of his touch echoed in every corner of my being, poignant and strident, keen and liquifying to my sex.

“I wanna make you come some more,” he murmured, meeting my eyes.

“I want you to come as well.”

Holding his gaze, I reached for the soap and worked it over the width of his chest, spreading the suds across his pecs and down to the grid of his stomach, enjoying the extraordinary construction of his body, the slow process of reacquainting my hands with his once familiar and always spectacular form.

I took my time, lathering my hands before I traced the disciplined lines of his six-pack. Or was it a twelve-pack now? I loved the way his belly heaved beneath my hand. I relished the connection between my touch and the length and girth of his dick. His hearty erection made me feel proud of the effect I had on him. The sight made me feel wanted. Desired. Craved. When he hissed as if my cool fingers set him on fire, I felt infinitely powerful.

Riding the sensuous slide of the suds, inhaling the fresh scent of spring trapped in the bar, I worked my hands over the sides of his body. I went from wide to narrow, beginning under his arms and tracing the angles that led to his tapered waist, admiring his body and the power he carried within. How I missed those glorious times when he'd loaned his strength to me.

Touching him without the need to restrain my lust was liberating. I retraced my way through the middle of his chest and devoted my time to soaping and polishing the prickly points of his nipples until he rumbled, a hoarse warning that revved up my need and resonated between my legs.

Having turned the suds into a foam, I worked my way up his muscular neck and over his bristled jaw. Touching him was my very own, exquisite luxury. How many times had I craved holding his face between my hands as I was doing now? How many hours had I spent fantasizing about looking into his kind, fawned-colored eyes while pressing my lips to his and sinking my tongue into his firm, beautiful mouth?

Too many times. Too many hours wasted in fantasies. Hours I wasn't going to waste now.

I reached behind his head, slid off the band that trapped his hair, and set it aside. I sank my fingers into his silky curls and spread the spiraling strands over his shoulders. They were long. Longer than I remembered. They were wild and rowdy, like the man himself—untamed like his heart and irrepressible like his soul.

They were also as unruly as the emotions rioting through me. I knew, had always known that Mac was a fast-running river ferociously cutting his swath through life. No force on earth could ever contain the mighty current of his existence, but for this moment in time, he was mine and mine alone. I took comfort in that, even though I knew that huge heartache would follow.

I lowered my face and kissed him, rediscovering his natural flavors, cream and vanilla, seasoned with my pussy's spice. I couldn't tame him or change the course of his life, but I could sure drink of him, at least for tonight.

So drink I did.

He hooked a hand behind my neck and deepened the kiss. When I had no more breath to give, he released my lips and hugged me tight, until we were belly to belly, chest to chest. My breasts pressed against his slippery pecs. My face fit

neatly into the crook of his neck. Trapped between our bodies, his sex stiffened against my belly.

It was time.

Mac cradled my ass in his hands, glided me up his well-soaped form, then settled me where the tip of his cock perched against my opening. My inner folds reshaped to the form of his helmet and my entrance hugged his cockhead in an eager embrace.

“Remember this?” He pressed me down on his erection.

“Yes,” I rasped, anticipating his every move.

“How about this?” Curling his lips, he pushed inside me and then came to a halt.

“I remember,” I murmured, closing my eyes and arching my neck. “Don’t stop.”

“This is me.” In one smooth stroke, he slid through my wet depths, gliding in the sleek juices of my arousal, pressing down on my ass. “Almost there.”

“Oh, Mac,” I heaved when he finally hit bottom.

“This is all of me.” His hand caressed the back of my head. His other hand rested heavily on the small of my back.

“You can take me, Dani. You can have me. You are the only woman who can.”

Dani. How I loved the intimacy of hearing his nickname for me whispered in my ear while I held his throbbing sex deep within me.

“I remember how well you used to ride me.” He held my chin and took my mouth in a harsh, mauling kiss. “Move, Dani. Ride me again.”

I curled my hips and ground against him, sliding back and forth on his lap. The shallow water rippled and splashed around us. I took him in and released him, finding glory in every glide. I remembered how he’d trained me to give pleasure, to share it, to take it. I recalled that once, I had trusted him with my body.

I let myself go. I rode him with wanton abandon. We went from a trot to a canter, and from a canter to a full gallop, turning the water in the bathtub into a storming little sea.

At every turn, he met my pace. At every pace, we granted each other pleasure. And when at last our bodies were ready to share in the orgasms blooming within us, we melded into each other and journeyed as one to a familiar place where lust and affection reunited at the very edge of creation.

Mac

The bed was small and short to boot, but it gave me the perfect excuse to spoon Dani all night. She fit perfectly within the curve of my body—when she wasn't coming on my dick, or my mouth, or my fingers. She'd committed to one night, for old time's sake. I'd committed to putting all the other nights that came before this one to shame.

So far, I'd delivered, making up for lost time and surpassing our past sexual milestones with frequency, intensity, and passion that brought us to a new level of intimacy. This was a night she was never gonna forget. Now I just had to make sure this was also a night she wasn't gonna regret.

“Dani?” I nuzzled against her hair. “Are you awake?”

“Kind of, but maybe not.” She stirred in my arms. “I could be dreaming.”

“It does feel like a dream, doesn't it?” I chuckled against her ear. “I was wondering. Shouldn't we, maybe, I don't know, talk?”

“*Talk?*” She twisted her head and met my eyes. “About what?”

I didn’t miss the unease that furrowed her forehead and darkened her eyes.

“About anything, really.” I fumbled like an idiot.

“One night, remember?” Her frown deepened and her gaze glinted with suspicion.

“Your proposal was a good one and I’ve sure enjoyed it.” I held her eyes. “But is there anything else you wanna talk to me about?”

She looked away and sighed. She moistened her lips and for a second there, I thought she was gonna say what I longed to hear. She opened her mouth and... my cell purred under my pillow.

Dammit.

“Hang on.” I grabbed my phone and, enabling the encryption, the message came through, a stream of numbers that revealed a set of coordinates and too little time to get there.

RP 20 minutes. One shot. No second chances.

Chapter Nine

Mac

Concealed within an eroded crag carved at the foot of the clay cliffs, Danika and I waited at the edge of the deserted beach. It was still dark. Not even the gulls were up yet, but dawn would be upon us soon.

True to its name, the Black Sea stood darkly before us, still as a lake, a mirror to the sliver of moon hovering low over the horizon. The wind had died off and the silence was only interrupted by the peaceful rustle of the small waves caressing the sand.

I swept the binoculars over the water one more time, homing in on the distant lights of a few vessels at sea. With the night vision function activated, the glasses revealed several ships at anchor. Most of their profiles belonged to cargo ships, grain tankers trapped by the Russian blockade, unable to load up and deliver the Ukrainian crops to countries that depended on the harvest to keep famine at bay.

The outline of a Russian frigate anchored between the channel markers and blocking the shipping routes was yet

more proof that Putin didn't give a fuck if millions died of hunger.

“Anything?” Danika asked in a whisper.

“Nothing yet.” I lowered my binos and glanced at her.

Face tensed, mouth straight, she scoured the landscape on the lookout for our signal. After I'd gotten the text, we'd dressed quickly in our fatigues and hoofed it to the message's coordinates. Along the way, she'd put her hair up in a ponytail and tucked her Beretta in her pocket. For a woman who'd traded intel work for boots-on-the-ground, she looked remarkably composed and ready for anything.

I lifted the binoculars to my eyes again and swept them over the sea.

“You keep surveying the water,” she whispered harshly. “I get that you're looking for Russian patrols, but this will have to be a land retrieval.”

“Yeah?” I kept up my visual surveillance circuit and whispered back. “Why is that?”

“Because the Russians will blast anything that comes out of the sky and the Black Sea is mined to the teeth,” she murmured, keeping her voice low. “Ukrainians have deployed

every mine they have to protect from potential amphibious assaults. The Russians have done the same to block the shipping channels. Nobody in their right mind would dare sail a ship in these waters.”

“True,” I rumbled as I continued to scan the area.

I sensed her studying my profile. I resented the fact that she felt I was so slow she had to explain this to me, but then again, I’d asked the stupid question. I deserved that punch of condescension.

Be patient, Mac Dense. This is not her ecosystem and she’s under a lot of stress. You’re not exactly Mac Sunshine at the moment, either.

The exfil ahead guaranteed a dangerous, complicated venture. My Elite teammates were putting themselves on the line for me. They excelled at what they did, and I had full confidence in their abilities, but I hated to endanger them, especially because this was not an official mission by any means. If they got caught...

I refused to go down that rabbit hole.

My foul mood also had to do a lot with Danika. No surprise there. The sex had been incredible and, in the

intimacy of our narrow bed, I'd been so close to getting her to talk to me. Then our "one night for old time's sake" had been cut short—mind you, for good reasons. Getting out of Ukraine was our priority, but frustration burned in the pit of my stomach.

I hadn't achieved my main objective. We hadn't had *the* talk. She had not told me about Kenzie. I was beginning to think she never would.

The thought activated an ill-timed episode of acid reflux that added to my frustration. Resentment flavored my mouth.

Head cool and eyes on the prize.

I could not fight all my battles at once. I clanked down on my molars and focused on this mission.

"You know what?" she whispered again. "I don't think anybody is coming for us."

I glanced at her. "Why not?"

"There are lots of Russian patrols cruising by." She knocked her head toward the sea, confirming that she had the keen eyes of a weapons analyst. "Also, your friends are late." She looked down at her watch. "Almost eleven minutes late."

I shook a hand in the air. “Meh.”

She frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I get that you’ve got low confidence in my abilities.”

If she wanted to doubt me, no problem. But my friends? Nope.

“Don’t extend your low opinion of me to Elite’s top-of-the-line operators. Are we clear?”

“I didn’t mean to imply that—”

“Yeah. You did,” I whispered over her. “You do that shit all the time, treat me as if I’m a brainless thug and my only assets are my muscles and my cock.”

“I—”

“Stop it, Danika,” I spat quietly, unable to check the old anger bubbling to the surface. “I know what you think of me or, better yet, how lowly you think of me, but you’re mistaken. I’ve tried to show you. Hell, I *came* to show you. But you can’t see it. Can you?” She tried to say something but I kept going, my voice low but my tone firm. “My friends are *not* late. My friends are already here. The only reason you haven’t seen them yet is because they don’t want you to see them yet.”

“*What?*” She drew back and her eyes bounced all over the place. “Where are they?”

“Concealed for tactical reasons. My team will not show themselves to anyone, not even friendlies, on the off chance that there are spies on the coast. See that cliff over there?” I knocked my head toward a neighboring high point. “A Ukrainian civil defense patrol has been hiding there for the last five minutes. I know this because...” I waved the binoculars in the air. “I’ve been doing *my* job.”

“I know that!”

“Do you?” I whispered, unable to keep the irritation that had been building in me since Kenzie showed up at the beach. “’Cause I’m getting sick and tired of you not seeing who I am.”

She drew back and stared at me. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Well, you did and there’s more,” I rumbled. “The Russian patrols run surveillance radar circuits at regular intervals. My team will time their final approach to coincide with the blackout period for this zone. So, try not to judge them too harshly for taking all variables into account. Sit tight and let us do what we do for a living.”

She must have gotten my point because she went silent... for a whole sixty seconds.

“Why are you so angry with me?” she asked, very quietly.

I huffed, unable to believe that she was asking me this now. “You know why.”

“Do I?” She scrubbed her hands over her face, then suddenly stopped, separated her fingers, and stared at me, her gaze widening.

“You know.” The realization in her eyes turned to shock and then to horror. “You know!”

I didn't say anything. I looked away, running my eyes over the horizon. What was there to say?

She dropped her hands to her lap. The panic that lit up her eyes hit me so hard that I couldn't bear it. My heart dropped and my stomach lurched to my throat. It was as if they'd traded places in my body. I felt sick at just how much she dreaded me coming back into her life.

Would you like to die today? the Delta Man that ruled my head asked in my most cynical tone. *'Cause that's what's*

gonna happen if you keep up this shit. This is not the time to sort out this clusterfuck, Mac Dumb.

I returned my attention to the binoculars and concentrated on my surveillance circuit.

“How did you find out?” she asked in a tentative whisper. “When did you find out?”

I narrowed my eyes on the oculars and refocused the wheel.

“Mac?” She yanked on my sleeve. “Talk to me.”

“I was hoping you’d do the right thing and volunteer to do the talking before now.” I shook off her grip and sideswiped her with a glower. “Obviously, that never happened.”

“That’s why you wanted to talk,” she concluded rightly. “A little while ago. At the motel. Because you knew. You knew! Mac, you must understand that I—”

“That you what? That you lied to me?” I snarled but somehow managed to do so quietly. “Yes, you did. For over seven years. *Seven. Fucking. Years.*”

“Oh, God.” She lifted her hand to cover her mouth. “Mac. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry!”

“But are you really?” I fought to contain my resentment, working my glasses over the coastline. “You could’ve told me I had a daughter seven years ago. Or at any time between then and now. You could’ve mentioned her in the last days we’ve spent together. You had some time to say, ‘Oh, Mac, by the way, we have a beautiful daughter, and she’s smart, sweet, and amazing,’” I whispered, imitating her voice. “But no, oh, no. Danika Kos had a plan to keep me in the dark and she meant to stick to it, rain or shine. You didn’t trust me, back then or now. So you kept Kenzie a secret from me.”

“*Kenzie.*” The name sounded like a prayer on her lips. “How do you know her name?” She didn’t wait for a reply. “You’ve seen her,” she guessed. “You’ve met her!”

“No thanks to you,” I muttered crossly.

“How?” she whispered. “Where? When did you last see her? Is she okay?”

I was so pissed that I flirted with the idea of withholding the information from her just as she had kept Kenzie from me, but the tears in her eyes hurt somewhere inside my chest. I was an asshole, but I’d never been a cruel asshole.

“Kenzie found me,” I offered in a hush. “She discovered my address in the documents you sent with her and ditched the idea of going to your great-aunt’s place.”

“Oh. My. God.” Danika gawked. “Ania—”

“She knows,” I grumbled. “We worked things out. Kenzie escaped the airline’s custody and came to find me at Crescent Beach.”

“That kid...”

“That kid is fierce,” I put in, keeping my voice down. “She’s fine. Safe. Protected. She’s staying at Crescent Beach with people I trust. You’ve got my word on that if that means anything to you.”

“Mac, for God’s sake,” she whispered. “You know it does.”

“Right.” I scoffed. “And I should believe you... why?”

“Because...” Whatever reply she meant to give me died on her lips as another realization widened her eyes and had her gaping at me. “Cy didn’t reach out to you to extract me from the Donbas. *You* traveled to Ukraine to find me. *You* came to get me. Why?”

“Kenzie needed her mother,” I mumbled and, somehow, my answer felt incomplete.

She raised her chin in the air. “Was that your only reason?”

“It was my main reason.” I was furious at her and wasn’t budging from my position.

She let out a long sigh. “We need to talk this out.”

“No shit, Sherlock. I’ve been waiting for you to tell me the truth for a while.”

“*You waited?*” she gasped, then whispered harshly. “Of course you waited, you arrogant bastard. All this time. You wanted *me* to tell *you*.”

“Outrageous, huh?” I scoffed. “Why would a grunt want the mother of *his* kid to tell him she gave birth to *his* daughter?” I shook my head. “So fucking unreasonable.”

“Fine.” She huffed. “Let’s talk now.”

“Poor timing, Danika. Looks like I’ll have to wait to hear from you some more.”

“Why?”

I handed her the binoculars. “Twelve o’clock. Four hundred yards.”

She aimed the glasses in the general direction I indicated. “I don’t see anything unusual.”

“How about that faint bluish glow briefly streaking the edge of the waves?”

“Oh, that? Yes, I see it. No wait, it’s gone now,” she reported, working the glasses. “I hate to disappoint you, but that wasn’t a signal. You were looking at a bioluminescence glow.”

“Really?” It was my turn to roll my eyes, even though she didn’t see me do it.

“Really.” Missing the sarcasm in my whisper, she kept looking through the binos and shifted into the didactic tone that drove me batshit insane. “The people around here call it ‘the sea sparkle.’ It’s produced by a type of phytoplankton common to the Black Sea that emits a nighttime glow. It’s even mentioned in ancient texts.”

“*Gracias* for that fine lesson in biology and history,” I muttered. “I so love it when you lecture me.” I put out my hand. “I’ll take my binoculars now.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.” She handed them over with a sigh.

“You didn’t disappoint me.” I took one last look, noting that the Ukrainian civil patrol had moved on from the cliff before I slid the binos into my ruck’s side pocket and straightened on my feet. After ensuring we were clear to go, I offered her my hand. “Get up.”

“I guess it’s back to the motel.” She took my hand and rose to her feet, shaking off the sand from her pants. “At least we can talk there.”

“We do need to talk.” How dense could one woman be? “But not now.”

She lifted her chin in the air. “Why not?”

“Because your so-called ‘sea sparkle’ typically happens... when?”

“At the end of the summer...” Her whisper died in mid-sentence and her eyes flickered to mine, sparkling with the realization.

“What is it now, May?” I flashed a placid smile. “Too early, no?”

Her eyes widened. “Does that mean that...?”

“My friends—you know, the ones you said weren’t coming?” I couldn’t stop myself from flashing her a triumphant smirk. “They’re here, now.”

Danika

“Wait here,” Mac ordered, moving out of our hiding space at a crouch, sweeping our surroundings with his weapon in the up-and-ready position.

For once, I found it easy to follow his orders. The world teetered at a skewed angle. The ground felt like quicksand beneath my feet. Two imperatives tore my brain in half: what appeared to be an imminent exfil, which should’ve had my full attention, competed with the revelation that Mac knew about Kenzie.

He knew!

He’d known since before he came to Ukraine. He resented me for keeping her a secret. He hated me for it.

Can you blame him, Kos?

My heart ached. The scorn darkening his eyes throughout our conversation was too much to bear. I was suffering from a serious case of emotional whiplash.

One moment I'd been enjoying the warmth of Mac's arms, the joy of his company, and the pleasures his generous body gifted mine. I'd savored every minute I'd spent reconnecting with the only man who'd ever meant anything to me.

The next moment, my life as I'd carefully devised it lay in ruins, shattered by the shock of a single revelation even as I waited in the middle of a war zone for a sketchy escape.

The wait offered no guarantees on my life or on that of the operator who mattered so much to me. In less than a few minutes, my lover had turned into my hater, radiating only fury and contempt at me.

If the tables were turned, would you be any less outraged?

I wanted to disappear from the world, sink into the cliff's crevices, and bury myself under the layers of clay to avoid ever seeing the profound hurt in his gaze. How had I not sensed this before? Why hadn't I seen it then, when it was so clear now?

His pain?

It was not pretend.

But I was Danika Kos—rational, cool, smart, strong, determined, independent. I always thought things through, and I'd carved a good life for Kenzie. I'd had good, solid reasons to do what I did, and those reasons still stood.

Waving a hand, he gestured for me to get behind him and follow him. Trailing his cautious steps as we left the protection of the cliffs, we took cover amid the low scrub, went to our bellies, and elbowed ourselves closer to the shore.

Mac moved like a leopard in the night. Every one of his senses was now engaged in the mission. With my emotions rioting in my head, I felt dumb and blind, but I stuck with him.

Follow Mac and you will live to see Kenzie again.

Kenzie.

She was safe. Protected. Mac had given me his word. Contrary to what he believed, I trusted his word. He didn't give it often, but when he did, it was golden. For now, it was enough to appease the worries consuming my mother's heart.

One of the reasons I didn't tell Mac about Kenzie was because I knew he'd be rip-shit angry with me. I wasn't supposed to get pregnant. He'd never wanted to be a father

and I didn't want Kenzie to suffer from his fury, contempt, or outright rejection.

Somehow, Mac's anger didn't feel as if it was driven toward my daughter. He'd called her "beautiful," "smart," and "amazing." His tawny eyes sparkled with gold when he spoke about her. He knew her. He really knew her!

His fury was all directed at me, not at Kenzie. What did this mean? Had I misjudged him? Had I made a mistake when I decided to go at parenthood alone? Was he okay with having a daughter? Could he love Kenzie? Could he be a true and reliable dad to her?

Rewind, Kos. You're going too fast. Just because Mac knows Kenzie is a likable little girl doesn't mean anything. Mac is Mac. Remember that.

I had a lot of emotions and questions buzzing in my head, but given our situation, I would have to address them later. If I wanted to survive and get back to Kenzie, I had to concentrate on executing this exfil to the best of my abilities.

We arrived at a narrow section of the beach, where a huge clump of clay and rocks had avalanched down from the cliffs. It was an old slide, and it was now covered with scrub.

We took cover there. Mac crossed his finger over his mouth and then formed the okay sign with his fingers.

I replied with the same sign, even though I'd gone from the high of being with him again to the low of finding out he knew about Kenzie. I was confused and reeling from everything that had happened tonight, but I'd executed my mission at The Pravda, I'd survived Kozlov and the Donbas, and now I had to hold my shit together.

Even so, my pulse pounded in my temples, and I couldn't help feeling like a moving target for rounds, drones, and missiles. For as far as I could see under the tenuous light of the moon, I couldn't spot anything that would suggest human life anywhere along the beach. No glow on the sea's surface, either. If a drone or a guard detected us, we could get taken out. Foes or friendlies, in times of war, everyone shot first and asked questions later.

A quiet sound drifted to my ears, a very muted *glug*. Following the line of Mac's sight, I narrowed my eyes at the water. I had to blink several times before I recognized a dark protrusion beyond the shoreline, nothing more than a ripple.

"Keep low," Mac ordered in a murmur.

Moving cautiously, he scooted forward, took a knee on the beach, and gave a hand gesture before he lifted his weapon to his cheek and assumed an overwatch position. No bubbles disturbed the surface, but a neoprene-covered head emerged from the calm surf, then a neck, followed by a pair of wide shoulders.

A fully armed diver/soldier came out of the water with his fins attached to his belt. He carried two portable diving setups in his hands. All in black and equipped with the latest technology, he was almost invisible in the night. As he approached, he looked like some sort of aquatic android, but I knew what I was looking at: a Navy SEAL in his natural habitat.

Staying low to the ground, he joined us in the scrub, released the lock on his full-face diver's mask, pushed it up, and perched it on his neoprene hood.

"About time," Mac whispered harshly, but his smile beamed in the night.

"Says the grunt who's always late to the party."

Flashing a smirk, the other man settled the diving setups on the ground, took a knee among the scrub, and offered his hand.

"Good to see your *cojones* are intact."

“My *cojones* say *gracias* for caring, bro.” Mac caught the man’s hand and shared a quick handshake and an eye lock with the newcomer. “Sitrep?”

“We’ve got short and long-range surveillance in place,” the man reported. “Karma’s on overwatch, even though she’s at the far range of her reach.”

“Karma is Elite Team’s kickass sniper,” Mac clarified for me.

“Put this on.” The SEAL unhooked a watertight bag from the rest of his gear and pulled a couple of diver’s suits from it. “Do it fast. We wanna go under while it’s dark.” Weapon ready, he took over the watch from Mac and surveyed the area, cliffs, shore, and sea, adding eyes to our security setup.

“Kane, this is Danika,” Mac said as he set down his weapon and kicked off his boots. “Danika, this is Kane, former SEAL-extraordinaire, now Elite Team’s sea, land, and air specialist, and mission voluntold.”

“Voluntold, my ass.” Kane met my gaze briefly. “This gorilla is a pain in the ass, but I like him enough to volunteer.”

“I figured that much.” Imitating Mac, I untied my boots and slid them off. “A guy who volunteers to swim through a minefield is either crazy or a true friend. Since you don’t look crazy so far, I’ll stick with number two.”

Kane’s shrewd stare fell on me like a hammer, a serious assessment. Mac jammed his legs and arms into his diving suit. He made it look easy. I tried doing the same, but I found it hard to fit the neoprene over my fatigues.

“Let me help.” In one massive yank, Mac jerked the suit up to my chest, helped me to fit my arms into the sleeves, and zipped up the front. “Put your boots back on, then fold the hem of the neoprene suit over them. We never know when we’re gonna have to run.”

Modeling what he meant, he jammed his feet in his boots and snapped the suit’s sleeves over his shoes.

As I followed his instructions, I realized I didn’t like where this was going. “How are we getting out?”

“You’re up, Shadow.” Mac nudged his chin toward the other man while buttoning up his ruck, prepping it for watertight conditions. “Why don’t you explain how we do things at Elite?”

“Is she gonna be able to do this?” he asked Mac.

“*She* is right here, in front of you,” I whispered a tad too sharply, snapping the neoprene over my boots. “And *she* will do whatever we need to do to get the hell out of here.”

“My apologies, ma’am.” The man’s lips twitched. “I’m glad to learn you’ve got grit. You’re gonna need it. Have you been diving before?”

“No, but I can snorkel.” I’d done it once while on a vacation in St. Lucia. “Oh, and Kenzie and I swam with dolphins once in the Bahamas.”

“Yeah, so the answer is no,” the man concluded flatly.

“Don’t be a jerk, Shadow, just tell her what you’ve got in mind,” Mac said. “While you’re at it, you might wanna tell me as well.”

“I’ll make it brief.” Kane’s eyes returned to me. “You said you swam with dolphins before?”

“I have,” I confirmed, nodding.

“Good.” Kane’s smirk chilled me to the bone. “We’re going out the same way we came in. Tonight, you’re gonna swim with mines.”

Chapter Ten

Mac

Danika's stare bounced back to me. "Please tell me that your friend here is joking."

"Sorry." I grabbed one of the scuba diving sets that Kane had lugged onto the beach and jammed my arms into the loaded vest. "That'd be a lie, considering Kane's sense of humor is still in its developmental phase."

Kane gave me the finger, but it was the fear that flashed in Danika's eyes that hit me in the gut. This was gonna be a bitch for her.

I buckled on my vest and picked up the other combat scuba diving set. It was an advanced model designed at Battle Brothers' labs for our divers' exclusive use to simplify emergency underwater exfils.

The smart model integrated a smaller, square tank and a hose that connected to a full-face mask, all attached to the BCD—buoyancy compensator device—making it easier and faster to outfit a high-value target for underwater extraction.

“Here we go.” Lifting the weighty set, I slid it over her arms and began to release the different components from the setup’s portable mode.

Her gaze followed me as I came around to face her. “Is this the only way?”

“Look, I’m a landlubber like you.” I adjusted her BCD’s frontal straps and clipped the buckles for a snug fit. “This is not exactly fun times for me, either. However, you’re talking about top-of-the-biz here. Kane is Best in Show.”

“Now I’m a dog,” he muttered, but he grinned, demonstrating that a certain affiliation with a sweet lady had contributed to improving his sense of humor since our last adventure.

“If anyone can guide us out of here it’s him,” I offered with total conviction. “Hey, Shadow?” I asked, for Danika’s sake. “Some help over here?”

“Mac’s right,” Kane stated in his economical style, scouting the shore and the sea through his carbine’s optics. “Our team has analyzed the risk factors. I can assure you, ma’am. This plan offers the best odds for success.”

Danika cocked her eyebrows at him. “And the odds are...?”

“Fifty-fifty, give or take.”

Damn if the ape didn't always have to be exacting in his reporting.

Danika grimaced. “Not exactly reassuring.”

“Hold this.” I released the full-face mask attached to her vest and handed it to her. “I'm sure they've done their homework.”

“We've got a viable route mapped out,” Kane volunteered. “Blaze, see to your own setup while I do this part.” He took the hose from me and, connecting it to Danika's mask, offered her a reassuring smile. “Never let a landlubber mess with your breathing apparatus. It's an old Navy rule and it saves lives.”

Danika managed a shaky smile, then rallied. “What is the basis for your route selection?”

“Detailed satellite surveillance, drone, and seacraft magnetic resonance studies, and direct visual recognizance.” He straightened the kinks on her hose while I systematically

checked my buckles and gauges. “We’ve been scouting these waters for twenty-four hours now.”

Danika’s nod was all business. “What kinds of mines are we looking at?”

“Anti-access, area denial, moored contact mines,” Kane stated as he adjusted her valve. “The ones we saw on the way in are Soviet-era relics in poor condition, anchored through cable riggings to the bottom of the sea.”

“All right.” Danika pondered this as she tugged on the diving gloves that Kane offered us. “The good news is that they are old and decrepit. They’re not equipped with advanced technology such as electronic, magnetic, acoustic, or water pressure displacement sensors. They’ll only explode on direct contact.”

“You are correct.” Kane glanced at me. “She knows her stuff.”

“You bet your ass she does.” I grinned at Danika and got busy testing my valve.

“Safety check.” Kane twirled a finger in the air.

Holding her mask in one hand, Danika lifted her arms and turned slowly while Kane checked her equipment.

“The bad news is that old Soviet mines are outdated and prone to failure and malfunctions, which makes them dangerous,” she said, completing her turn. “If the gear fails, they can become unpredictable floating bombs. Turkey and Romania have both reported Soviet designation mines free-floating into their territorial waters since the start of the war.”

“You are well informed.” A trace of admiration sparked in Kane’s gaze as he secured a loose strap. “This is why we elected to kick off this extraction just before dawn. Once the sun comes out, daylight will increase our chances for better visibility through the densest clusters.”

“Moored sea mines are designed to float just beneath the surface,” she pointed out.

“Which is why we planned to hug the sea floor on the way in and out.” He tilted his head, listened to the comms in his ear, and motioned for us to crouch down. “T-minus two minutes. I know that diving doesn’t come naturally to most people—”

“Add my name to that list.” Danika raised a tentative hand. “I hate deep water and sharks. Oh, sea mines, too, but that’s a given, right?”

Kane actually grinned. “The only people who get a kick out of sea mines are thrill seekers like me who get a rush out of defusing those things.”

Danika huffed. “I rescind my first opinion of you. You are crazy.”

“Crazy, but useful to the nation.” Kane widened his smirk, the cocky ape. “Think of it like a trip to the aquarium and let me worry about the rest.”

“It might be too late for this confession.” She hesitated. “Last time I went snorkeling, I almost drowned.”

“I’m not letting you drown.” I took her gloved hand and squeezed it. “We are not letting you drown and that’s final. Isn’t that right, Shadow?”

“You bet your big ass, Blaze.” Kane’s eyes sparkled like steel. “I’ve never lost an underwater passenger. It ain’t happening today. Mac Muscles here would wring my neck if something happened to you, so you can be assured that I’m a hundred percent invested in your safe passage.”

“Thanks.” Danika lifted half her mouth in an iffy smile.

Kane took the face mask from her. “Now, lady and land-bound Delta Farce, please pay attention and stand by for my standard security briefing.”

“Hey, I’ve done this before,” I protested.

“Listen anyway.” Kane pointed at Danika’s mask as he explained. “This doubly sealed face mask is a breathing air system. It’s designed to minimize the difference in ambient pressure so you don’t need to make manual adjustments. This flexible flap over the nose will allow you to pinch your nose while you blow to equalize the pressure in your ears. Like this.” He held his nose and puffed, demonstrating the technique. “If your ears hurt, do this until they don’t anymore.”

She pinched her nose and blew out cautiously.

“Understood.”

“We know the Russians have sonar in the area, so once we go under, we’d like to keep radio silence if at all possible. You know the okay sign.” He demonstrated anyway. “A wave of the fist means ‘distress or I need help.’ A horizontal wave of the hand means ‘something’s wrong.’”

“Let’s try not to use the last two,” Danika proposed.

“Shall we?”

“We shall.” Kane’s lips turned up before he pointed to a spot on the upper right corner of her vest. “This is your emergency blow-off valve. To activate it, you pull this ring. When you do, you’ll shoot up to the surface. Do not activate it unless you are ordered to do so.”

“What if you’re not around to order me to pull the valve?” she asked, then quickly reversed herself. “No, don’t answer that. Forget I asked.”

“He’ll be around,” I put in. “I’ll be around, too. We’re not leaving you alone.”

“Good,” she spat. “Cause if you do, I’ll follow you to hell and shred you with my own well-sharpened nails.”

“You heard her.” I shrugged at Kane. “She’ll turn us into the devil’s spaghetti.”

“My wife, Alix, will want me to stay off of the demon’s menu.” Kane tilted his head, listened into the comms in his ear, and, sobering up, went back to business. “This will be a relatively shallow dive. Our deepest depth is about fifty-five feet.”

“Distance and ETA?” I asked.

“Six nautical miles of mined waters, traversed at an average speed of seven knots, give or take, a dive of approximately fifty-one minutes that will take us beyond the mines,” Kane reported. “We’ll stick to the same route we used to infil, which is mapped and recorded in our GPS. Our underwater vehicles are equipped with radar and sonar technology that will detect and alert to any dangers. This concludes the orientation portion of this dive. Questions?”

Danika narrowed her eyes at Kane. “*Underwater vehicles?*”

“Indeed.” Kane looked us over once more and, satisfied that we were properly geared up, listened to his comms again, and got to his feet. “We are a go. I repeat. We are a go. Hoods up. Masks on hand. Are you ready, ma’am?”

Danika

Was I ready to swim through a minefield?

No, but what choice did I have?

I lifted my neoprene hood, fitted it over my head, and adjusted it around my face. My crash course on diving ended as Kane placed the mask over my face and adjusted the three

straps until they fit snugly all around. The mask was a sleek design, but with all the heavy diving equipment on, I felt like an astronaut—only I wasn't going to the moon.

For a gal who preferred to operate on dry land, this was turning out to be quite a challenging day.

Moving quickly, Kane donned his mask, secured it in place, and tapped his ear. His voice came over a speaker inside my mask. "Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you." My relief at finding out that we had comms capability fled when I realized that anyone in the comms loop would hear me screaming if I lost it.

Do not lose it, Kos.

"How's your airflow?" Kane asked.

I took a big breath and let it go. "Seems okay."

"To conserve air, keep your breaths slow and steady," he instructed.

Hard to do when my heart hammered in my ribs and I was already on the edge of hyperventilating.

"How are you doing?" Kane turned to Mac and checked the fit of his face mask.

Shouldering his ruck, Mac flashed the okay sign.

“Good to go.”

“Bravo, Foxtrot, we are Oscar Mike,” Kane announced as he started toward the water.

Perhaps sensing my hesitation, Mac took my hand and, moving silently in the night, we trailed the SEAL into the water. The Black Sea embraced me—feet, knees, thighs, waist. A full-body shiver rattled my bones. God, I wished we didn’t have to do this.

Kane halted as the water reached my chest and Mac let go of my hand. I mourned his touch and sank my feet in the sand, resisting the pull of a strong current.

“Danika, you are with me.” Kane strapped a pair of lead lines to my vest and connected those to the back of his BCD. “Once we’re in position, I’ll tighten the lines so that you’ll be riding tandem. You’ll grab on to these.” He turned to show me a pair of handholds at either side of his tank. You’ll stick to me like an orca baby to her mother. Are we clear?”

I lifted my right hand. “Consider me Krazy Glued to your ass.”

“Good answer.” Kane laughed and Mac joined him, both men relaxed and confident, as if we were all about to take a stroll down the mall instead of swimming through a mine-infested sea.

I wished I felt as poised as they looked.

The emergence of a head and a masked face not three feet away from me made me jump in the water.

“Stand down,” Mac’s voice crackled in my ear, but his glare was on the newcomer. “This ugly frog who just scared the crap out of you is Knox. He goes by Triton. He’s Shadow’s brother and he’s a badass SEAL like Kane.”

“Howdy, folks.” Knox’s voice came over the comms. Scanning the coast with his weapon, he greeted us with a wave and a smile from behind his face mask. “Sorry I startled you, ma’am. It’s my job. Welcome to my sea. And by the way, I’m way better than Kane.”

“Ha!” Kane scoffed, donning his fins. “You wish. Time’s a wasting. The sea calls.”

“I’m on point,” Knox said as his head disappeared beneath the surface. “See you down under.”

“Oh, God.” I’d faced off with war and Kozlov, but I was truly terrified of the sea.

I must’ve said this out loud because Mac held my head between his hands, pressed his face mask to mine, and locked eyes with me.

“Breathe in, breathe out,” he commanded. “You’re gonna do great. Stick with Kane and whatever you do, do *not* panic. Now, you and I are going under the water together.”

Don’t panic, I repeated to myself as I dove below the surface and entered the sea’s darkness. *Do not panic*.

Chapter Eleven

Mac

As special forces went, we Delta Force operators were superior to the rest. Everyone knew that. Right?

But today, riding second diver in Knox's slipstream as he maneuvered his two-man swimmer delivery vehicle through the powerful currents and the mined seas, I gave a nod to Knox and Kane. Perhaps these two highly trained and decorated Navy SEALs had a slight performance edge over me, at least in the water.

Their skill level was fan-fucking-tastic. They read the currents like dolphins, adjusting their SDVs' speed, direction, and depth as necessary. It was as if they belonged to the sea, natives to the blue depths of our changing underwater landscape.

At first, we sailed through shallow waters where dawn's emerging daylight refracted through the surface on rocky bottoms and sandy plains. The light imbued the water with a bluish shimmer that revealed schools of anchovies, sprat, and herrings, swirling en masse, oblivious to us and the

steel cables that anchored the mines floating just beneath the waterline.

The mines varied in size, but for the most part, they were as Kane and Danika had described, antiquated Soviet designs bigger than beach balls and mostly round, sporting tubular spikes that reminded me of the coronavirus's molecular shape.

I turned my head and checked on Danika. Kane steered his sleek underwater transport vehicle in our wake. Strapped onto his back, she gripped the handholds as instructed, her body tucked between his legs, keeping the tight formation that SEALs preferred to maximize speed and performance.

I had to give it to her. For an intel operative whose job design had never meant to include fieldwork, the woman was brave.

Seeing that she was enduring the ride with admirable fortitude, I returned my attention to our swimmer delivery vehicle. Shaped like sleek, black missiles, measuring roughly eighty inches long and eighteen inches at the beam, these BB diver propulsion systems were similar but larger than your run-of-the-mill underwater scooters. They were designed for stealth and packed with technology. The SDVs were silent,

emission-free, and equipped with top-of-the-line navigation systems that preempted close encounters of the deadly kind.

When we steered over a shelf and dipped down along an algae-covered ledge, the light slowly ebbed and the colors began to fade. My ears popped like crazy, and I equalized constantly. I hoped Danika was doing the same. Looking over Knox's shoulder, I checked the dive computer on the vehicle's compact console. A dotted line marked our course from one GPS point to the next. A red glow lit up on the GPS objectives every time we met them.

As we descended deeper, the water became turbid. An otherworldly greenish tint crept in, then yielded to ghastly darkness. It was as though we were time-traveling, leaving the present to return to the primordial caldera that had birthed life on this planet.

I congratulated myself at least a thousand times for choosing The Unit over The Teams. Not that I would ever admit it out loud, but I'd take land over sea any day. Forcing myself to keep my breaths even, I fought to shake the eerie feeling of exiting my familiar universe and entering an alien one. I was no stranger to danger, but even so, I had to suppress an impulse to make the sign of the cross.

Hang in there, Dani, and don't forget to breathe. I sent good vibes her way.

As to the SEALs piloting our SDVs, they appeared impervious to the low visibility, the kelp clusters they so deftly maneuvered to avoid, the startling outlines of bigger fish that swam in and out of my field of vision like bad omens from hell, and the long, menacing chains that stretched upwards toward the surface, anchoring the mines that could blow us up on contact.

We were forty-one minutes into our trip and ascending toward the light when Knox motioned Kane to come abreast. They slowed down the vehicles until the four of us were floating in the current. Using Elite's sign language, they gestured themselves into the quick conversation I followed.

No, no, no. I tapped on Knox's back and, claiming Kane's attention as well, slashed my hand over the side of my neck, indicating my firm opinion on the matter.

Necessary. Kane gestured back. *Rendezvous point is too close to board without detection.*

Shit. It figured. Things had been going so fucking well.

The brothers steered the SDVs to the sandy bottom and secured them with a pair of small anchors staked to the sea floor. Working quickly, they hooked fast-release bungees to Danika's and my vests, mooring us to the grounded propulsion vehicles. As if I were a helpless baby, they demonstrated how to clip and release the carabiners. Kane gestured, asking me if I understood how to drive the SDV. I gave him the finger. Did the clown think I was a useless rookie?

He grinned behind his mask and signaled, *Just in case.*

You better return fast, asshole, I signaled back.

He widened his grin and gave me the thumbs-up.

Wasting no time, the SEALs adjusted their equipment, extracted the necessary tools for their side mission, and swam away. I followed the scissoring motions of their flippers, trailing their progress.

Danika tapped my shoulder. Behind her mask, she raised her eyebrows at me. She wanted to know what was happening. I gestured to the radar on the vehicle's console and indicated a pulsing point that stood relatively close to the blue balloon that indicated our final destination. Then I lifted my hand and pointed in the direction of the long shadow floating a few hundred yards to our three o'clock.

She realized that she was looking at the hull of a vessel and drew an “R” and a question mark in the water.

Yes, Russian patrol vessel, I nodded. I drew my hands slowly together, then brought them apart quickly, fingers rigid and spread apart.

Alarm twisted her face. “Oh, shit,” she mouthed soundlessly.

Oh, shit indeed, I agreed with another nod.

The brothers had taken a detour to place limpet mines on the Russian vessel that lurked in these dangerous waters and could potentially prevent our recovery. It was just a precaution, but I could see Danika’s fear tighten her features behind the mask.

She reached out to me. I hesitated, still prey to the frustrating sense of disappointment gnawing at the pit of my stomach, but then I remembered our night together, the passion between us, the pleasure. Next I knew, I caved to my instincts. I opened my arms, claimed her waist, and gathered her against my chest. It was impossible, of course, but I thought I could feel her heart beating wildly against mine.

She was afraid that none of us were gonna make it. That was my guess. Narrowing my stare on the slim, almost invisible profile of Kane and Knox's now tiny flippers, watching their stealth figures disappear into the deep blue, I didn't blame her.

She tapped a gloved finger gently on my mask, catching my attention. I looked down. Her sparkling blue eyes were trying to tell me something. She patted my chest, then hers. I wasn't sure what she was saying, but I replied with a thumbs-up. She shook her head and repeated her motion, bouncing her hand over my sternum. I frowned, unable to understand.

Her chest came up and down, an impatient exhale. Moving slowly, she placed her palm on her chest and then held up her hands, forming a shape by touching the ends of her thumbs and indexes, before she pointed at me.

I heart you.

I love you?

My heart seized in my chest. For a moment there, I didn't dare to breathe. I stared in complete disbelief at the woman who made and unmade me with every look, and now, with every gesture.

Was she saying what I thought she was saying?

She nodded firmly.

This time my heart flip-flopped in my chest. I couldn't breathe, even though the air was flowing and I was sucking it by the gulp full. She repeated the hand gesture. With that simple motion, she demolished and rebuilt me at the same time.

Danika loved me.

Me?

Great. Fucking awesome. Unbelievable. I clenched so hard my jaw hurt. After having my kid and not telling me about her; after seven years of total absence and abject silence; after the lies, the hurt, my wounded pride, and after rediscovering our physical connection and maybe even surviving a war, now, when we were stuck at the bottom of the sea, now she was telling me this?

The shock crashed over me like storm waves. It ripped me in half. I didn't know what part of me would win the violent argument taking place in my head.

On one hand, I could've strangled the woman. I could've throttled her for telling me this, now, without

warning, an underwater ambush. Even now, the pain of her rejection made me want to howl like the dejected wolf I'd been all these years

The other part of me felt like kissing her, long and hard; like making love to her all over again and admitting that I had inexplicable feelings for her. How could one man feel so angry and so happy at the same time?

I considered things between us as they stood, the good, the ugly, and the sublime, with the sublime threatening to hijack the argument, and my body keen to focus on the fact that my attraction for her had withstood the test of anger, sorrow, and time. It had never died, never waned.

I'd been so mad at her for so long that I hadn't registered the treacherous emotion that stood behind my fury. In my outrage, I'd ignored it. I hadn't heard my heart's painful screams. Instead, I'd gagged the damned organ.

As if trying to tip the scales, my cruelly repressed dick weighed in. It was currently stuck in a state of agony, throbbing behind stern layers of neoprene.

All I could do was stare at the woman.

Danika loved Mac. *Me*. The father of her daughter. Confusion clouded my mind. Could I believe her? And if this was true, what did it mean?

The realizations kept kicking my ass. My world changed on the day I met Kenzie. It had changed again, today, now, in this unlikely place, at the bottom of the sea.

I hadn't realized that a part of me had been drowning for a long time until Danika's gesture challenged my disbelief. Even though I was firmly anchored to my SDV, I experienced a weird sensation. It was as if I'd activated my BCD's emergency blow-off valve and I was shooting up toward the surface on a path toward light, breath, and... what? What was this feeling?

Hope?

I have to talk to her, to understand what the hell is happening to me right now. I also want her. Everyone else had been a distraction. I'd only ever wanted her, but I'd had zero hope I could have her. Until she formed a heart with her fingers and the gesture became hope.

Okay, all right, I had hope. Of what? I wasn't sure, but I had to find out.

Now, all we had to do was sit at the bottom of the ocean, watch to make sure that our tank air levels didn't drop into the red zone, and pray that Kane and Knox returned alive and soon so that I could figure out if Danika was telling me the truth and if, with work, we could maybe have a future together.

Danika

He didn't drown me. He didn't rip the hose from the tank and leave me there to die. He didn't even push me away or flash his teeth in the snarl I deserved. He simply locked his eyes with mine and held me, anchoring me to the strange underwater world where, in the midst of my fears, I'd discovered my truth.

He looked... surprised. Shell-shocked. Could I really blame him?

The guilt of the secret I'd kept from him blinded me to everything but the consequences of my omission. I shut my eyelids to keep my tears from spilling. Would he ever forgive me? God, what about Kenzie? Would she ever forgive me for keeping her apart from her father?

I'd had good reasons to proceed as I did. Those still stood and were barriers to how I felt. Also, I had no idea how Mac felt about me. But I loved him. Plain and simple. I loved Mackenzie Cienfuegos and I didn't want to die without him knowing that.

I'd had to tell him, here, at the bottom of the ocean, even though I couldn't foretell what tomorrow held or even if we had a tomorrow.

He'd taken Kenzie in. He'd made sure she was provided for, protected. Then he'd come to find me, to secure me so that Kenzie had her mother. He'd helped me escape Kozlov, led me through a war zone, and used his resources to sneak me out of Ukraine.

I'd been in lust with him since the day I met him. Now, my feelings for him coalesced into a deeper appreciation for the man he had become and what he'd done for us—a solid, undeniable emotion.

Whether we lived or died, I had to atone for my mistakes. The only way to do this on short notice was to complete the truth he'd begun to unravel, to close the loop I'd opened on the day I chose Mackenzie Cienfuegos to be my child's father.

Of course, he didn't know that. He didn't know why I hadn't told him, either. Would he ever understand?

A gentle tug led me to open my eyes. Mac's attention focused somewhere to my right. I followed his line of sight and almost squealed with relief. Kane and Knox emerged from the deep blue, swimming in tandem toward us. They split to go around a mine-mooring cable and reunited on the other side. Legs pumping, fins swirling, they approached at inhuman speed, flashing huge smiles behind their masks.

So this is what SEALs looked like in their underwater realm *after* executing a successful mission.

Lots of hand gestures I couldn't follow ensued between the three guys, but soon enough, we were all sorted out, back on our underwater scooters, and underway. A few minutes later, we cleared the last of the mines and began our final ascent. The shadow of a small vessel appeared ahead.

The brothers cut power at a shallow depth near the vessel. Kane unclipped me and gestured for me to go. I swam up toward the hull, an ascent of only a few feet. My ears equalized right before I broke through the surface. The light welcomed me with a lick of warmth. It was nice but it was

nothing compared to how grateful I was at seeing the sun again.

Mac came up behind me, and together we started to swim the last few feet toward the boat. It was a white and blue motorboat and it was flying the banner of the Russian coast guard.

I halted in my tracks.

“Friendly.” Mac’s lips slowly formed the word. He nudged me with a head knock. *Come on.*

I followed, going in pure faith that he knew what the heck he was doing because the Russian military was not my friend at the moment.

As we approached, a pair of ramps dropped at either side of a row of idled motors. A man almost as tall as Mac and dressed all in black approached me. He sported a strong face, dark wavy hair, thick eyebrows, and shrewd blue eyes. He helped me out of the water and dragged me into the boat.

My soaked body left behind a wet trail. From the corner of my eyes, I spotted a tall woman with a huge rifle strapped to her back, also dressed in black. She dragged Mac

by the back of his vest. Once he was on board, I let out a relieved breath.

The man in black parked me beneath the boat's white hardtop. I took off my face mask and tried to stand up. My legs refused to work. Until that moment, I hadn't realized how cold I was or how weak I'd become. It was as if the water had sucked up all my mojo. I sat in my own puddle of seawater, quivering and puffing like the proverbial fish out of the water.

"Take it easy," the man suggested in a low bass as he unbuckled my vest and relieved me from the heavy gear.

"Give yourself a minute."

Not that I had a choice.

"Who are you?" I heaved, lowering my neoprene hood, allowing the wind to ripple through my hair.

"My name's Sebastian Aguilar." He helped me shed the last of my gear. "I'm the CO of Elite's motley crew. I go by Seb or by my call sign, Orion."

"Seb, Orion." I nodded. "Got it."

Mac's voice reached me as if from far away. "Did you miss me, Karma, *querida*?"

“Sure.” The tall blonde flashed a mischievous smirk that activated a pair of demonic dimples. “Like I miss lice on my genitals.”

“Admit it, you love me,” Mac cooed, the damn flirt.

A flicker of jealousy burned in my belly. To think I’d just declared my love to the rogue. His habit of flirting with every female he came across had contributed to my decision to go solo at parenthood. The realization that he hadn’t returned my gesture after my underwater confession had me feeling particularly prickly at the moment.

What did you expect, Kos? Insta-love? You lied to him!

I gulped a salty swallow and hugged my shivering self. Perhaps he simply wanted to cuss me out on terra firma.

The sight of Kane and Knox emerging from the water claimed my attention. From my perspective on the floor, I watched in awe as they drove their respective SDVs over the ramps and onto the deck. Releasing the accelerators and sliding behind their vehicles, they brought the scooters to a stop.

“That worked well,” Knox announced as soon as he got rid of his face mask, sounding a bit surprised himself.

“Ajax Battleson is gonna be tickled pink when he hears my glowing reports on his new SDV design.”

“Like you need to give any of the Battleson boys more of a big head.” Kane scoffed, as he, too, shed his gear, and turned to the pilot. “Did they see us?”

“Monitoring,” the man strapped to the high chair at the helm reported, working his console. “Stand by.”

He pressed a button, bringing up the ramps in the boat’s stern. Then he ignited the engines, eased the throttle forward, and, drawing a smooth arch in the sea’s surface, turned the boat while monitoring the multiple displays on his console. I looked over the gunwales and swallowed a gulp. A Steregushchiy-class guided missile corvette was anchored in the distance.

My stomach plunged.

The sleek Russian corvette was equivalent to a NATO frigate. It was one of Putin’s newest toys and a recent addition to the Russian Black Sea fleet. Equipped with the latest radar, sonar, and navigation systems, the gleaming gray ship was built sharp and narrow at the prow for speed and squared off at the stern to accommodate a helicopter hangar and a launch pad. Wielding the latest electronic warfare capabilities and

armed with powerful, long-range naval guns, torpedo tubes, and pedestal machine guns, she was a nimble killer.

The pilot set a casual pace, not too slow but not too fast either, no doubt trying to avoid triggering a chase. Everyone on board leaped into action. Still outfitted in their diving suits, Knox and Kane manned the binoculars. Karma and Sebastian secured the SDVs and the gear onboard.

“Drink this, slowly, but put down all of it.” Mac materialized by my side with a life jacket and cracked open the cap of a protein drink. “You’ll feel better after you do.”

I took a sip and discovered he was right. Dehydration, exhaustion, and the sea’s cool temps had done a number on me. I kept my eye on the frigate as Mac buckled on my life preserver. He scooped me up into his arms. Fighting the pitch and roll of the boat, he carried me to the bench and, with a grunt, sat down next to me.

I took in the red dents on his face where the diving mask had left marks and the wet, loose tendrils that escaped his ponytail when he pushed back his hood, remembering that, although he was the strongest person I’d ever met, he was human, too.

“You need to drink as well.” I tilted the bottle against his lips.

He drew a long swig, then pushed the bottle back toward me and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Gracias, corazón.”

Corazón? Had I heard him right? Had he just called me “his heart”? Was it just a casual expression or had he meant it? And why did I need to know one way or another so badly?

Pay attention, Kos. You are still in the thick of things.

“That’s a mean-looking Russian frigate over there,” I mumbled between smaller sips, spilling some of the drink on my neoprene-encased lap as the boat cut into the waves.

Before Mac could answer, a harsh voice crackled over the radio. “This is Russian corvette *Suvorov* addressing unidentified coast guard vessel. Identify yourself. Over.”

Wearing a fearsome frown, Sebastian came to stand next to the boat driver. The brown-haired hunk at the wheel motioned to me, waving his hand with urgency.

“Come on.” Mac helped me across the deck, parked me next to the console, and after anchoring himself on a handhold, kept me there with an arm around my waist.

“Hey, I’m Trev and I go by Druid,” the golden-eyed helmsman offered before he handed me a card written in Russian. “You are up to bat. Do your best. Ready?”

I braced a hand on the back of his seat and skimmed my lines, only then understanding what the team required of me. After taking a swig of the bottle to moisten my throat, I nodded.

Trev handed me the marine radio’s mic and counted down with his fingers. “We go live in three, two, one.” He mouthed, “Go.”

Putting on my crispest, most official accent, I pressed the side button and spoke into the mic. “Russian corvette *Suvorov*, we are Russian Coast Guard fast patrol boat *Uragan*, designation two, one, four, six. Over.”

“Coast Guard fast patrol *Uragan*, we are not aware of other vessels permitted in this area,” the belligerent voice replied. “What is your destination? Over.”

“We are en route to assist the evacuation of Zmiinyi Island,” I reported and then added a hasty, “Over.”

There was a moment of silence when only static crackled over the line. Several alarms went off on the console,

indicating that the *Suvorov*'s many radars were now actively tracking us.

Trev shook his head. "The dickheads are checking us out."

"Movement on deck," Kane reported from his perch manning the binoculars.

"Port side," Knox yelled. "Machine gun angling maneuvers."

"Fuck," Mac swore under his breath and my heart broke into a wild gallop.

"Coast Guard fast patrol boat *Uragan*," the voice came again. "You are ordered to heave to, immediately. Over."

I cringed and traded looks with Mac, Seb, and Trev. "What do we do now?"

"Buy us some time," Trev muttered, pushing the throttle forward to add to our speed. "Perhaps we'll get lucky and they'll shift their attention to some other ship."

"Coast Guard fast patrol *Uragan*," the voice echoed over the speaker again, angry, demanding. "Do you copy, over?"

“Russian corvette *Suvorov*.” I turned the knob and increased the white noise in the channel, pretending we couldn’t hear them at all. “Do you copy, over?”

“Coast Guard fast patrol *Uragan*, you are ordered to heave to and prepare for boarding,” the man shouted over the radio. “Over.”

“Russian corvette *Suvorov*,” I said, sticking with my strategy. “This is Coast Guard fast patrol *Uragan*. We do not copy. I repeat. We do not copy. Do you copy? Over?”

“We copy, *Uragan*, and so should you.” The radio operator sounded pissed. “You *will* come about. You *will* heave to. Our crew *will* board for inspection. Over.”

“Stern ramp is lowering,” Kane barked. “She’s about to fart a boarding vessel.”

I took a deep breath and played for time.

“Russian corvette *Suvorov*, this is Coast Guard fast patrol *Uragan*.” I dialed up the hiss. “We are experiencing a communication malfunction. Please repeat. Over.”

We went back and forth several times, but I could tell the voice on the other side of the radio was not pleased by our lack of compliance.

“Pursuit RHIB about to hit the water,” Knox reported.

Crap. We didn’t have much time left.

“We’re still miles to Romanian territorial waters.” Mac met Sebastian’s stare. “They’re not letting us go. We’re gonna have to make a choice—”

“We are lit,” Trev announced, his voice sharp. “I repeat. Weapons armed. We are ‘target acquired.’ Brace for evasive maneuvers.”

My blood froze in my veins.

“Druid, give me balls to the wall,” Sebastian shouted over the roar of the engines.

Trev pushed the throttle and steered the boat into a random weaving across the sea.

“Shadow. Triton.” Seb made eye contact with Kane and Knox and lifted a hand in the air. “You are up to bat.” He turned his attention to me and had the gall to dare me with a chin lift. “This could be our last transmission, Kos. Think about what you wanna say next.”

“Make it good, Dani.” Mac flashed a ferocious smirk. “Make it worthy of Elite Team.”

“*Uragan, Uragan, Uragan,*” the voice shouted over the radio waves. “I am Russian corvette *Suvorov*. You will heave to and surrender or we will blow you out of the water.”

I felt zero fear when I met Mac’s fierce stare. Returning his cocky smirk with my own, I clicked on the key. “Russian corvette *Suvorov*, heed my words.” I switched to Ukrainian. “Up. Your. Ass.”

In response to my nod, Seb dropped his hand and shouted, “Bravo, bravo, bravo.”

“Hit the deck.” Mac pushed me to the floor and threw his body over mine.

I shut my eyes and braced for a fiery end.

Chapter Twelve

Danika

The explosion caught me smothered under Mac's weight, my cheek splattered against the deck and awash in my spilled drink. The boat felt as if it was flying over the water. An orange glare broke through my closed eyelids. And the sound. God. The awful sound. The monumental blast pounded my eardrums. The shriek of metal dying screeched in my ears, and plops and splashes echoed all around us.

Heart hammering in my throat, I opened my eyes. We weren't dead. Not yet, anyway. The boat appeared to be in one piece.

Heaving, I snaked out from under Mac. "You... are... crushing... me."

"Sorry." He lifted his weight and the world came into clear focus.

I caught sight of everyone on board staring at the wreckage burning in the water and the black smoke billowing high in the sky. Kane and Knox held small devices in their hands. Remote detonators, I realized at once. The *Suvorov* had

targeted us, but before they could shoot to sink us, the brothers had activated the limpet mines they'd planted on the ship.

The mighty *Suvorov* slowly turned to its side before yielding to the sea's eternal embrace.

Mac

I sat in Danika's Prague flat, waiting for her to finish her preparations for the next phase of our mission, fiddling with my lopsided bow tie. I must have tied and retied the damn thing a hundred times, and yet it still twisted at an angle, tickling the underside of my chin, annoying the hell out of me. It looked like a crooked butterfly about to fly.

The shirt's overly starched collar chafed against my recently shaved neck. I felt as if I wore a noose around my neck. I glanced down at my watch. Almost time to kick off the next phase of our mission. What was taking Danika so long?

After we took the *Suvorov* out of commission, we'd hightailed to international waters, changed our vessel's flag, and traveled through several hours of high seas and stormy weather. Seasickness had taken hold of Danika, and to be honest, I also donated my stomach contents overboard once.

It'd been a long trip and she'd been throwing up for most of it. I'd divided my time between helping my teammates navigate the troubled seas, manning the radar to ensure we were safe from Russian pursuit, and tending to Danika, making sure she kept hydrated.

The exfil had been miserable and everybody had been relieved when we sailed into the port city of Constanta on the coast of Romania and met with our friendly agents there.

A BB jet had been waiting to transport us directly to Prague. Danika and I had a quick video call with Kenzie in-flight. I wanted my daughter to take a good look at her mom and be reassured by it.

As usual, Kenzie had asked lots of questions, but we'd told her that we were on the move and would share the story when we got back—redacted for her age, of course. At some point, Danika would also have to deliver the news of Baba's passing, but that had to wait for now.

The relief I spotted on Danika's face as she talked to Kenzie made me so damn happy. After seeing Kenzie thriving under the care of Gracie and Alix, who were Sebastian and Kane's wives respectively, Danika began to relax. When the

call ended, she slept through the two-hour flight. I couldn't blame her. I might've catnapped, too.

Once we were wheels on the ground, Elite Team transferred Danika to the custody of the State Department Bureau of Diplomatic Security—DS. I wasn't happy about Elite not being in charge of Danika's security while in the Czech Republic, but I understood DS was the lead agency to protect American diplomats and that they had the local intel, resources, and network to do the job.

After negotiating with Battle Brothers, DS authorized me to provide personal protection to Danika. They also allowed Trev to join the team as my support asset and legalized our presence in the country, albeit under false names. All of these negotiations happened at the highest levels of the Czech government while I glowered and occasionally growled at DS's Prague contingent.

Territorial turf wars were the worst. I got that they were Danika's colleagues and friends. I accepted it was their business to protect her. What they didn't understand was that *I* was the best man to protect Danika and that *I* wasn't going anywhere without her.

While the diplomatic row lasted, our team huddled. We worked to set up the next phase of the mission and planned our contingencies. Seb, Knox, Karma, and Kane left the embassy, under the excuse they were gonna get a bite. Their real purpose was to conduct a contingency covert op, but nobody needed to know that. It went well and they were back by the time the diplomatic dispute was resolved.

At that point, the team boarded the BB jet on the way to Elite's headquarters in Florida. As flexible as the Czechs had been with us, they were uneasy about hosting a team of American operators in their country when Russian spies were everywhere and Putin needed few excuses to attack yet another peaceful country. Trev, Danika, and I stayed behind. We would travel on to the States tomorrow, once our newest objective was accomplished.

While Trev networked with DS to set up his surveillance station, Danika and I rushed to her flat to clean up and get ready for her next diplomatic performance, scheduled for 1900 sharp. It was entitled "Look at me, I'm right here, in Prague, where I live and work, and not in Ukraine as the Russians are saying."

The plan entailed going to an opera. An opera. *Shit*. A soccer game would've been better. More witnesses, too. Wasn't being seen by as many people as possible the objective? No such luck. Apparently, the opera was where the diplomatic community hung out, so this grunt was opera-bound.

To give DS some credit, a tux and associated accessories waited for me in the guest room at Danika's flat. Given my size, I was impressed with their diligence.

At no time since emerging from the depths of the Black Sea had Danika and I had the time, energy, or privacy necessary to discuss our personal affairs. Every moment since we'd left Ukraine had been taken up with frantic activity. Even though I was no longer on a patrol boat or an airplane, the ground beneath my feet felt unstable.

I didn't know where Danika and I stood. Hell, I didn't know what I was gonna do next. Now that she was back on firm land, would she change her mind about the heart gesture she'd made with her hands thirty-some feet under the water? Had she meant it? And if she did, what did it mean, for me, for us, for my relationship with Kenzie?

I forced my jittery foot to stop tapping on the plush area rug that anchored Danika's stylish living room and pushed off her ivory couch. I'd been afraid to touch that fine piece of furniture for fear of denting the seat cushions or staining the swanky fabric. Even though I'd spent an hour scrubbing myself clean and making myself presentable, the couch felt way too fancy to settle in it comfortably.

Where I came from, a couch like this would have been an inconvenience. Had we owned a piece as fine as this one, my Dominican mother would've never allowed us to sit on it. Hell, she would've draped it with a plastic cover and displayed it to be seen but not used as had been my grandmother's custom when she immigrated from the island.

Afraid to touch anything, I clasped my hands behind my back and took in the place. The last rays of the setting sun poured through the windows and reflected off the crystal chandelier hanging in the middle of the room. It refracted a kaleidoscope of colored lights over the creamy walls and the elaborate plaster moldings that edged the high ceilings.

The warm light added a glow to the stately parquet floors, glinted off the porcelain collection displayed on the

shelves at either side of the dainty fireplace, and enlivened the paintings that adorned the walls.

To my taste, the flat felt a little stodgy, a tad too formal and pale. I preferred comfort over form, earthy colors, and paintings that portrayed movement rather than static scenes, but I had to admit that the place had a dignified, historic atmosphere that matched Danika's natural elegance.

To think this was where my daughter had spent her last formative years, far away from the common grunt I was or the projects where I grew up, enjoying the comfort, luxury, and culture that my nomad black ops lifestyle could've never provided for her.

I could almost imagine my little spitfire, cuddling with the stuffed animals piled on her bed or reading the books on the shelves of her pink room, which I had explored earlier; or acting all prim and proper for her mama, doing her homework on the exquisite table that presided over the adjoining formal dining room.

I could also envision Danika entertaining her diplomat friends at the same table, offering gracious champagne toasts over a first course of caviar and pâté.

My eyes flew to the carved double doors that separated the bedrooms from the living room. How many fancy suitors had walked through those doors on the way to Danika's bedroom? Who had they been? Cultured professors? Erudite political scientists? Refined envoys, politicians, ambassadors?

A surge of petty jealousy flushed my face, tightened my fists, and took me by surprise. I'd never been jealous of anyone before. The women who came into my life were transient presences. They were nice but I never missed them when they left. I expected them to drift through with a quick goodbye and no consequences.

But Danika. *Shit*. She'd been different, back then, and now, as well. From her, I wanted so much more than a night, so much more than her fingers shaped in heart form. Never mind that she was the mother of my daughter and that complicated things.

The truth was, I was jealous of men I didn't know, of the people who'd filled the last seven-plus years of her life, of every man who'd ever touched her before or after me. If the bite of my nails on my palms was any indication, I wanted to pound them all into dust. And for what reason? For worshipping a smart, confident woman who deserved their adoration?

She'd expressed that she loved me, but we'd been deep underwater and in danger. Hell, who knew, maybe I'd been suffering from hypoxia and had hallucinated the whole thing. Yeah, hypoxia could explain why the memory felt so surreal. If this wasn't the case, I had to wonder. Now that Danika was safe and in her perfect environment, did she still feel the same?

The old doubts returned to haunt me, the same ones that had kept me from knocking on Danika's door until my knuckles bled when she'd first ghosted me. My wounded pride combined with my old fears to turn my stomach into a veritable maelstrom.

Look around you, Mac Dumb. Why would Danika want crass, profane, coarse you when what she enjoys is this? This is the life she wants, the one she built without you, on purpose. Do you really think you could belong here? You ain't got the IQ to match hers. You ain't got the class, either.

It was true. She and I? We came from different worlds.

I yanked the stupid bow tie into place and tugged on my collar, trying to get some air circulating inside my penguin suit. I had to get ahold of my anger, of the insecurities that slithered out of the back of my mind like poisonous snakes,

where a rotten part of my brain proclaimed I wasn't good enough.

Don't ever let 'em snooty assholes fuck with your head, mi hijo. My mother's Spanish-accented voice echoed in my ears, firm, passionate, proud. You're a Cienfuegos. No one can stop you.

It was the same little speech she gave me every time I came home with a busted lip or a black eye after fighting the gangs that plagued our neighborhood. They'd wanted to recruit me to deal drugs. To earn myself a chance to join the army, I'd needed to keep my record clean—not an easy feat when you grew up where I did.

A smile curved my lips. I could almost see my mother, the incomparable Ilaria Cienfuegos, wagging her finger at me, her eyes narrowed, the curls that Kenzie and I had inherited from her shaking adamantly at the top of her head.

We might not be rich or fancy, she used to tell me, but we come from good, decent people. We've survived slavery, dictators, persecution, revolutions, poverty, injustice, corruption, and violence. We've got grit, mi hijo, we've got fuego and fuerza—fire and strength—and the Lord has blessed us with your father's Irish suerte—luck. So don't ever let

anyone make you feel ashamed of who you are, 'cause we've come a long way and we ain't stopping now.

All of this from a formidable woman who'd negotiated with my father to ensure that her line would live on in America. She'd argued that my happy-go-lucky father had seven brothers in the States, all of them Mackenzies, whereas her Cienfuegos line had no male descendants. So, she made a deal with my father, who would never deny her anything: My first name would be Mackenzie if my last name would be Cienfuegos.

Mulling my mother's words, I made my way to the bank of windows, where sumptuous drapery framed panoramic views of Prague's old town and the imposing National Theater. The windows overlooked the Vltava. It ran a placid course through this beautiful city. At my eleven o'clock, the Legion Bridge proudly spanned the river, complete with a pair of tollbooth towers.

"Neo-baroque," I mumbled, noting the architectural styles that merged to define the bridge. "Art nouveau."

I might've been a product of a subpar public school in the projects, but I'd made it my lifelong mission to educate myself. By choice, I remained a simple grunt true to my

humble roots, a man who hated pomp and pretense. At my core, I was a soldier and lived my life by my warrior's code. That was never gonna change.

I didn't wanna pretend to be anyone else but the person I was. I knew I looked like a brute of a man, and I often talked and acted like one to cement the impression. In my line of business, brute came in handy and it suited me just fine. But stupid?

Nah. Uh-uh. Stupid I ain't.

I hadn't made it to West Point and all the way through to The Unit without learning some stuff. I'd also worked in the European theater before. Add to that the fact that during our mission together, Danika had gone out of her way to instruct me by sharing her passion for art, and I wasn't totally clueless.

Another glance at my watch had me wondering how much longer was Danika gonna take. She'd been in her room for fucking ever. Our transport would be here any moment now. I was itching to get this done and over so we could get back to Kenzie and to the sketchy business of figuring out the path ahead.

I paced the room and fought the stubborn bow tie that refused to stay straight. Then I paused before the small

painting that stood on the mantel and lifted it from its little stand. It was an oil portrait on a 14x14-inch canvas, mounted on a simple wood frame.

I recognized the style. It had most likely been painted by one of Prague's talented street artists, who sold their wares in the old city, mostly as souvenirs for visiting tourists. The portrait featured Danika and Kenzie, seated on the grass among a bunch of yellow flowers by the river. In the background, I spotted a span of the Charles Bridge, Prague's oldest and most famous medieval bridge.

The angle of the sun's reflection, carefully woven into the hues of Danika and Kenzie's respective manes, suggested it had been a beautiful summer day in Prague, and so did their outfits. Kenzie sported pink shorts and a tank top, while Danika looked regal as always wearing a simple pair of jeans and a white peasant shirt.

In the painting, Kenzie was younger, maybe four or five, flashing a dazzling smile that displayed all her baby teeth. She held a pink leash in her hand, connected to the white Maltese puppy sitting on her lap. They looked so complete together, so happy. Hell, even the puppy appeared to be smiling.

Jealousy heated my core again, ambushing me out of nowhere. To think I could've been there, that day, perhaps even watching over the artist's shoulder as he painted my girls—or, at least, my girl.

It's all in the past now, Mac Petty. Think of the future now.

Barely touching the canvas, I traced Danika and Kenzie's delicate figures with my finger. My index looked monstrous compared to the small, refined work of art.

“Hey.”

I flinched. I'd been so deeply engaged in my thoughts that Trev's voice startled me. I felt caught, as if I'd been surprised doing something wrong. My clumsy hands fumbled the painting. That I managed to catch it at the last moment was a miracle, and so was the fact that the canvas didn't rip in my grip.

Phew. As gingerly as I could manage, I set it back on its stand and stepped away from the mantel. *Close call.*

Feeling like the proverbial bull trapped not in the china shop but in Danika's fancy flat, I whirled on Trev. “You'd

think a bro would give a grunt a break and not sneak up on him,” I groused. “Where the hell did you come from?”

“I didn’t sneak up on you.” He curled his thumb over his shoulder and pointed at the front entry. “I came through those doors from the apartment across the way, where I’m done installing my surveillance systems. I’ve been parked here for a whole minute while you were checked out, looking at that portrait. Where the hell did your brain go, Blaze?”

“Nowhere.” I stalked across the room and plopped down on the couch, feeling like a total idiot. Me. A Delta man. Startled. All this luxury smothered my senses. I was losing my edge.

“What’s going on?” Trev settled his hands on the angled wheels of his sports chair and, biceps rippling, rolled across the room. He maneuvered around the coffee table and parked himself across from me. “You look...”

“Like an elephant crammed into a penguin suit?” I flashed a self-deprecating smirk. “Yeah, I know.”

“I was gonna say that you look like a gentleman in that tux.” Trev leaned back on his chair and inspected me from head to toe. “You look sharp. Sophisticated. You look good, brother.”

“Yeah, right.” I scoffed and looked away. “I look like a giant clown, and you know it.”

“I don’t say things I don’t mean.” He studied my face with his shrewd brown eyes.

His elfin features would’ve made his face pretty, but “pretty” was not an adjective that applied to Trev, and “handsome” fell well short of the person he was. They failed to describe his fierceness of character, the iron will that squared his jaw, and the ferocious resolve that drove his actions and made him a rock to those who knew him best.

The genius at the core of Elite Team, the magician who made the impossible happen and the implausible real, wore his straight, light brown hair in a crisp, layered cut. It combined with his usual attire—a black T-shirt and designer jeans—to give him a trendy edge that matched his epic tech skills. Sitting in his self-designed, cutting-edge wheelchair, he looked sharp but approachable, calculated and calculating, but also authentic, like himself.

“Did you shave off all your stubble?” he asked. “Or did your electric razor declare its independence and took matters into its own blade?”

“I shaved it all off.” I rubbed my strangely smooth jaw.

“So?”

“I’ve never seen you without your stubble, that’s all. You look respectable, man, fresh-faced. And your hair. Taming that wild hair of yours and putting it all into that man-bun took some effort.” His lips twitched. “Hair gel?”

“Hey, now.” I lifted a finger in the air. “Don’t think I’ve gone fancy all of a sudden here. I combed my hair. That’s all.”

“Really?” He sniffed the air and expanded his grin. “Hair gel. Lots of it. You’ve made an effort.”

“Fuck off.” I cursed him in two languages. “Mind your own business.”

“It’s a good outcome, Blaze. You look the part.” He tilted his head, his eyes dropping down to the base of my neck. “Except for the bow tie. That, you gotta work on.”

“I tried, but the damn thing won’t stay straight.”

“Want me to fix it?” he asked.

“Can you?”

“Can I fix a bow tie, the ape asks.” Trev *tsked*, leaning over and taking control of the rebellious little thing. “Of

course I can. Do you think I grew up barefoot in the boondocks wearing clip-ons at prom?”

“What do you have against clip-ons? I used those all the time when I was in high school.”

“Oh, yeah?” He undid the crooked tie. “I bet you walked around as if you were prime plus beef back then.”

“More like a hundred percent Wagyu.” I smirked. “The ladies dug me.”

“I believe you.” Trev ironed the wrinkled silk with his fingers. “I’ve been your wingman before. You’re a chick magnet, but your retention rate sucks.”

“Hey!” I glowered. “I like it that way.”

“Do you?” Trev rolled his eyes. “Fine. Whatever.”

“Why are you shitting on my parade today?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” He shrugged as he refitted the tie beneath my collar. “Cause it’s your fucking parade we’re in?”

He wasn’t wrong, but I didn’t like the way this conversation was going. I suddenly realized that, while he knew almost everything about me, I knew very little about Trevor Marks’s life before Elite. Turnabout was fair play.

“Now that you mention it, where and how did you grow up?” I asked.

“Not anywhere near here, that’s for sure.” He finished tying the silk bow and leaned back in his chair to inspect his work. “Much better.”

I rose to my feet and looked at my reflection in the mirror over the fireplace. The bow tie was now properly centered, and he was right. I didn’t look too terribly bad.

“Thanks.” I yanked my fancy jacket in place. “I look hot.”

“Do try *not* to admit your hotness out loud while you mingle tonight,” he advised with a straight face.

“Why not?” I stuck out my chest, pretending to preen. “I make this tux look good.”

“Oh, there it is.” Trev flashed a hint of a smile.

“What is?”

“Your perpetual front. The happy-go-lucky jock. I was wondering where he’d gone, especially when I spotted that other expression on your face.”

“What ‘other’ expression on my face?”

“The one that suggests there could be a brain inside that Neanderthal skull of yours and that it may even provide insights to the rest of you, at least every once in a while. It’s the only somber expression in your repertoire, and you only wear it when you’re pondering heavyweight thoughts.”

“I’m confused.” I scratched my clean-shaven chin. “I can’t tell if you’re trying to insult or praise me.”

“Neither one.” He gave me his Mona Lisa smile. “I’m just making an observation.”

“Which is...?”

“That who we think we are changes with the circumstances, and that the circumstances change who we are.”

Nothing escaped Druid’s attention. Nothing. Trying to fool this ape was useless. A formidable intellect shone in the steely gleam of his brown eyes. He flashed me the sweet, peaceful smile that soothed rabid men and made women swoon. It was proof that the power of his astounding IQ was only exceeded by his amazing EQ.

I threw in some flak to get him off my tail. “You are way too deep for me, man.”

He widened his smile. “And you are only as shallow as you wanna be.”

He wasn't getting off my case.

“Well?” He cocked his eyebrows at me. “Is there something you wanna talk about?”

I shook my head and sighed. “This is exactly why I don't play chess with you anymore. Can't keep up with the speed of your mind, dude. Not sure I wanna get what you mean about changing circumstances and changing people, either.”

“That last part is true.” He inclined his head. “The rest is bullshit. If you ever wanna talk about why you feel inferior to the mother of your daughter, I'm here.”

I opened my mouth and... closed it.

I had to give it to the ape. He'd diagnosed my malady in ten words. Why deny the truth even if it tasted like a pile of shit?

My gaze returned to the Legion Bridge. It was yet another embodiment of the classic beauty that Danika had surrounded herself with in the European cities where she'd chosen to live. A classic beauty I would never be, but Druid

had pushed me to face my fears and, as my mother had often reminded me, I had other gifts to give. *Fuego* and *fuerza*—fire and strength. And *suerte*—the luck of Irish.

I also had a beautiful daughter. Druid had subtly reminded me of that. If Danika and I could get over the hurdles and work things out, Kenzie could reap the benefits of having both of her parents around. Wouldn't it be amazing if Kenzie could have a mother *and* a father who adored her, even if I was flawed and unrefined?

Hell, even if she changed her mind about how she felt about me, even if the heart gesture had been a figment of my imagination, I wasn't gonna let her elbow me out of Kenzie's life. Not again. No other man on earth could love Kenzie as I did.

"I've got something for you." Trev forced me back to the here and now by lifting a pair of modern glasses from the case on his lap. "Put them on, please."

"Surveillance?" I turned to the mirror and settled the sleek glasses on my face.

"I'll see what you see, hear what you hear." He pulled up a small mic connected to the case and lifted it to his mouth. "Do you copy me?"

His voice echoed in my ear crisp and clear, arising from the invisible speaker inserted into the glasses' temple tip.

“Affirmative.” I took off the glasses and examined them with a new appreciation of Trev’s capabilities. “I like your toys. This one’s out of *Mission: Impossible*.”

“Better than a platoon on the ground and a lot less visible,” Trev agreed. “We won’t compromise your identity. If someone tries to record a picture of you, it will superimpose a different set of features and thwart facial recognition programs.”

I whistled aloud. “Even better.”

“I’ve already hacked the theater’s cameras,” he continued. “I’ll be monitoring the compound to make sure no security threats approach you or Danika. The glasses will give me a close-up of what you’re looking at and will keep us in contact.”

“Great, I won’t be alone during my torture.” I made a show slumping my shoulders. “Misery loves company. You, too, get to be tormented by shrieking folks.”

“Have you ever been to the opera?” he asked, a tad too cheerfully for my taste.

“Never. You?”

“A few times.” He lifted his wide shoulders. “It’s not so bad.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to a fucking opera,” I grumbled.

“Maybe you’ll like it.” He rolled his wheelchair to the antique hutch that anchored the dining room.

“Ha.” I let out a bitter cackle. “Like I like root canals and peach schnapps.”

“Personally, I think that Fuzzy Navels are delicious.” Trev uncapped a bottle of brandy and poured a short inch into the pair of snifters that flanked the decanter. “You made it through Delta Force’s culmination exercise. Surely you can handle this?”

“I can handle it, sure. But...”

Holding the snifters between his thighs, he rolled his chair back into the living room. He parked before me and offered me one of the glasses. “But what?”

I took the snifter and, tilting it one way, then the other, contemplated the amber liquid licking the sides of the glass. Trev took a sip of his drink and waited with a saint’s devotion

and a demon's grit. Following his example, I drew from the glass. The brandy traveled down my throat, leaving behind a trail of heat that warmed my stomach.

“Will I make a fool of myself?” There, I'd said it out loud. “What if I'm an embarrassment to Danika?”

“You know what to do,” Trev reminded me. “Most importantly, you know what *not* to do. If you remember that last part, you'll be fine.”

“What if I lose my patience with snooty folks?” I paced up and down the room, holding on to my drink. “I can't stomach proud, arrogant, egotistical snobs who think they're superior to everyone else because they shit in designer toilets.”

“Oh, please.” A flicker of annoyance sparked in his eyes. “You're Delta Force. You are *the* definition of proud, arrogant, and egotistical. Of course you can handle snooty. The only difference here is that your snobs come in soldier form.”

“Hmm.” I considered that. “You might not be wrong about that.”

“Of course I'm not wrong.” It was his turn to scoff. “These snobs are just like you and your Delta friends, except

they're rich on top of smug. You've manhandled rich douches before. Instead of taking them down with fists or guns, you do it with words. You've got this, Blaze."

"If you say so," I muttered.

"Where's the cocky Delta we all know and love?" He pretended to knock on an imaginary door. "Hellooo, Cienfuegos? Are you in there?"

"Shut up."

"She'll help you."

"The thing is..." I hesitated. "*I* wanna help *her*."

"Oh, I see." The smartass's half smile bloomed into a full smirk. "There's your alpha idiot poking out his nose again. Protection's a two-way street. She watches your back, you watch hers. If you do that, you'll both be all right, and most importantly, so will Kenzie."

I tossed the last of my brandy, plunked the empty glass on the mantel, and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. "And here I thought we were talking about the damn opera."

"We are talking about the damn opera, but we're also talking about life in general and *your* life specifically, which is

the very subject that had you so consumed when I rolled in.

No?”

I aimed a sullen glare at him. “You think you know it all.”

“Not all, but a lot. I’ve gotten to know you, and I like your kid. She reminds me of, well, me, when I was her age.” He had the gall to smirk before he settled his glass on the coffee table and rummaged through his sidesaddle. “Back to business. The press has been tipped as to Danika’s appearance at the opera tonight. All you two have to do is see and be seen. Here are your identity papers.”

I took an American passport from him, a driver’s license, and a couple of credit cards. “Who am I today?”

“Professor Jonathan Wilson, a visiting scholar from West Point who specializes in modern military history. You can handle that shit. Can you?”

“Seeing that I’ve been to West Point and know a little about modern military history, I should be okay. You did good, Druid.” I slapped his back. “You did really well. And...”

“And what?”

“Thanks for the pep talk. Yeah, I know that’s what it was. It could be that I needed it. I don’t know what the fuck we’d do at Elite without you.”

“You’d be fine.” He rolled his chair backward and then angled it, aiming for the door. “The world would keep on turning. You’d find someone as good or better than me, and Elite would keep kicking ass day after day.”

Something about the tone of his voice made me frown. “Bullshit. You are irreplaceable to the team. Hell, you’re irreplaceable to me. You’re my friend. What the fuck do you mean when you spit out crap like that?”

“It was just talk, nothing else. Oops. Cell’s ringing” Trev pointed at his Bluetooth earpiece. “Gotta go. No worries. I’ll be on overwatch. Don’t make me watch anything gross.” He accepted the call as he rolled his chair out of the flat and shut the door behind him.

How strange. Why was my hyperactive gut signaling like a pointer dog?

Because it wasn’t just talk. Something was gnawing at Druid. I might have followed him to the apartment next door and demanded to know what the hell he was thinking if Danika hadn’t made her grand entrance just then.

And what a grand entrance it was.

I forced myself to close my mouth and just... enjoy.

Her makeup was an extension of her beauty, highlighting the length of her jet-black lashes, the high angle of her cheeks, and the beauty of her ruby-red lips.

She wore a long dress that draped her delicate figure in cobalt silk, echoing the full gamut of the blues that sparkled in her eyes. She'd parted her dark hair in the middle and put it up in an elegant chignon. A pair of triangular gold earrings dangled from her ears, framing her face.

Long sleeves and a straight cut below the collarbone imbued the dress with demure elegance, but the high slit that exposed her leg up to her thigh made my throat parched, and so did the sight of the shapely calf that arched over her high heel.

I about had a heart attack when she turned around to pick up her sparkly clutch from the chair. My cock went into a painful seizure and wouldn't let go. The dress left the smooth line of her back exposed from her neck all the way down to her lower, lowest back. The silk flowed seamlessly over the lovely curves of her ass, cradling her flesh to perfection.

My voice came out in a hoarse croak. “We ain’t gonna make it to the theater with you wearing that.”

She laughed, a melodious sound that sent a pleasurable tingle to blow over my skin. Her musical giggles reminded me of sunshine, merengue, and sweet rum, making me feel drunk even though I’d only fortified myself with three small sips of brandy.

“We have to go,” she said, and I loved hearing the playfulness in her voice. “Later perhaps, if we do this right?”

“Is that a question or an indecent proposal?” I asked, holding my breath.

She brought her delicate shoulders up and cocked an eyebrow. “Both?”

“Oh, hell.” Was she gonna give me another chance at what I craved?

I slid on my glasses, took her elbow, and led her to the door.

“You don’t make an offer like that to a dude like me and expect me to pass on it,” I warned. “Let’s get this opera appearance done so we can get to the indecent proposal part.”

Chapter Thirteen

Danika

The National Theater of Prague was only a short walk across the bridge from my place, but for security reasons, DS insisted on driving us tonight. Built in the 1880s, the theater was one of the most majestic neo-Renaissance monuments in a city known for its exquisite architecture. From my flat's front windows, I had a lovely view of the theater's famous golden crown and of one of two glorious statues that flanked the building's portico—the winged goddess Nike, raising an arm in victory, riding a chariot pulled by a trio of bridled stallions.

My emotions were all over the map, but right now, sitting next to Mac in the posh car on the way to the theater, I felt like victorious Nike. We'd survived the war, Kozlov, and the exfil. We were on our way to finish the mission. After that, I was going straight to Kenzie, to reunite with my daughter, whom I missed so much.

On top of that, Mac looked like a movie star in his tux. His sexiness titillated my molecules and teased my lust. With him by my side, I felt alive, crackling with desire and perhaps even hope.

The urgency of our mission had given us no time to talk. The biggest lie of my life loomed ahead like a guillotine over my heart, ready to sever the connections I'd reestablished with Mac, but before I did, I had a mini-plan.

I was determined to tell him the truth. The whole truth. I wanted him to have the best possible chance at forging a great relationship with his daughter. He'd protected Kenzie when I couldn't, infiltrated a war zone to get me out, and showed me care and consideration I didn't deserve. He'd earned the full truth.

Once I told Mac about the selfish decision I'd made over seven years ago, he would never trust me again, and rightly so. His wrath and contempt would be the prices I'd have to pay to right my wrong and give Mac and Kenzie a clean start.

I was ready to pay for my mistakes, but still, I needed another intimate moment with the only man who'd ever mattered to me. My heart walked a straight path to its final execution, but my body refused to give up one last time. I glanced at Mac. It sounded crass coming from me, but I was gonna bag me this Cienfuegos tonight.

I pressed my thighs together and willed that certain hyperactive part of me to calm down. Thankfully, the entrance to the National Theater came into view. Throbbing with activity, lit up for tonight's performance, and standing next to the river Vltava, the landmark felt as if it was the beating heart of Prague.

The car pulled up to the front portico. Mac came around, held the door for me, and helped me out. When we touched, a surge of lust bolted through me. It was so potent that it almost knocked me off my feet.

My need sizzled at the top of my skin, electrifying my clit. Too bad that justice for him required misery for me. I took a deep breath and tried cooling my overheated molecules without much success.

I stepped out of the car and focused on doing the job tonight. The press and the paparazzi were out in full. Cameras flashed, but I ignored them as if I was used to this kind of attention.

I wasn't.

Ordinarily, a cultural attaché was not worthy of attention. I avoided the press as much as I could, except when hosting PR events. But this time, it was different. We'd come

to the theater to show the world that I was at my post and not in Ukraine as the Russians insisted. Several reporters had been tipped to my presence and I needed to make the most of it.

Mac offered me his arm. I threaded my hand through his elbow and held on to him as we ascended the stairs, pretending to enjoy the attention and ignoring the questions aimed at me.

“Is it true that you were seen in Ukraine only a few days ago?”

“Are you working for the CIA?”

And my least favorite. “Are you working for the Ukrainians or the Russians?”

The mere question proved the world as we knew it was upside down.

“Grin and bear it,” Mac rumbled through his smile, patting my hand on his forearm. “You’re doing great.”

It helped that he stood by me, lending me his strength, looking formidable and striking by my side. I’d never seen him in formal wear, or in this case, I’d never seen formal wear so amazingly worn. He cut a splendid figure.

Every time I looked at him, he took my breath away. He strutted into the lavish lobby as if he'd been born wearing a black tie, confident, charming, and devastating, especially to me.

His face looked strange without his usual stubble. The absence of his perpetual five o'clock shadow accentuated the wide planes of his cheeks and the defined form of his mouth. His naked smiles tempted me to kiss him with every twitch of his lips.

I missed the stray curls that usually framed his face, but with his hair firmly trapped at the nape of his neck, I could appreciate the noble span of his forehead and the devilish arches of his expressive eyebrows. And then there were the sleek glasses. Kill me now. He looked like the hottest, most jumpable professor ever.

As we made our way up the stairs, he became the target of everyone's admiration. I was the object of envy. Not that I blamed anyone, but inside, I wasn't being generous.

Eat your heart out, people. Mac's mine and don't you forget it.

But was he mine?

I sighed. Only for tonight.

I'd told him that I loved him, but he hadn't returned the sentiment. I'd put my heart on the table and he hadn't.

Considering the truths I had to tell him, I wasn't surprised, but tonight I was going to pretend he was mine, even if it was only for a short time.

The security team quickly cleared us. I walked into the ambassador's box on Mac's arm, then halted at the door and glanced up at him. I had the satisfaction to spot his eyes widening as he took in the magnificent concert hall, the rich crimson-and-golden palette, and the sumptuous details that sprang everywhere, dazzling the eye.

The gilded statues, the fluted columns topped with elaborate corbels, the intricately painted ceilings, and the globed lamps that inundated the space with a magical radiance were a testament to the opulence of a time gone by. The ornate stage, the sweeping balconies, and the orchestra pit below showed off classical architecture at its best.

My chest rose in awe for such beauty, for the craftsmanship, the hard work, the resources, and the attention to detail that had built and maintained this treasure.

"Wow," Mac murmured.

His whisper unleashed a shiver of delight to wreak havoc on my body. My face ignited with heat but also with the pleasure of sharing my love of Prague and history with him.

This place was art, built to contain art, for the sake of art, to make and witness history. It was an example of humanity's capacity to devote itself to peace instead of war, to choose beauty instead of cruelty, to value creation over destruction. This building had survived war, tyranny, and oppression, and it still stood today as a symbol of hope.

The sounds of the lively crowd filled the space. The design of the concert hall transformed the noise into muted, velvety murmurs. Below us, the luxurious seats were already crammed with the crème and the scum of Prague.

Ambassador Curry was seated in her usual chair, next to the roaring golden lion that demarcated the partition between the theater boxes. She and her husband rose to greet us, as did their guest, the Ukrainian ambassador to Prague. Following the script, we didn't take our seats right away. Instead, we chatted and mingled for everyone to see.

This was the statement we'd come to make. I was in Prague, at my post, and the United States stood with the people of Ukraine.

From the corner of my eye, I spotted the Russian ambassador and his party in their box across the theater. Mariska Grigoris sat among his guests. She was my counterpart, one of several Russian cultural attachés who doubled as an agent for the Federal Security Service, the latest transliteration of the KGB. We'd sparred before— diplomatically, of course. Tonight, her green eyes seemed to be particularly interested in me.

“Does the woman in the box across the way have a crush on you?” Mac asked quietly as the lights dimmed and we took our seats.

“It's more like she would like to crush me under her heel if she could,” I whispered.

“Hmm.” He studied the woman and then, keeping his guard up, mumbled, “She had a dog.”

“Huh?”

“Kenzie. In the little painting you have in your living room. She held a white puppy.”

“Ah, yes, that was Lily. Unfortunately, she passed away last year.”

“Have you brought Kenzie to the opera before?” he asked, taking me aback with his random questions.

“I have,” I admitted, concealing my surprise at his curiosity about everything Kenzie.

We hadn’t talked about her yet. We hadn’t had *the* conversation, the one that could net Kenzie a father and lose me a lover. I knew it would not be an easy one, but to hear Kenzie’s name tumble out of his mouth so easily shocked, delighted, and terrified me at the same time.

“Well?” he mumbled. “Did she like it?”

“Kenzie loves opera, theater, Broadway, ballet, museums, you name it.” I took a deep breath and ventured out on a limb. “She’s a little artist herself. Our daughter loves art in all its forms.”

“Like you.” He frowned and blinked several times before he locked eyes with me. “Did you say *our* daughter?”

“*Our* daughter.” I reached out, took his hand, and squeezed it. I had to cement that idea in his brain before he ripped me out of his life for good.

“Dani.” His whisper had a hoarse quality to it, and he gripped my hand tighter, in a way that conveyed the emotions

parading in his eyes. “I like the sound of that.”

I liked it too, even though the reality of it was likely to be different from the ideal.

“What does she wanna be, you know, when she grows up?” he asked.

“A Supreme Court judge.” I smiled when I remembered her fierce determination to become someone of great consequence. “Or the President of the United States.”

“Wowzers.” Mac’s grin was all about pride. “She’s got dreams and the grit to make them real.”

“*Fuego and fuerza,*” I whispered as the lights dimmed, reminding him of what he’d once confided in me. “And *suerte*. She also inherited her father’s luck.”

He drew back and, even though I had no idea what he was thinking, the lingering look he gave me stole my breath.

The first notes of *La Traviata*’s overture silenced us, but my heart beat hard in my chest. If only I didn’t have to tell him the truth. If only I could omit the part that would make me into an unforgivable, unredeemable human being in his eyes.

Later, Kos. I clung to his hand. *Lose him later, enjoy him now.*

Setting aside my anxiety, I put the needs of my country over my own and focused on the opera and the people attending it.

On more than one occasion, Mac had expressed his contempt for everything “snooty,” but much to my surprise, he sat through the whole production and paid attention. Sure, he was hypervigilant even as he took in the happenings on the stage, but he also asked a lot of questions during the two intermissions. When it was all done, I caught him wiping the corner of his eye.

“Are you crying?” I asked in total disbelief before the lights came on, as the audience rose to applaud.

“No,” he snapped, and then, more softly, “Maybe. Hell. I don’t know. That was...”

“Tragic?” I offered.

“Consumption is curable, you know.”

“Not back then,” I reminded him. “Tell me the truth. Did you hate it?”

“I liked the first and second acts. The last one was so...” He rolled a hand in the air as if seeking the right word.

“Tragic?” I offered again.

“Yeah, tragic. Romantic but sad.”

“Romantic but sad.” *Story of my life*. “That’s what Kenzie would’ve said, for sure.”

He drew back. “Yeah?”

“Absolutely.” I grinned, recalling my opinionated kid and missing her terribly. “She fancies herself a critic of, well, everything.”

“I believe that.”

The applause died down. The ambassador, her husband, and their guest turned to say their goodbyes. We stood, shook their hands, and watched them leave, lingering behind, again, to be seen. The DS agent in charge asked us to stay put while they escorted the ambassador and her small party to their car. Leaving one of his agents stationed at the door, the rest of the group vacated the box.

Mac and I sat back down in our seats, observing the crowd streaming out of the theater, the river of humanity spilling out the doors.

“Would you attend another opera if you could?” I asked, knowing that it wouldn’t happen with me and yet unable to contain my curiosity.

Two small lines deepened between his eyes. “Is that a trick question?”

“Not at all,” I assured him. “I’d like to know.”

“I could be persuaded to give it another shot,” he admitted, albeit reluctantly. “Especially if you dress like that.” He winked and I had to laugh, even though I was very self-conscious about the way my nipples winked back at him.

“I would also come back if we brought Kenzie with us.” He hesitated. “I mean, she sits through the entire thing, uh?”

“She does, but I won’t lie. She prefers Broadway and she digs the jollier shows.”

“Yeah, me too.” He flashed a relieved grin. “I’m more of a HEA kind of guy.”

“*HEA?*”

“As in happily ever after?”

“Oh.” I thought about that. I wasn’t going to get one of those, but if I was true to my resolve, my daughter would. And then I thought about something else. Wasn’t the term usually associated with...

“Mackenzie Cienfuegos.” I gasped. “Do you read HEA romance?”

His face was a blank screen. “Of course not.”

I narrowed my eyes at him until he squirmed in his chair. “Tell me the truth.”

He twisted his mouth into a cringe. “You are so damn scary when you do that brain x-raying thing you do. Perhaps you work for the CIA after all.”

“I think you read romance.” I leaned toward him and tapped my fingers on his strong forearm. “Come on. Spill.”

“I don’t know.” He lifted a noncommittal shoulder. “Reading romance is a stretch. Every once in a while, I pick up a romance novel, you know, to pass the time.”

“Really?” I lifted an eyebrow. “I smell a rat in your half-baked confession, Cienfuegos.”

“My mother loves them,” he offered.

“I’m not asking about your mother’s reading habits.”

“Okay. Fine. I’ll tell you.” He lifted a hand in the air and then let it drop to his lap. “I like them. They take me away. What else can I say? Are you happy now?”

“I’m speechless.” My grin hurt my cheeks.

This tough, hardened operator had such a sweet side to him, one that I hadn’t really seen until he learned he had a daughter. The man read romance, for God’s sake. How cute was that?

Cool it, Kos. He’s not for you. You cannot fall in love with him. I mean, you cannot fall in love with Mac more than you already have.

My curiosity struck again. “Do you read the smutty ones?”

“Those are the best,” he said with the certainty of a connoisseur.

“I agree.”

His stare fell on me. “You?”

“Me.” It was nothing short of liberating to admit this to someone, to him. “Intel reports in the morning. Dostoyevsky at lunchtime with my salad. Opera early in the evening. Hot romance right before bed, you know, to promote sweet dreams and all of that.”

The lust gleaming in his eyes flowed through me in a caress that dampened the space between my legs. I prayed the

evidence of my desire had not soaked through my dress.

“We need to get the hell out of here.” Mac stood up in all his majesty, and I caught a glimpse of his equally majestic erection. “Otherwise, we might get arrested for lewd and indecent conduct in a public place.”

“I have diplomatic immunity.” I rose to my feet and teased him, not so accidentally brushing the back of my hand against his hard-on as we looked down on a nearly empty theater now.

It was time to turn the heat on.

“You did that on purpose,” he accused, taking my arm and leading me out of the box.

“Absolutely,” I purred in his ear. “It’s called foreplay. Have you heard about it?”

“I would love to demonstrate my proficiency at it, but I refuse to defile a national monument.”

I laughed. “I admire a man who respects history.” I lowered my chin and stared at him through my lashes. “It makes me all hot and bothered.”

“We’re leaving.” Mac gestured for the agent to follow us. “Is the car ready?”

“Yes, sir.” The agent gestured toward the staircase.

“This way, please.”

We were on the way when Mac took my arm and slowed down.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Druid reports we are about to have an interesting contact.”

No sooner had Mac finished his sentence than the door of the ladies’ lounge swung open and Mariska Grigoris stepped out. The petite, short-haired brunette wore velvet platform shoes and a tightly cinched mini-dress that matched her fiery emerald eyes and left no part of her to the imagination.

“Well, hello, Danika,” she greeted me in her high voice and her softly accented English. “My dear colleague. I was so afraid for your life. How lovely to see you where you belong.”

“Mariska.” I inclined my head and, clinging to Mac’s arm, attempted to move forward. “If you’ll excuse us, we’re in a hurry.”

“A moment of your time, please.” She stepped before us, blocking our path and then directing a flirty smile at Mac.

“And who might this lovely specimen of maleness be?”

“None of your business,” I spat, instantly regretting the hostility that sharpened my tone.

“Oh, dear, you’re a tad... protective, shall I say?”

Mariska seized on my blunder to tilt the balance of power between us and expanded her grin. “Did your time in Ukraine erase your knowledge of diplomatic protocol? No, don’t bother denying it.” She shook her small index finger in the air then dropped her hand to her side. “We both know what we know. How about an introduction to Mr. Eye Candy?”

I started to grind out, “He’s not—”

“Jonathan Wilson, at your service.” Mac gave a small bow and smiled at Mariska. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“The pleasure is all mine, gorgeous.” Mariska’s calculating eyes ate him up as she measured the man before her. “You’re a very pretty hunk, in a big and tall sort of way, but I suppose that if your proportions match, then that’s a plus for a lady.”

“Mariska,” I grumbled, rolling my eyes. “Don’t do this, please.”

“You must also be an intellectual,” she continued, ignoring me and exclusively applying her wiles to Mac. “Danika here always does pretty but never stupid.”

I clenched so hard my teeth hurt. She made it sound like I “did” lots of men. Mariska was on a war path. I took a calming breath. My job was not to give her the pleasure of an engagement, and yet I had to get us out of the situation without creating a diplomatic row.

“Let me guess.” The shameless flirt tapped her temple with her green-painted nail. “I’m gonna say you’re a writer with an excellent gym membership or a professor perhaps?”

“Guilty as charged.” Mac winked at the woman.

He winked at her!

Was I not standing right there between the two of them?

He knows what he’s doing, Kos. Cool your heels. I counted from ten in reverse.

“I’m a great admirer of your country’s beauty.” Mac sounded so sincere that even I believed him. “You are a lovely representation of it.”

“Why, thank you.” The minx tittered and toyed with the emerald laying between her breasts, playing her game to perfection. “Have you been to Russia, Mr. Wilson?”

“Once or twice.” The private smile he produced especially for her pushed me out of their bubble and made me want to rip it off his face and stomp all over it.

“That’s lovely to hear.” Mariska squared her shoulders and stuck out her chest in an overt display of her spectacularly hard nipples. “Americans have such a warped view of Russia. It’s refreshing to find a mind open to all we have to offer.”

Oh, brother. It took all I had not to snarl at her. Was she so bold as to try to seduce and recruit Mac right under my nose?

“I’m open-minded,” Mac assured her, and I repressed an urge to kick his ass all the way to the limo.

“What’s your area of expertise, Mr. Wilson?” Mariska asked, tilting her head slightly.

“Modern military history,” he rumbled, making his expertise sound like the sexiest occupation in the world.

“I do enjoy an occasional history lesson.” She batted her lashes, then drew her card from her purse and slid it into

his front pocket, the brazen ho. “Call me if you wish to have a personal tour of Prague. I’ve been stationed here much longer than Danika, most of my career. I know everything that goes on in this city. *Everything.*”

Her eyes shifted to me and hardened. She flashed me a condescending smile that managed to chill me to the bone. For the first time in my life, I wanted to throw diplomacy out the window and slap the bitch up and down the stairs.

“That’s a very kind offer,” Mac said, too enthusiastically for my taste. “I might take you up on it sometime.”

“Please do.” She shifted on her feet and smoothed her dress over her thighs, a provocative gesture. “And now, I must go. The ambassador requires my presence at a small event to celebrate our latest victory over Ukraine.”

The blood boiled in my veins. I wanted to confront her about the innocent people dying in Ukraine, but Mac warned me with a look and I forced myself to paste a stiff smile on my face.

“Danika, Mr. Wilson.” She gave us crisp nods, turned, and swinging her hips, took a few steps toward the staircase, balancing her perky ass on four inches of platform heels.

“She’s skilled,” Mac muttered through his smile.

“Shut up.” I hated that he was right.

“You jealous, Kos?”

“No.” My voice was pure defensiveness.

He widened his smile. “Liar, liar, pants on fire.”

“Oh, I forgot to ask.” Mariska paused at the top of the stairs and turned to us. “Danika, how is your sweet daughter doing? We haven’t seen her in Prague for a while.”

My fingers curled into my fists and I took a step forward, but Mac landed his hand casually on my shoulder and kept me by his side, reminding me with an invisible squeeze that getting her opponents off balance was what Mariska did best and that this was just more provocation on her part.

“My daughter is fine, thanks for asking,” I managed to say, even though my spine had gone rod stiff. Why was she bringing Kenzie into this?

“Such a bright kid.” Mariska’s tone was all glee, but hidden in there was a threat, one that raised the hairs on the back of my neck.

Another squeeze from Mac’s hand confirmed that he, too, perceived it as such.

“Oh, and one more thing.” Mariska shifted in her shoes. “I was tasked with delivering a message to you. It’s inside. In the ladies’ room.”

In the ladies’ room?

I’d exchanged secret communications with diplomats and agents from other countries in original ways many times, but this was ridiculous.

“Enjoy your evening.” Mariska pursed her neon pink lips, brushed them against the tip of her fingers, and blew Mac a kiss. “See *you* soon.”

Mac’s lips never moved. “This doesn’t sound good.”

It didn’t sound good at all.

We waited until she descended the stairs and disappeared out of our sight. Then we turned as one and, leaving the DS agent at the door to watch our backs, went into the bathroom. There, inscribed on the large, gilded mirror, was my message, written in neon pink lipstick.

I will find you.

K.

Chapter Fourteen

Mac

I paced the length of Danika's living room, barking instructions into my cell. Mariska's casual mention of my daughter at the theater felt like a warning or worse—a threat.

I was damn determined that Kenzie was not gonna be exposed to danger. This explained why I was rattling out orders like a six-barrel Gatling gun. Given that my team knew exactly what to do, this was completely unnecessary, and still, I had to make sure that every step was taken to ensure Kenzie's safety.

After I went over the plan for the fifth time, it was Kane who put an end to my rantings. “We've got this, Blaze. No one will hurt Kenzie. I guarantee it. She's now Elite's most secured asset.”

“As soon as we hit the ground, Miranda and I are sticking with Kenzie,” Karma pledged. “Your kid is as much ours as she's yours. She's gonna be safe.”

The team was flying in one of BB's transatlantic jets, still en route to Elite's headquarters, where they would be

arriving in a few short hours. My orders had already been forwarded to Crescent Beach and additional security measures were in place. The full strength of Elite had been called upon and concentrated around Kenzie. I knew she was safe, and yet I couldn't help but worry.

“We'll take care of business on this side of the world,” Knox said. “You need to concentrate on keeping Danika safe. And yourself, too. You got a plan for that?”

“Druid and I are working on it as we speak,” I reported. “We're looking for a covert route back to the States, but if Mariska wasn't yanking our chain and Kozlov is truly alive, there's no way in hell we're gonna let him trace us back to Crescent Beach and Kenzie.”

“Gotta agree with that decision,” Sebastian interjected in his deep tone. “Let us know what you need and you'll have it.”

I ended the call and met Trev's gaze. Sitting on his chair by the couch, he clicked off his earpiece. He'd been in on the call as well, but his fingers had never stopped working the laptop he balanced on his lap.

“Anything yet?” I walked up to him and looked over his shoulder. “Did you get confirmation that Kozlov is alive

and kicking?”

“Working on it,” he reported.

“Cyborg may know,” I suggested, taking off the glasses, stripping off my tux jacket, and draping it over a chair.

“I’ve been trying to contact him,” Trev mumbled, his eyes fast on his screen where streams of information popped up at dizzying speeds. “He hasn’t returned my pings yet.”

“Keep at it.” I patted Druid on the shoulder. “He’s probably on the battlefield with his men. The Russian attacks have only gotten bloodier and more violent since we left.”

“It’s carnage over there.” Trev closed the lid on his laptop. “Gotta talk to my cyber team. I’m going back to my setup next door.”

“Continue looking for Kozlov and Cy, and sitrep me as soon as you know anything.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He backed up his wheelchair then rolled it to the front door. “Keep telling me to do things I’m already doing and I’m gonna hack into your files and give you a permanent demotion.”

“Ha!” I laughed. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.” He challenged me with a smirk. “I’m gonna shrink your pension to the size of your mini dick. Good night, Mac. Sweet dreams.” He closed the door as he left.

I stalked to the dining room, where Danika sat in front of her laptop, talking to Kenzie. Danika was still wearing her long cobalt dress, but she’d kicked off her heels and taken off her earrings, and she was doing her best trying not to look worried.

“So, wait,” Kenzie was saying, her voice squeaky high. “You’re not coming over tomorrow as you promised?”

“Soon,” Danika said, “but not yet, sweetheart.”

“But Mama!” Kenzie protested. “You said—”

“It’s only a small delay.” Danika stole a glance at me, pleading for help.

“Is the Big Guy there?” Kenzie demanded in her quick staccato, and I stopped short of leaning into the screen in a momentary bid to avoid my spitfire’s ire. “Put him on. I know you’re there, Cienfuegos,” she called out. “I wanna talk to you.”

Danika leaned back on her chair and gave me a look that said, “I don’t know what else to tell her.” I cocked my

eyebrows. She nudged her head toward the screen.

Oh, well. My favorite little flame was burning high, and she would continue to scorch her wick until she got the explanation she needed.

I dragged over a chair, sat down next to Danika, and faced the screen.

“Hola, *mi vida*.” I waved a hand. “How are you, *mi reina*?”

“Poo on a stick,” Cienfuegos junior spat, her blue eyes sparkling. “I’m so super mad at you right now.”

“Watch your temper, my love,” Danika admonished gently.

“Sorry, kiddo.” I squirmed in my chair. “The bubble bounced a different way. Can you please cut me some slack?”

Kenzie stuck out her lower lip and pouted, giving me a taste of her temper. She sat in front of her laptop at Gracie’s dining room table, surrounded by a small stack of books, crayons, pencils, and a notebook. Holding my breath, I watched as she rubbed the red crayon onto the paper as if she were scrubbing dirt from the floor.

The girl was Cienfuegos-level furious.

“Come on, *mi niña linda*,” I prodded her softly. When her pout didn’t budge, I put my fist to my mouth and, blowing into it, imitated a radio’s white noise. “Big Taco to Little Taco. Do you copy, Little Taco?”

My stubborn little flame held on to her fearsome pout, but when I called out again, her lips twitched.

“This is Little Taco,” she finally said, using the radio lingo I’d taught her. “Go ahead, Big Taco.”

“Little Taco, I’m sorry for pooping on your parade,” I offered between crackles and hisses and was grateful when a giggle escaped the custody of her set mouth. “My bad. But it’s better to make it a little later than to arrive ugly. Don’t you agree? Over.”

“Okayyy,” Kenzie huffed and flashed me the tiniest grin. “Mama says everyone deserves a second chance.”

I let out a relieved breath, shocked at how a little girl’s mood had become the most important thing in my world.

Still pouting a little, Kenzie picked up a purple crayon and glanced at me before she applied it to the page. “What happened to your face grass?”

“My what?”

“You know.” She fingered her chin. “The scratchy stuff on your face.”

I knuckled my jaw. “You mean my stubble?”

“Yeah, that.”

“I shaved it when I escorted your mom to the opera.”

“Cheese and crackers.” Her startled gaze bounced from her mother to me. “You two are doing opera now?”

“Just the one,” I rushed to explain.

“Well, don’t you look *Gucci*?”

“*Gucci*?”

“Yeah, cool, you know?” She waved her little hand in the air.

“Gucci.” Straightening my lips, I smothered a laugh.

“Got it.”

She exchanged the purple crayon with a blue one and, trapping her tongue between her teeth, began to draw again.

“What are you doing?” I ventured, figuring it was a safe topic.

“Homework.” She pointed an accusatory crayon at me.

“It’s your fault. *You* told Gracie and Alix that I had to keep

going to school, so they enrolled me in this online academy for smart kids.”

“Sorry again, kiddo.” It didn’t look like I was gonna get a break today. “I hope it’s not too terribly bad.”

“Don’t apologize for doing the right thing,” Danika muttered under her breath, then smiled at our daughter.

“Kenzie, sweetheart, you love school. You love learning new things.”

“I know, Mama,” she admitted reluctantly. “It’s not so bad. The kids are cool, but the teachers are bo-oh-ring. I learn more from Gracie and Alix. They’re my new BFFs. Gracie is crazy good at math and Alix is all about science and languages.”

“*Languages?*” I noted the plural. “How many are you learning at the moment?”

“Let’s see.” She looked up at the ceiling, scrunching her perky nose into a wrinkled little knob. “Spanish doesn’t count. I’ve spoken it since I was a baby. Mama made sure of that.”

I glanced at Danika. “Spanish, huh?”

She shrugged. “It was part of her heritage.”

I don't know why my chest expanded at that. It was a small thing that was also very big. Danika hadn't told our daughter about me, and yet she'd made sure Kenzie had learned Spanish. That meant something. Right?

Meanwhile, Kenzie counted with her fingers. "Right now, I'm studying five, no, six, if you include Mandarin."

"So, seven languages if we include teen slang like 'face grass' and 'Gucci'?"

"Yeah." She giggled. "I speak slang, too. I looked it up on cosmoteen.com."

Danika cocked her eyebrows. "What did I say about going to websites that are not appropriate for your age?"

"But Mama—"

"Listen to your mama," I put in. "You're a kid, kiddo. You're not even a tweenie yet."

"I know that," my little spitfire said, her voice all attitude. "But I wouldn't want to be uncool, you know?"

"Of course not," I agreed wholeheartedly. "You are in no danger of that. There hasn't been an uncool Cienfuegos on the planet for the last one hundred generations."

Her face-splitting smile was the breakthrough I needed.

“I’m so happy you are working on all your languages.”

Danika flashed her warmest smile and Kenzie returned it in kind. “I’m so proud of you.”

“I’m proud of you, too,” I jumped in, imitating Danika, but feeling like a damn parrot, trying to sound like some sort of a father and not the ignorant grunt I was.

“I’m also glad you like Crescent Beach.” Danika’s relief and gratitude toward my friends rolled off her in waves. “The people over there sound very nice. The beach sounds amazing.”

“It’s super-duper stupendous, Mama. You’d love it here.” Kenzie set the crayon down, and choosing yellow, continued drawing, chatting at warp speed. “It’s never cold. The ocean is divine and I lo-oh-ve the humans here. Before they left, Kane and Knox promised to take me swimming every day. Soon enough, I’ll be shredding the water like a SEAL. Seb’s gonna teach me jiu-jitsu, and Karma said she would show me how to shoot a 9mm.”

“Oh, God.” Danika gulped as if she’d swallowed an avocado pit whole. She shot me a panicked look. “Mac?”

“Yeah, sure, perhaps when you’re a little older.” When Danika’s face registered no relief, I added, “Maybe when

you're thirty-one?"

"I'll be an old lady by then, silly," she said, giggling.

I made a mental note to talk to Karma about not arming the kid just yet.

"But enough about me." Kenzie glanced up from her notebook. "We digress."

I looked at Danika. "Did she just use the word *digress*?"

Danika lifted a helpless shoulder. "She reads the dictionary every night."

I gaped. "You make her read *the dictionary* every night?"

"No!" Danika hurled me an offended glower. "I don't *make* her do anything."

"I like reading the dictionary," Kenzie chimed in, setting her crayons aside. "It's fun."

Fun? Okay.

"What edition?" I asked.

"Merriam-Webster annotated," Kenzie informed me promptly.

Danika aimed a curious glance at me. “Why do you want to know?”

“So I can read it, too.”

“Oh.” She drew back, looking at me as if she’d never seen me before.

“Big Guy, we gotta talk.” Kenzie began to drop her crayons into the box, one by one. “You told me you were gonna get Mama. On the plane, you said she would be here tomorrow, but now she tells me that it won’t happen.”

“I’m sorry, *mi vida*,” I offered evenly. “It’s just gonna take us a little while longer.”

“Duh.” She organized her crayons by hue into a perfect rainbow. “I get that part loud and clear, but I don’t like it when you don’t tell me stuff and treat me as if I were a baby. You promised to always tell me the truth when we first met.

Remember that?”

“I remember.” She was right. I had promised her the truth between us.

I swallowed a dry gulp, feeling properly chastised by a seven-year-old. Okay, so she was precocious, but man, this parenting thing? It promised to be quite complicated.

“Here’s the scoop.” Kenzie clasped her hands on the table as if she was the president about to address the nation. “Mama won’t tell me why she’s worried, but when she gets those wiggly lines across her forehead? Not good. There are like twelve muscly guys with hulky guns outside the house. Do you wanna tell me what’s going on? Or should I do a Carmen Sandiego and find out on my own?”

Danika and I cringed as one. She was as worried as I was that Kenzie would take matters into her own hands. It was the downside of having a precocious kid. My daughter was young, but it would be a strategic error to underestimate her resolve.

“All right, my spicy taquito,” I finally said. “I’m gonna be straight with you.”

“Go for it, you supersized burrito.”

I had to laugh at her clever comeback. Her sense of humor was just like mine. When Danika elbowed me, I sobered up. “Do you remember what I told you I did for work?”

“Secret stuff.” She nodded, setting her curls aflutter. “I’m not supposed to tell anyone.”

“Exactly, and secret work means I have to do secret things, right?”

She lifted her pointy chin in the air. “So?”

“Right now, I have to keep my secrets. This is why I can’t explain everything to you at this moment.” I waved my hand over the screen. “Do you get what I mean?”

“Ooooh.” She drew back, her eyes wide. “You mean to say that we do not have a secure communication channel?”

“Sheesh,” Danika murmured, massaging her temples.

This kid? She was way too smart for me.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s what I mean.”

Our communications were encrypted and highly secure, and Druid had deployed a signal-blocking device in Danika’s apartment to keep spies at bay, but I reasoned that there was always a theoretical chance that our comms could be compromised. So, I wasn’t lying when I admitted to her concerns. Right?

Crap. I’d smoked half my gray cells to honestly answer one little girl’s question. My brain was about to self-combust.

“Okay, Big Guy, don’t give me the scoop, but answer this.” She tilted her head sideways, a very Kenzie gesture that reminded me of, well, me. “Is Mama safe? Is she gonna make it here soon? And are the bad guys coming to where I am?”

“You can bet your little rear end that you are completely safe at the beach,” I stated with full conviction. “I guarantee it. If you do as Gracie, Alix, and the others tell you to do, you have nothing to worry about. Nothing. Copy that?”

“Copy that, Blaze.”

“Your mother is also gonna be fine. I promised I would bring her back, and I will. Whatever it takes.”

“Okayyy.” She let out another cute little huff. “But tell your muscly guys they don’t gotta worry so much about me. I’m old enough to take care of myself.”

“Sure.” I smiled at that. “What are you, seven?”

“Duh, no, un-uh.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m almost eight. My birthday is coming up.”

“You’re right.” It struck me that I had no idea when my daughter had been born. It also irritated me. I tried improvising. “Your birthday is coming up in only...”

“A couple of weeks,” Danika rushed to my assistance.

“Well then, that’s what we’ll shoot for.” I decided on the spot. “Your *mami* will be there to celebrate your birthday with you. There will be a cake and lots of presents, I promise.”

Kenzie narrowed her gaze, eyeing me closely. “You go around giving out promises like the Easter bunny poops jelly beans, don’t you?”

“I’m also very good about keeping my promises,” I shot back.

“We’ll see about that.” She leaned back on her chair and crossed her arms, openly broadcasting her skepticism.

“What about you, Big Taco?”

“What about me?”

“Will you be coming to my birthday party?”

“Am I invited?” I held my breath and found myself hoping with all I had.

“Hmm.” She pressed her lips together and looked up, leaving me hanging like a fish from her hook. “I think I’d like that,” she finally said.

My daughter had invited me to her birthday party. *Hooah*. I felt as if I’d scored a ticket to the Super Bowl. But also, talk about pressure. She had given me a clear directive

and now I had to deliver. My mission had just acquired a firm, tight timetable.

“Kenzie, we’re ready,” Gracie’s voice announced from somewhere beyond the screen.

“I’m coming,” she yelled back. “Sorry, guys. Gotta go. We’re watching the *Young Sheldon* marathon. He is sooo cute.”

It struck me that she and Young Sheldon did have a lot in common.

“Hey now.” I narrowed my eyes at her and wagged my finger. “You’re not allowed to call a boy cute until you’re forty. Got it?”

“You’re funny.” Her giggles rang like a bell. “It’s not like I wanna kiss Sheldon or anything like that. That’s gross *and* germly. Not on my calendar. Uh-uh, no way. What I mean is that he’s smart. A prodigy. Like me.”

“No way, uh-uh.” I imitated her tone. “No one’s as cute and smart as you are.”

She flashed her gap-toothed smile. “True.”

“Kenzie, honey, remember we talked about modesty?” Danika reminded her.

“But we also talked about honesty, Mama,” she pointed out in her nasally pitch. “I’m cute and clever, am I not?”

“No question about that,” I spoke over Danika. “You, my little sweet mango slice, you are Da Bomb with hot sauce.”

“Da Bomb with hot sauce.” Kenzie bent over her belly and cackled. “I like it. You’re so funny, Blaze. If you keep me laughing this hard, you’re gonna make me fart.”

“Oh, God.” Danika slapped her forehead. “She really does take after you.”

“Yeah.” I wiggled my eyebrows at Kenzie. “I’m good at farting, too.”

“Ha, ha, ha.” She pointed at herself and then at me. “Little Farting Mango and Big Farting Mango.”

“I meant in the lack of modesty department,” Danika deadpanned.

“Modesty is for fools who don’t got the goods. We?” I winked at Kenzie. “We’re loaded.”

“Score!” Kenzie pumped her tiny fist. “I’ve been trying to tell you that, Mama.”

Danika pretended to wince. “You two are a dangerous combination.”

“Kenzieeee,” Gracie’s voice came again. “The show is starting.”

“Gotta go.” She waved. “Go kick butt, Big Farting Mango. And remember *Babylon Five*, episode five: *no surrender, no retreat.*”

“Got it.” I offered her a crisp salute. “*No surrender, no retreat.*”

“Love you, Mama.” She leaned into the laptop, puckered her lips, and kissed the screen, right before her image vanished, leaving me both full and hollow.

I craved that kiss on my cheek.

“That kid blows my mind every time.” I puffed a long breath.

“She’s too smart for her own good.” Danika fingered her earrings on the table.

“True,” I agreed. “Wise as a miniature sage and fast as a supersonic missile.”

“I feel bad.” Danika looked away from me. “I should’ve told her about Baba.”

“Surely the sad news can wait until we’re back stateside?”

“Not really,” she said. “I was a coward. She needs to know. The sooner the better. The next time I talk to her, I’ll have to tell her.”

“Why is that?”

“Kenzie’s intelligence comes at a price,” Danika ventured, setting the earrings aside and fixing a tentative gaze on me. “She’s an extremely sensitive child.”

She left it at that, and I realized she was giving me room to learn about my daughter if I chose to. I hated that she had to explain my kid to me, but I intended to come up to speed and fast. “What do you mean?”

“She told you. She’s a child prodigy. Like Young Sheldon.”

“Explain, please?”

“When I talk about Kenzie being smart, I don’t just mean that she’s a gifted child and that her IQ is off the charts.” She paused for a moment before her chest rose with a big inhale. “I mean that she’s been *diagnosed* as a prodigy.”

“*Diagnosed*?” I eyed her closely. “By whom?”

“A group of world-renowned specialists who are experts at identifying the special needs of kids like Kenzie,”

she explained. “They help parents like me to understand their kids and ensure they have the means to find happiness. I consult with them regularly to make sure I’m doing right by Kenzie.”

I considered Danika with new eyes. Kenzie was right. Danika was a great mom. She’d gone all out to make sure our daughter had the best life possible, consulting with experts and all that stuff. I was running way behind the curve.

“I need to talk to these experts,” I mumbled.

“If you want their info, I’ll give it to you.”

“Of course I want it.” I got a hold of my frustrations and tempered my voice. “Meanwhile, what’s the definition of a child prodigy?”

“Good question.” She rewarded my curiosity with a small smile. “Each child prodigy is unique, but on the whole, prodigies demonstrate insatiable curiosity, incredibly long concentration spans, and a superior ability to rapidly learn, understand, and process new and complex information.”

“Kenzie in a nutshell.”

“Exactly.” She inclined her head. “Child prodigies also show exceptional levels of working memory, attention to

detail, and domain-specific talents. For example, Kenzie excels at logic, math, spatial integration, and languages. She's quite the little artist and outperforms the average adult at verbal communication by... a lot."

"That's why she reads the dictionary and sometimes talks like she's one."

"Yes," Danika said. "This also means that she exists at a much higher level of awareness than the rest of us. She has an enhanced emotional radar, emotional depth, and sensitivity that is way beyond her years."

"I can see that." I considered everything that Danika said. "She can be very adult-like at times, and yet she's still a kid."

"That's where it gets tricky." Danika's gaze darkened with concern. "She's able to learn and understand concepts that adults would struggle with, and yet, she's only seven years old."

"Almost eight," I reminded her.

"Almost eight." Danika's lips curved up before she continued. "Her intellect is way ahead of her age. This can cause her difficulty balancing her life. Child prodigies often

experience adaptation challenges and grow up to be miserable adults. I won't let that happen to Kenzie."

"Me neither," I pledged. "I wish she could be a kid forever."

"Me too." Danika let out a long exhale. "I can't tell you how hard I've worked to make sure she has a long and happy childhood."

"I bet." The work would've been constant. "How is Kenzie different from other kids?"

"She's built differently. Scientists think the brains of kids like Kenzie are wired in ways that we don't fully understand. Her cognitive processes work in unique patterns. For this reason, her needs are also unique."

"What does that mean?"

"When I deal with Kenzie, I have to be very careful. If she thinks that I'm not telling her the hard things up front, or that I'm keeping secrets, she gets super worried, her anxiety levels spike, and she begins to doubt her entire world. She can process grief and other emotions on her own terms, but she needs truth and trust to thrive."

“I get that.” Honesty had been the only demand Kenzie had ever made of me. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

“Because you asked.” She stated the obvious.

“But also because you want me to know what I’m getting into,” I checkmated her. “Am I right?”

She nodded. “She’s a special child, Mac.”

“I know.” *You don’t want me to screw her up*, I didn’t say. “You did well by her.”

“Thanks for saying that.” The look in her eyes softened. “But I can’t take the credit. She is an extraordinary kid.”

“She takes after you,” I said. “I can’t keep up with her.”

“Right.” Danika scoffed. “Because you’re so dumb?”

No, I wasn’t dumb, but could I really be the father that my little prodigy needed?

Learning all of this, my throat felt parched. Questioning my fitness to be an asset to my daughter, I rose from the table and came around the long peninsula that separated the kitchen from the posh dining room. A couple of soft spotlights discreetly mounted under the cabinets provided

the only illumination in the room and imbued the marble counters with a silver radiance.

“You got anything good to drink?” I asked.

Danika followed me to the kitchen, grabbed a couple of longnecks from the fridge, handed me one, and pulled open a drawer.

I twisted off the longneck’s cap.

“What?” I asked, confronting her raised eyebrows.

She held up a bottle opener. “That was not a twist cap.”

“I didn’t notice.” I reached for her bottle, uncapped it in the same way, and returned it to her hands. “I always thought you were a champagne and wine kind of girl. You’re drinking beer these days?”

“Only good ones.” She dropped the bottle opener back into the drawer, then paused and softened her voice. “I started after you left.”

The admission took me by surprise. I had no clue what it meant. It also brought my pent-up anger to the surface.

“I didn’t leave,” I growled. “*You ghosted me.*”

“I did and I’m sorry for that.” She took a long sip of her beer.

“As long as we’re clear on that.” I braced my arms on the glossy marble, pushed up, and, perched atop the marble counter, locked eyes with Danika.

She looked away and drew another long draft from her pilsner, one that lasted a while and could easily be mistaken for an attempt at guzzling some liquid courage.

Nah. She was fierce. Her bravery could not be doubted.

I, on the other hand, could use a little extra oomph to untie my clumsy tongue and have a civilized conversation with my daughter’s mother. Sitting atop the counter, I tipped my head back and swigged some of the lager. Danika stunned me by downing the rest of her brew.

It appeared that today she needed reinforcements.

My gut squeezed a warning. As brave as she was, why was she so afraid of talking?

She set her empty bottle on the marble surface, and, leaning against the counter, crossed her arms. Tension stiffened her shoulders, and half her face was concealed in the shadows. The under-mounted lights reflected off the other side

of her face, softening her features and infusing her skin with a soft glow.

Over seven years of absence and lies became a solid presence standing between us in the form of silence. At the same time, the powerful attraction that had once brought us together flared, the same connection we'd rediscovered in the middle of a war in an abandoned motel on the shores of the Black Sea.

The magnetism between us offered the foundations of a new bridge. I had so many questions that demanded answers. At the same time, my need for her was so strong that when I sucked in the air and caught a whiff of her natural scent, I felt dizzy with want.

Hell, I didn't even know how to start this conversation.

"Mac." She hesitated, and a ripple ran the length of her throat. "I know that I have no right to ask you to believe anything I say, but I want you to know. I'll tell you everything. From now on, I'll tell you the truth, no matter how harsh or damning it is."

My head told me not to believe her. My heart embraced every word she said. Whatever came of it, she'd opened the door and it was time to grab this bull by the horns.

“We’re secured for the night, and we can’t move until we know more,” I pointed out in my curt mission-briefing tone. “Do you wanna talk now or what?”

The blues in her eyes deepened to match the cobalt hues of her gown. Her voice was but a fleeting whisper and yet her murmur drifted crisp and clear to my ears. “Or what.”

Chapter Fifteen

Mac

Keeping her eyes downcast, she slid off her sleeves from one shoulder, then the other. She held the dress to her chest for a moment of hesitation and, keeping her chin low, looked up at me through her lashes. A pretty pink blush crept over her cheeks. My heart revved up, understanding the question in her eyes. I pressed my lips together, moistened them, and dipped my head ever so slightly.

She let go of the dress.

With a muted rustle, a river of cobalt rushed down the subtle curves of her body, deserting her form. My blood hastened south. The dizzying rush filled my ears as my dick went into command mode. My stare followed the fall of the dress, but at a slower pace.

The silk's retreat revealed a landscape of porcelain skin—the hills of her breasts, the peaks of her nipples, and the span of her torso as it narrowed at the waist, only to widen slightly at the hips. Interrupted by the lone dip of her belly button, the flat surface of her stomach led my gaze to the

shaved rectangle of bristled hair that sprouted over her mons, a dark thicket rising above her skin, which looked pristine as new snow.

She hadn't been wearing anything beneath the dress. She was so stunning that I wanted to cry at the sight of her beauty.

Lifting her long legs, she stepped over the dress pooling at her feet and slowly ambled toward me. In the distance, the wail of an ambulance broke the night's silence before the sound faded away, leaving us in the thickness of a pregnant silence that reminded me of the calm before the storm.

As she approached, I could've sworn that lightning sparked from our bodies. Her desire struck at me, feeding my need, provoking it, augmenting it. In reply, my lust lashed out, frantic electrical charges desperately seeking to equalize the imbalances between billowing storms en route to colliding with each other.

She came to stand between my legs. Entwining her arms around my neck, she pressed her naked form to my chest. Her body radiated erotic heat, burning through my clothes and setting me ablaze. Her nipples poked through my shirt and I

swear, I sniffed the air looking for proof that my shirt had been scorched and her nipples had branded my chest.

The heat of her belly unleashed a firestorm in my groin. An orgasm gathered at the base of my spine and shot through my lower body.

Not yet.

I hugged the woman and dipped my nose in her hair, inhaling her shampoo's floral scent. I'd craved her for a long time. Yeah. Talking could wait.

Cradling the back of her head in my hand, I lowered my mouth to hers and sucked her lips, a slow, smoldering kiss that brought home more of the crisp flavors of the fine beer we'd shared, down to the lager's delicate bitterness. Then her taste broke through and I forgot about everything. Binging on her, I claimed her mouth for myself.

She slid her hand up my neck and slipped off the ponytail holder, releasing my hair. She drew back for a brief moment to comb out the curls until they fell free over my shoulders. With a satisfied nod, she drew up on the tip of her toes and pressed her lips to mine.

Lost in her kisses, astounded by her primal response, I barely noticed when she undid my shirt's buttons. She slid the shirt off my shoulders and protested with a sexy groan when she had to stop to undo the cufflinks. As soon as she was done, she set them aside on the counter and did away with the shirt.

Attacking my mouth with her lips again, she ran her fingers over my chest. It was as if she'd taken off my shirt so she could claim and kiss every inch of skin now available to her. Such a refined, elegant woman. Such determination to get what she wanted.

I adored her in her wildest form.

Her hands seemed small and pale as she caressed the tanned expanse of my pecs. Her busy fingers were everywhere, tiny flames stroking one nipple, pinching the other, tracing the grid of my stomach, and sliding down the long muscles of my back.

“More,” she mewled as she broke the seal between our mouths. “I want more.”

The passion that dimmed her irises shot through me, stoking my desire to new levels. She lowered my zipper and dug into my pants. Looking down, I spotted my package

cupped between her hands, and my cock, rising from her hold as if it, too, wanted to kiss her lips.

“Dani,” I whispered, trailing my fingers over the sides of her face.

“Don’t speak. Don’t say anything yet.” She bent down and planted her lips briefly on the tip of my dick. “I just want to eat you, fuck you, love you.”

It was a statement, but it was also a question.

“Okay,” I heaved, tensing against the onslaught. “Eat me, fuck me, love me.”

She slid her hot, wet mouth over my stiff cock. I hissed like a snake about to strike. There was no greater pleasure in the world than being the object of her hunger. She pursed her lips around me, creating a ring of pleasure that glided up and down my erected flesh, testing me, growing my pleasure.

Fighting hard not to come, I clamped down and sucked in the air through my teeth. As she bent over me, I caressed her hair and entwined my fingers through her elegant chignon, an attempt to pace her mouth’s demanding attention.

My attempt failed. She consumed my cock without the slightest sense of restraint, fiercely, devotedly. There was no

hesitation, no attempt at modesty.

This was Danika unleashed.

Her tongue slithered over and around my cockhead, plunging down my sides as she enveloped me in the moist luxury of her mouth. She traced my beam with the tip of her tongue, up and down, up and down, and then flicked it as it trailed the engorged veins that thickened over my dick. She swooped down on me, head swirling, mouth gaping to fit all of me in her throat.

Don't swallow. I can't bear it. Don't swallow.

She swallowed.

I groaned and somehow managed to stem the tide flooding my dick.

I threw my head back and resolved to endure the torture for as long as I could. It was divine agony. How could such severe torment feel so good?

The heat of her lips coated me with her mouth's wetness, silkier and more slippery than any lube money could buy. My resistance eroded inside her mouth and my control buckled.

“Dani.” I held on to her chignon and pulled, albeit gently. The bun came undone in my hand and her dark hair unraveled between my fingers, but she refused to let go of me. “Dani, wait,” I repeated, this time sternly. “I need you to stop.”

A muffled protest drifted from her throat. I gathered a handful of her long tresses and pulled, this time more firmly. The sucking sound of a seal breaking announced the moment when she released her grip on me.

My dick felt suddenly abandoned. My body felt deserted. When my wet flesh met the air, a shiver ran the length of my spine. One would think that a burst of fresh air would cool my ardor, but nothing of the sort happened. The damn traitor refused to lose an inch in girth or length. I was stuck with a fifth limb.

Well, Mac Fucker, what do you expect when you pull back from the woman who can blow you to heaven and back?

Dani straightened on her feet and raised her eyebrows, an annoyed question. Her hair, now loose, cascaded down her back and over her shoulder, giving her a tousled look that I found irresistible. She stood before me, her lips glossy and her chin moist. Desire slit her eyes and blushed her cheeks into a rosy tone that echoed the color of her nipples.

I reached out for the tip of her breasts and pulled her to me until she stood even closer between my legs. Lowering my face to hers, I claimed her mouth with another deep, grateful kiss. At the same time, I explored her naked body, teasing her nipples with one hand and filling my palm with the soft flesh of her breast.

I slid my other hand down her back, over her ass, and around her hips. Turning my wrist, I ran my fingers over the taut skin of her lower belly, and following a southerly course, reached down and dipped my fingers between her legs.

I groaned and so did she when I slid my fingers along her inner folds. “You’re soaked.”

“You did that,” she mumbled as I continued to fondle her. “You’re the only one who does that to me.”

“Is that true?” I smiled against her mouth, heartened by the idea. Sliding in her moisture, I breached her opening with my finger. “You’re not lying to me?”

“I’m not lying.” She whimpered as I glided another finger between her velvety walls. “I haven’t been with anyone since you.”

I drew back, astonished by this, and yet I continued to fondle her, to quicken her body, even as I processed this important piece of information. Danika was a beautiful woman. I couldn't conceive she hadn't had tons of proposals in seven years. She hadn't accepted any of them?

The words blurted out of my mouth. "Are you shitting me?"

"I'm telling you the truth." Sincerity sparkled in her eyes. "I swear. From now on, no more lies."

"No more lies." Holding her fast against me, I slowly added a third digit to her depths. "I like the sound of that."

Gradually, I pumped my fingers in her, denying her frenzied body the faster pace it craved.

"Mac," she moaned, her face now pressed in the nook of my neck, her hips rocking and rolling around my fingers. "Mac, please! You're killing me. I need to come."

"Hang on." I strummed my thumb over her plump clit, brushed my lips over her mouth, and filled my palm with a handful of her ass. "I need to make sure. Will you be true to me?" I asked, increasing my pace and sinking my fingers deeper in her.

“Yes,” she hissed. “I’ll be true to you. Always!”

“Will you tell me everything?” I worked my hand in a rhythmical wave motion that curled my fingers forward and brushed my fingertips over her G-spot. “The whole truth?”

“I promise.” She shut her eyes, grimaced, and let out a throaty cry that turned my groin into a tight knot ready to snap. “I swear!”

“All right then.” I stroked her clit and, pumping a little faster, brushed the tips of my fingers over the spot I knew would launch her out of control. “Come, *corazón*. Come now.”

Her walls clamped down around my digits. Her entire body went rigid, contracting within itself. And then I felt it, her orgasm, a pulsing gallop approaching from the back of her sex, growing stronger and faster, engaging her pelvic floor and shaking her body, stampeding through her like a wild herd of pleasure that could not be stopped.

She cried out against my shoulder, digging her nails into my biceps. Her mouth clamped down on the skin above my collarbone and then it was only my flesh smothering her screams of pleasure.

Danika

I came undone in his arms. My body quit, overwhelmed by pleasure. My legs gave way. For a moment, I had no cares, no concerns, no thoughts. Mac had me. That was all I needed to know. In his care, I was safe. In his arms, I was sheltered. I trusted his strength to hold me up when I had no will of my own. I trusted him with this moment of respite, of bodily joy, of happiness.

I had the sensation of being gently gathered and carefully put together, rebuilt and rearranged on the firm, cool marble surface. Since I was burning with pleasure, it must've sizzled when my hot skin first made contact with it. When I opened my eyes, I swore I saw my heart flying like a butterfly around Mac's head.

“Dani, *mi amor*,” he whispered in my ear. “I've missed this. I've missed you.”

Mi amor. Had he just called me his love?

If only I could be his love. If only he'd allow it once I told him what I had to tell him.

His cock's blunt head glided in my sodden depths. His hard dick traveled through me, opening me up to his size,

rustling in my wet sheath. I'd come only minutes ago, but having him in me felt divine, like a promise beginning anew.

My body reawakened to his intimate caresses. I blinked several times and found myself lying on the kitchen counter with my legs wide open. My ass was perched on the edge of the marble and Mac stood between my thighs, his big, amazing body undulating to the tune of his strokes. His deep-set eyes focused on me, only me.

“I want you to come,” he rumbled.

“I just came.”

“Then do it again.” He spoke softly, but I had no doubt that his words were a command.

That, in itself, shook me off the stupor of one orgasm and put me on the road to another. My erotic self rejoiced at having defined direction, at not having to think, at indulging in this rare moment that allowed me to let loose and enjoy. There was no greater pleasure than having this man in my body and realizing my wildest fantasies. All seven-plus years of them.

My breasts wobbled on my chest, slapping quietly, clapping at his strokes as if cheering him on. My body swayed

to his beat, displayed for his gaze, devoid of shame or embarrassment. When was the last time I'd felt this free?

I basked in the light of his whisky-hued eyes, in the tension that made a muscle on his jaw flinch and stiffened his powerful body to the point that it felt like a generous extension of his erection as it plunged in and out of me.

In, out. In, out. In, out. Would he be in or out once he knew?

Not now, Kos. Not yet. Do not rob yourself of this gift.

I made no effort to come. I just lay there, on the polished slab, taking him in, watching him wrestle with his need, feeling the strength of his hands clutching my hips, allowing him to cram not just his flesh in my body but his passion into my being as well.

His eyes remained locked with mine. He built the most exquisite sensations inside of me, layer upon layer of need. He seduced me with his strokes and then spread my folds apart and massaged my clit to complete his takeover.

“Do you want to do me harder?” I asked. “You can do me harder. Please, do me harder.”

“Are you sure?” he rumbled like a quaking volcano.

“I’m sure.”

His eyes darkened and his thrusts grew bolder, deeper, faster. The satisfaction I spotted in his eyes gave me the courage to push further.

“More,” I heaved, shaking beneath his strokes. “I can take it. I want to take it.”

His teeth clenched, his jaw set at a straight angle, and he grunted with each stroke now, sinking all the way in me. His balls slapped against me. His body’s sheer power resonated to my core as he propelled his cock into new territory.

I’d never known myself to be so deep, so wet, so open. I wanted everything he could give me, and I wanted it now. I needed him empty of seed, cleansed of all grievances so that he could accept my truths and act to his own benefit without having to fight our mind-wiping attraction and our bodies’ dangerous needs.

I wanted his extremes to be satisfied, or better yet, gratified, indulged, sated; and mine, too, because I might never have this again. I would take all I could get now. And yes, I also wanted to be punished, needed the physical penitence in preparation for my full atonement.

“Harder,” I rasped, curling my fingers over the edge of the counter and bracing myself to be the beneficiary of his passion. “Please, Mac, give me all you’ve got.”

He gave it to me. Oh, yeah. He wanted it like this, too. I could read the bliss on his face. The problem was that it didn’t hurt. Dammit. On the contrary, it felt good, too good, like a prize that only got better as he freed himself to wreak havoc in my body.

I pleaded. I cried out. I shouted, hollered, and screamed. I tried not to come, but he wouldn’t have it. In the end, I came twice, seduced by his mastery, endurance, and perseverance, condemned to suffer one orgasm after the other, until he roared his release and filled me with his warm, healing come.

“Oh, yes. Yes!” I cried out as the biggest orgasm of them all shook me to the core.

A few moments later, Mac slumped over me, covering my torso with his. Five minutes passed. Then ten. His breaths came in gasps next to my ear, and even empty, his sex remained deeply seated in me.

Damn this man. Damn the bliss he gave me. I wanted him to take his revenge on my body, but no matter how hard I

tried, he didn't hurt me. He fucked me hard all right, but hurting me? Causing me pain?

No. He wasn't gonna do it. Ever.

"Dani, *mi amor*," he breathed out. He kissed my ear, the side of my face, my eyes, nose, and lips, and when I responded to his tongue eagerly, I felt his spent dick reviving in my sheath.

"I never understood." He laid his forehead on mine. "Why didn't you want me? Why didn't you want to be mine? And do you want me now?"

"Oh, I want you all right." Making a huge effort, I lifted on my elbows, scooted back, and after wiggling out from under him, sat up on the counter. "It's you who won't want me."

"How can you say that?" He straightened on his feet and frowned. "I want you, Dani. I always have. I always will."

"We'll see about that."

My knees were shaking too hard, but I forced my legs to work. I scrambled down from the counter and landed on the tip of my toes. Turning around, I leaned over the cold marble

and braced my legs apart. I knew what he would see, me all hot and well used, and some of himself, too, dripping from me.

I looked over my shoulder. “Do you realize that you’ve never taken me from behind?”

His frown etched deeper on his forehead, but after a few seconds of contemplation, he flashed a sexy smile. “You wanna remedy that situation?”

“Yes, please.” Before I was beyond all remedies. “Can you?”

“Oh, yeah. I can. When I’m with you, I always can.”

I knew my strengths and my weaknesses. Mac liked my body. He would not love the rest of me once I confirmed my moral failings, but that was later and this was now. I also knew that Mac was too much of a sexual being to deny me the decadence I needed.

As he entered me from this new angle, I braced on my elbows. My breasts hung over the counter and my nipples drew random patterns on the cold marble. He endeavored to remedy the situation to perfection.

If only I could find a way to remedy his heart after I told him the last of my secrets.

Chapter Sixteen

Mac

The night was as old as my bones felt by the time we both climaxed again. Danika's knees gave way, and since we'd moved on from the kitchen to the bedroom eons ago, we both fell on her mattress. Gasping for air, she collapsed on her stomach, still shaking from her latest orgasm. Weak from my release, my knees buckled as well, but I managed to roll over. I landed on my back next to her, heaving like a marathon runner after yet another wild fuck fest.

Holy glorious fuck. I'd never felt so sated before, so utterly satisfied and high on sex, on Danika, on the power of our lovemaking. We were so good in bed.

Could we maybe talk things out, find a way to reconcile our pasts, and work things out for Kenzie, and perhaps even for us, too?

Outside the window, the city of Prague had fallen into a deep sleep. We'd had none of that, even though we probably needed to rest. Instead, after an unmatched night of decadence and self-indulgence I would never forget, a dull ache had

settled on my groin, my glutes burned with the afterglow of a serious workout, and my gonads had turned into dry river beds.

Still, if she wanted to go at it again, I'd make it happen. I was so hooked on Danika, so committed to giving her whatever she needed from me.

I shifted on the mattress. The delicate French cane bed creaked under my weight. I had no doubt that it was a solid piece, an antique restored with loving expertise, but I wouldn't be surprised if the whole thing collapsed into a heap. Hell if we hadn't put the frame to the test.

"Are you good?" I reached for the covers tangled up against the footboard.

"I'm well, thanks for asking," she mumbled listlessly. "Although I fear I'll never be able to walk again."

I chuckled and worked to disentangle the blankets. "Likewise."

She sighed. "But it was so worth it."

"Ditto here."

Freeing a top sheet from the jumble, I pulled it over her, warding off the early morning chill that crept through the

small gap in the window I'd cranked open earlier. We'd been hot and sweaty back then, and I'd joked that the heat between us could set off the smoke detector. The sheet was a lot like the woman—soft, silky, and eminently feminine. Its supple rose hue evoked the post-coitus glow that blushed Danika's skin.

Twisting the sheet around her body, she shifted to her back, scooted up, and laid her head on the pillows. After letting out a wistful exhalation, she closed her eyes. Her dark mane spilled over the pillowcase and her chest rose and fell beneath the sheet as she fought to recover her breath.

Bella—beautiful. *Bellissima*.

That such a formidable, smart, gorgeous woman had chosen me to ditch her inhibitions and give me pleasure beyond belief made me feel like the luckiest dude on earth. It gave me more hope, too, that perhaps we could work things out and this could become a regular occurrence.

“Don't go anywhere.” I planted a kiss on her lips. “I'll be right back.”

Naked as I was born, I padded out to the kitchen and grabbed another couple of excellent Czech beers from the fridge, the pale lager she favored. Since dinner was many

hours in the past and my stomach rumbled, I grabbed a bag of pretzels from the pantry and carried it back along with the longnecks to the bedroom.

“What service.” She smiled and took one of the bottles from me.

“I aim to please.”

“Well, you did.” A sexy grin sparkled in her eyes.

I smiled so wide that it hurt. I’d done something right.

Coming around the bed, I sat up against the pillow and stretched out my legs on the mattress. Ripping the pretzel packet open, I tilted it before her. “I was hungry. Want some?”

“You’re always hungry.” She dipped her hand and came up with a fistful of salted pretzels. “Thanks.”

I stuffed several pretzels in my mouth and washed them down with a swig of beer. Danika studied the pale flowered wallpaper across from the bed as if it was the most interesting thing she’d ever seen. Her jaw came up and down as she munched on just one little pretzel.

The silence between us lengthened, a sure sign that our long overdue talk was in order. I held back, willing her without words to take the first step.

“I don’t suppose you want to skip *the* conversation?”
she finally asked, quiet, subdued.

I settled the bag on my lap. “It’s necessary.”

“You’re right.” She sat up against the pillows and took another sip of her drink. “What do you need to know?”

It was up to me to get this going. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“About Kenzie?”

I nodded.

“It’s... hard to explain.”

“Try.”

“Is that why you came to Ukraine?” Her gaze caressed my face and her eyes acquired a pleading quality. “To demand an explanation from me?”

“Yeah. No, I mean. Fuck.” I clawed my fingers through my hair then let go. “I guess it was part of my original intent.”

“So...” She eyed me closely. “Just to be clear, when you found out about Kenzie and realized where I was, you came after me because...?”

“Kenzie needed her mother, and it was my job to bring you back to her.”

“*Your job?*”

“I’m her father, am I not?”

“I think that’s pretty obvious, but if you need a DNA test, I’ll consent.”

“I don’t need a DNA test. That girl is a Cienfuegos to the roots of her curly hair. But if you need a DNA test to make sure she’s mine...”

“I guess I deserved that.” She winced. “I don’t need proof. You were the only man I slept with during the time of her conception, the only man I’ve slept with in the last eight years.”

“I still find that hard to believe.” I shook my head, trying to wrap my brain around that. “Why didn’t you sleep with other people?”

“The truth?” She met my gaze.

I nodded.

“I only wanted you.”

The words fell over me like a warm blanket. I could accept that. Even though I had slept with several women after Danika, I had not been satisfied because I, too, had only craved her.

“Being a mom is hard work,” she added. “I don’t have a lot of ‘me’ time. I’ve been busy raising Kenzie. She keeps me on my toes.”

“I bet.” I took a long pull of my beer and tried to keep the conversation on track. “Seven years of silence. Why?”

“You won’t believe me...” She hesitated, brushing her thumb in small circles over the film of condensation that had formed on the bottle in her hand. “But I thought my decision would be best... for you.”

“For me?” I plunked down my bottle on the night table and frowned. “How?”

“You were Delta Force. You loved what you did. You worked hard and you played hard, too. You were in it for the fun.”

“So what if that was true when we first met?”

“You were like a hummingbird, flying from one woman to the next.”

“I didn’t fly away from you,” I pointed out, surprised by the surge of irritation that heated my face. “*You* ended it between us.”

“You had your habits, your life philosophy,” she ventured, staring at the bottle in her hand. “I never wanted to force you to be someone you were not.”

“You mean I wasn’t fatherhood material.” There, I’d said it.

Her earnest gaze sought mine. “Were you?”

“How the hell can a grunt know that?”

“You made it clear that fatherhood wasn’t in your life plan,” she reminded me. “You were so careful when we had sex. Let’s face it, Mac. What would you have said if I’d told you I was pregnant back when?”

“I don’t know.” I popped a pretzel in my mouth and chewed, considering the question before I swallowed a salty gulp. “I would’ve probably been shocked, I suppose, like I was when I first met Kenzie.”

“You were married to Delta Force, an adrenaline junkie jumping from one adventure to the next. Would you have

wanted a child back then? How would you have reacted to the news?”

“If I’m gonna be honest here, I’m gonna stick with ‘I don’t know,’ but regardless, it was my right to know.”

“I can’t disagree with that,” she admitted quietly. “I don’t want you to think I’m proud of what I did. All these years I’ve felt so guilty about keeping you in the dark. During those few weeks when I first learned I was pregnant, I thought about calling you a million times.”

“Or you could’ve simply answered my calls, texts, emails, messages—”

“I get your point.” She lifted a hand in the air. “But based on the things you’d said to me and the way you were back then, I assumed you would not want to be a father. I was sure that you were going to be furious with me for interrupting your life and cramping your style. And...”

“And what?” I demanded, remembering the grunt I’d been back then and wondering if she was right on some of her assumptions. Or on all of them.

“I feared that...” She paused, cleared her throat, and tentatively glanced at me. “I was terrified that if you learned I

was with child you would ask me to terminate the pregnancy.”

“I would’ve never—”

“Think about it before you say it,” she spoke over me. “You’ve met Kenzie now. You realize the treasure she is. But back then, you didn’t know any of that. She was a dividing cell, and I was just another one of your conquests.”

“Not true,” I protested. “It was always different with you.”

“Was it?” She cocked her eyebrows and tilted her head in an expression that challenged me in every way. “I was a woman, same as all of the other women you slept with. All that you promised me was fun and pleasure. We had fun and we had lots of sex, but you were not serious about me, about us. How was it different with me?”

“I wanted to tell you,” I grumbled darkly. “Something about you was changing me.”

“Even if that was true, did you tell me?”

I looked down at my feet and rubbed my toes against the cane footboard. “No.”

“Then how was I supposed to know?”

“By the time I tried to tell you, you didn’t give me the time of day.”

“I’d shifted gears by then. I was going to be a mother. I was preparing for that.”

“Admit it,” I spat. “You thought I would be a terrible father.”

“Oh, Mac.” She let out a sad sigh and I had to swallow around the brick of grief obstructing my throat. “To be honest, I wasn’t sure what kind of father you’d be, but I knew the kind of man you were then. Do you remember yourself when we met?”

“I was high octane.” I rolled down the top of the crinkling pretzel bag until I squeezed all the air out of it. “Still am, I suppose. Can’t imagine that’ll ever change. Back then I was a boisterous, reckless, happy-go-lucky jock. I drank too much and partied too hard when I was off duty. I probably acted like an alpha idiot at least half the time.”

“You were also happy with yourself and your life,” she pointed out in that clearheaded, logical way of hers. “Above all, you were free. Wild. That was the essence of who you were.”

“And you didn’t like that,” I concluded wryly.

“On the contrary, I liked it a lot.” She surprised me with that. “You taught me to have fun. You showed me how to let go, relax, and live in the moment. That was no small gift to uptight me. I knew it wouldn’t last forever, but those months we spent working together? They are some of the happiest memories I have. I never thanked you for it. I do now.”

That about left me speechless.

“When I thought about who you were, I felt as if I didn’t have a right to ask you to change.” She turned the bottle in her hand but kept her gaze on me. “I didn’t want you to be anyone other than yourself. I didn’t tell you about Kenzie because I wanted you to remain free. Free as I’d never been. Free as I’ll never be.”

She paused as if to let that sink in. It struck me that she had seriously considered me and my life when she made her decisions.

“Do you see the difference between us?” she asked gently. “I was ready to commit to something other than myself. You’d already made your commitments, to your country, Delta Force, and yourself. There was no space in your life for a baby. Or me. You had no desire for a family, either.

Our roads were going in different directions, and you would've been miserable walking my path."

Okay, so maybe she wasn't wrong about any of that, and still... "You should've given me the choice."

"I can't disagree with that, but I wanted to be a mother so badly and..."

I hurled her a curious glance. "And what?"

"I didn't want you to feel I'd caught you in a trap and tied you down to me—to Kenzie and me." She set the bottle on the night table. "I wanted you to think of me fondly instead of blaming me for becoming a burden in your life."

It was in poor form, but I couldn't repress the sarcasm. "Very selfless of you."

"No, see, that's where you are wrong." Wrapped in her sheet, she got up from the bed and sauntered to the window. "My decision was logical, based on solid assumptions, but it was never selfless. And that's where my mistakes were compounded. I was selfish."

"Selfish?"

"Very." She pulled the curtain aside and looked out the window.

“Explain,” I demanded, although I couldn’t help but admire her proud figure framed in the moonlight.

“Once Kenzie was born, I could’ve told you about her. It would’ve been too late for you to ask me to end the pregnancy then. Right?” She tossed her hair over her shoulder and met my eyes briefly before she returned her stare to the night sky. “By then, I had a career that was taking me places, a full life. Whether or not you would’ve accepted Kenzie as yours, telling you the truth wouldn’t have made a difference. I loved Kenzie. I cared for her. She had everything she needed from me. But once again, I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” I asked, dreading her reply.

“Afraid that you would reject her, hurt her feelings, interrupt the great life I wanted to give her.”

“I understand you wanting to protect her.” I fingered the bag on my lap. “Believe me, I do.”

“It gets worse,” she said and that feeling of dread grew in my belly. “As Kenzie grew up, I wanted to keep her all to myself. She’s my life, my reason to exist, my everything. Losing her to you would’ve broken my heart.”

“You’re never gonna lose her to me.” I pointed out.
“You are her mama. You should hear how she speaks of you. She loves you. Me, not so much.”

“You are a very charismatic person, an extremely lovable guy,” she offered. “If you choose to be part of her life —”

“Let’s not beat around that bush,” I snapped. “That’s not in question here. I’m gonna be part of her life. Are we clear on that?”

“If you say so,” she admitted, albeit reluctantly. “What I meant to say is that, once she gets to know you, she’s going to love you. You’re going to be her favorite parent.”

“Nah, I doubt that.” I waved a hand in the air, but my longing for Kenzie’s acceptance ached in my chest before I forced myself to tamp down my expectations. “She adores you. To her, I’m just Big Guy, her sperm donor.”

“Oh, God.” Her shoulders slumped, and she turned around to face me. “I can’t believe she called you that.”

“She still does, sometimes.” I downed the last of my brew. “When she’s mad at me.”

“That must hurt you so badly.” She scrubbed a hand over her face. “You don’t deserve that, and I never meant to hurt you. I’m so sorry, Mac.”

“Water under the bridge now.” I set the empty bottle aside. “When she’s old enough, I’m gonna tell her she was conceived out of friendship and affection, assuming you’re not gonna fight me playing a part in her life.”

“I’m not. Can’t you see? You’re in. She found you. You’re already a part of her life. How we go forward is up to you. Your decision.” Her voice wobbled, and in the dim light, I spotted a watery film bulging in her eyes. “The only thing I ask is that you don’t hurt my—*our*—daughter. Whatever you choose to do, don’t disappoint her, and don’t break her heart.”

“Of course not.” Did she really think I would do anything to hurt Kenzie?

I fought to control my indignation. She had no idea of the person I was, of the man I’d become. She had no clear perception of how much I wanted to be the father Kenzie deserved, of how hard I was willing to work to earn Kenzie’s love.

I had to tell her. “I only want to help, Dani, to do my part, to love that kid with everything I’ve got.”

“That’s a huge relief to me.” She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “I’m her mother. My instinct is to protect her. So, please, don’t punish her for my actions. Don’t be angry with her, don’t ever play with her feelings, and don’t hate her because you’re furious with me and you loathe what I did.”

“That’s never gonna happen,” I assured her. “It’s true that I’ve been mad at you, for not trusting me and for keeping me apart from Kenzie all these years, but I don’t hate you. I never did. I never will.”

“Don’t speak too soon.” She sniffled, and much to my alarm, tears began to trace a path over her cheeks. “You might start detesting me now.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s one other truth I owe you, the last secret you need to know, and you are going to despise me for it.”

My gut wanted to stop this conversation now, but it was too late. “You’re scaring me.”

She let out this weird croak, a chuckle that was also a sob. “I can be a very scary, logical, cool-headed bitch.”

“Danika?” The beer soured my stomach. “What are we talking about?”

“It wasn’t an accident, Mac.”

“I don’t follow.” I frowned. “What wasn’t an accident?”

“My pregnancy.”

“Wait.” I shook my head, trying to dispel the feeling of doom wrapping around me like a vise. “What the hell are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I liked you a lot back then.” She cleared her throat, firmed up her voice, and pushed out the words. “You had a lot of the qualities I was looking for in a man. I admired your strength, your bravery, your person, and if I couldn’t have you, then I thought perhaps I could steal a part of you.”

“What part?”

Her chest rose as she inhaled all the oxygen in the room. “Your DNA, my love.”

Chapter Seventeen

Danika

“Wait.” Mac looked confused, as bewildered as I’d ever seen him. Anger and disbelief darkened his eyes, and when he spoke, his demand came in a low, menacing snarl. “What the fuck are you saying?”

No way around this. I’d come to the edge of this precipice and now it was time to jump. I summoned all the courage I had and straightened my back.

“I’m saying that I *chose* you to be the father of my baby.” I raised my chin in the air. “I decided that it would be you, and then I... I...”

He worked his jaw. “You what?”

I forced myself to go through with my entire confession. “I... I made it happen.”

“How?” he muttered between clenched teeth.

I examined the rug at my feet, then lifted my head and forced myself to make eye contact with him. “A needle,” I whispered, my voice hoarse, my face hot with the tears

streaming down my cheeks. “A pack of condoms. Lots and lots of sex.”

“Holy shit.”

The plastic bag exploded in his grip. Pulverized pretzels burst in the air and fell like shrapnel over his lap, the bed, the carpet. For a moment, he just sat there, his face twisted in outrage, his eyes storming, his large form overwhelming the bed.

His jaw flinched with a determined clench and his stare fell on me, sharp and honed, digging into me like a blade to the liver.

“We always used the condoms you provided,” he murmured, working things out as he spoke. “I thought you were as finicky as me and ran with it, but you’re telling me that you got pregnant. *On purpose.*” The outrage in his stare burned me to cinders. “You played me?”

I felt like a pile of ashes about to collapse, as if parts of me were already scattering, blown away by the wind of his righteous fury. It exuded from him like radioactive waves and for a moment, I wondered if I had just committed emotional suicide.

Yes, you have, Kos, but for a good reason. With all the lies out of the way, you'll clear a path for Kenzie and Mac to have a relationship based on truth, not deception.

The thought strengthened my resolve. My heart was the proper price to pay for my mistakes and still, I wanted Mac to understand. I swallowed around the lump in my throat and spoke as evenly as I could manage.

“I didn’t see it as playing you back then, but I can see why you may feel that way. I’m ashamed. I know I did wrong, but I didn’t just want to have a baby. I wanted to have *your* baby. Do you understand what I’m saying? *Yours.*”

“Am I supposed to feel flattered about that?” The frown that ruffled his forehead only etched deeper. “You wanted my baby but not me. Is that it?”

“Please, try to understand.” I hiccupped and it was only then that I realized that I was bawling. “I didn’t think you’d want to stick with me. I didn’t believe you wanted a baby, and I didn’t want to ruin your life.”

“So, instead of telling me all that shit, you punched holes in my condoms.”

“You make it sound—”

“Vile? Cruel? Manipulative?”

His words hit me in the sternum. For a moment there, I couldn't breathe; but I had to get through this—for Kenzie, mostly, but also for myself. I had to finish my atonement, even if it meant allowing Mac to take his vengeance, to slice my heart to shreds, to make me pay for my mistakes with his loathing.

“Yes, I was vile, cruel, manipulative,” I spat. “I did whatever I had to do to conceive Kenzie.”

“I was such a fucking fool. I never even noticed.” He rose from the bed and, oblivious to his nakedness, began pacing on the other side of the room, his bare feet crunching over the broken pretzels. “Me, a Delta man. Entrapped. By you.”

“I made sure you were free of any obligation,” I shot back. Somewhere deep inside I wanted this to count for something, even though I knew it didn't make the rest right.

“I don't know what the fuck I'm supposed to do with this pile of crap you just dumped on me.” He paused his pacing, raked his clawed fingers through his hair, then stopped mid-scalp and held his locks away from his face, leaving his

spiral curls standing every which way. “I mean, what am I supposed to do with this shit?”

“Mac, I—”

“Not an hour ago we were fucking like rabbits.” He dropped his hand from his head, releasing his curls to fall to the sides of his face, and began pacing again. *Crunch, crunch, crunch.* “Were you vying for a second baby? Are you even on birth control like you said you were? Were you using me again?”

“I promised you the truth. I swore I’d never lie to you again—”

“You can promise all you want, but you lied and schemed before,” he ground out. “Why not now? How can I trust you? Why should I trust you?”

“Because I want to make things right,” I offered lamely.

“Why?” he growled.

“I’m putting myself through hell to make it right for you. So that you and Kenzie can have a relationship that is not based on lies of any kind. I’m giving you the truth so that you

can decide whether you want to be Kenzie's father or not with full knowledge of all the facts."

"I already told you, that's not in question," he shouted.

"Think again, Mac. You can't become part of Kenzie's life and then change your mind because you didn't know this or that. I won't allow you to hurt our daughter like that. This is why I'm telling you this now. You're either in or out. Anything else will destroy her."

"Are you implying that I'll hurt my own kid?"

"No!" I cried out. "I'm telling you all of this for Kenzie's sake, so that from now on, you understand you will always get the truth from me, that as Kenzie's mother, you can trust me."

"*Trust you?*" He scoffed. "Ha!"

"I could've avoided telling you the whole truth, but I didn't, did I?"

"Perhaps you're a little late with all this 'truth.'" The quotation marks he drew in the air about killed me.

"I *am* late, but ask yourself why I'm doing this now and you'll see what I'm trying to show you."

“Right now, I can’t see shit,” he ground out. “I gotta get myself some air or something.” He stormed out of the bedroom.

My chest ached as if I were having a heart attack. The pain was almost too much to bear, but I dropped the sheet, reached for my robe, and threw it on, trailing after him. The crumbs littering his path led me down the hallway. I found him in the kitchen, stuffing his legs into his pants, his face scrunched with smoldering fury.

I blinked the liquid pooling in my eyes. “What are you doing?”

“Leaving.” He yanked up his zipper. “I can’t be here right now.”

“I understand.” His temper, pride, and outrage struck me like a merciless lashing. This was Mac. I’d known this would be his reaction. Why then was I weeping so hard? “I deserve your anger.”

“Stop telling me what you deserve.” He grabbed his shirt from the counter and whirled on his heel. Towering over me, he wagged an angry finger at my face. “Stop telling me that you understand. You don’t understand shit about me,

about my life, and I don't want your fucking understanding!
You got that?"

The wrath in his voice pounded me over the head. His breath blustered over me in hot bursts. I'd thought I'd been ready for this. I'd been mistaken. I shrunk before his outrage, feeling smaller every second that passed. Every word hurt. Every glower battered me with violence that destroyed me. I dropped my face in my hands and sobbed.

"I can't do this." I felt more than saw the pain in the tightness of his voice. "I just can't."

His feet rustled on the floors, and when I lowered my hands, I saw through a curtain of tears that he wasn't in the kitchen anymore.

But I wasn't done. Almost, but not yet. Even though my head throbbed and I felt as if I'd been skinned alive, I raced to the living room and found him reaching out for my front door's handle.

"I have one more thing to say to you." I wiped my face and straightened on my feet, trying to muster the little dignity I had left. "I'm sorry for all the grief I've caused you, for disrespecting your choices, for taking away your ability to make your own decisions."

He snarled. “Forgive me if I can’t believe anything you say right this minute.”

I winced. “I get it.”

“How magnanimous of you.” He threw the door open and stepped into the hallway.

“Wait!” I sprinted to the threshold.

He turned to face me, braced his feet apart, and crossed his arms. “What?”

“I know that you hate me, but at least now you know the truth. I also know you can’t possibly love me the way I love you, back then or now. It’s a fitting punishment for my crime.”

“*Your crime.*” He shook his head, a movement somewhere between rage and confusion. “Is that what we’re calling this now?”

Ignoring the accusation in his tone, I continued. “From the bottom of my heart, I pray that someday you will accept my apology, but before you go, I want to clarify something.”

“By all means. Go ahead.” He waved a hand in the air. “You’ve clarified a lot today. What harm can a little more ‘truth’ do?”

“A lot, I can see that by your reaction.” I fisted my hands by my sides. “I was afraid that this is exactly how you would react back then. That, too, made me decide not to tell you. But now, I want you to know this.” I inhaled a big breath. “I’m sorry for my mistakes, Mac, but I can never, ever be sorry for bringing our daughter into this world, and I will never apologize for Kenzie’s existence.”

Leaving the raging man standing outside, I closed the door with a quiet click. It was done. Done and over. Feeling like a husk of myself, I crossed my flat. My shoulders slumped with the weight of my regrets and my grief. I’d lost Mac, for good. I had no idea if he was in or out of the parenting thing, but either way, I hoped I’d saved my daughter from the grief of starting a relationship with her father and then losing it because of me.

I went back to my bed, where I curled up in a fetal position and cried.

Mac

I stabbed my key in the hole of the door to the apartment across from Danika’s and, using excess torque, twisted my wrist and forced the lock to release. Wearing only my pants

and dragging my shirt along, I stalked into the flat, closed the door with a kick of my heel, and locked it behind me. The living room was empty. Druid was probably catching some well-deserved Zs.

Good.

I wasn't in the mood for company.

Out of habit, I surveyed the place. The apartment was a one-bedroom version of Danika's floor plan furnished in an ultra-modern style. It was one of two locations in the building that had been available as short-term vacation rentals. DS had rented both places for the next week. Their security detail rotated out of a different unit downstairs. Druid had taken over this one.

The curtains were, as always, drawn. A single can light beamed down on the dining room table where data streams filed across the multiple screens of Trev's computer bank. A constant chatter droned from the humming laptops. They pinged, buzzed, and beeped, casting a blue radiance on the stark white walls.

I crossed the living room and plopped down on the sectional. Stretching out on the long side, I closed my eyes. Maybe, if I went to sleep now, I'd wake up to find out that

tonight had been a nightmare. Well, at least the last part sucked.

Sleep wasn't to be. An image of Danika formed against the back of my eyelids, a reproduction of her face right before she closed the door on me. The memories of her hollow gaze added churn to my stomach. Worst of all were all those tears, streaming down her face, and her voice, so fragile and pained as she tried to speak between sobs.

Fuck.

I threw my legs over the edge of the couch, planted my bare soles on the floor, and sat up, knuckling my eyes. I got a hell of a surprise when my fingers turned out wet. I stared at the droplets clinging to my hand.

What the hell was wrong with me?

Blinking off the moisture from my eyes, I fought a tug-of-war with my divided emotions. On the one hand, there was my righteous rage, eating me up. The hundred fires that had no doubt named the people of my lineage flared, fueling my outrage. I'd been used. Me. A Delta. I'd been played. By someone I'd trusted. By Danika!

Jaw clenched, shoulders stiff, I could've been a bull on fire, a desperate, angry beast, bucking at my fate and ready to charge, trample, and gore anyone who got in my way. The pain that throbbed in my chest justified my need to lash out, to destroy, to hurt as I'd been hurt.

On the other hand, there was the grief, a deep ache that knotted my chest and kept me from breathing right. I felt gutted. Debased. Betrayed. This was betrayal on top of betrayal. *Planned* betrayal. Manipulation that I refused to accept in my life.

Another image of Danika as she closed the door on us forever interrupted my rage. She'd been crying. Sobbing. Her tears added to the misery wrenching my insides. I'd had to flee or risk falling apart in front of her. No way I would do that. She might've used me as if I were nothing but a tool, but I still had some pride left.

Exhaustion tugged at my senses and muddled all those emotions into one big ball of crap. I'd once had Danika. Then I'd lost her. I'd found her again, and tonight? Tonight, I'd lost her for the second time, or truer yet, I'd given her up, sacrificed her to the fiery gods of war that ruled my head.

She had used me. She had betrayed me. It was the end of all hope. I was done. *We* were done.

The sorrow. Man. The anguish. It crawled up and coiled around my throat, threatening to strangle me. One moment, we'd been having the best night of our lives. I'd had hopes that I could pick up the pieces, work my way around the past, and somehow build a family for Kenzie. Now I had nothing. Not a fucking thing.

Part of me wished I'd never known she planned her pregnancy and deceived me to achieve it. A guy like me could never forgive this or be with a woman I couldn't trust. It was inconceivable, impossible.

I'd fight for Kenzie if I had to, but getting back with Danika was out of the question. The road ahead included Kenzie, but not her mother. Even with access to my daughter, the journey felt lonely already.

“What are you doing here?” Trev rolled into the room, wearing a fresh change of clothes, his hair wet from the shower. He teased me with a smirk. “I thought you'd promised to take advantage of an indecent proposal or perhaps read a romance novel with a certain attaché.”

I sighed. “You heard all that, uh?”

“Didn’t have a choice, Romeo.” His grin died on his face when I didn’t return it. He studied me, now fully alert, despite the dark circles under his eyes. “What’s up with you?”

“I was restless.” I shrugged, playing it cool. “Anything new?”

“Nothing yet.” He eyed me from across the room. His gaze took in my tangled curls, my bare torso, and my naked feet. “You look like shit, Blaze.”

I scratched my jaw, rubbing off the itch of my beard growth, remembering now why I hated shaving. The hard little hairs pushed themselves through the follicles, irritating my face. The motherfuckers prickled like needles on my skin.

Needles. Mierda.

“Blaze?” Trev leveled his gaze on me. “What do you need?”

I pulled at my hair and mumbled. “Coffee might be good.”

“Two coffees, coming up.” He turned his chair around and went into the kitchen.

I settled my elbows on my thighs and buried my face in my hands. All I could think about was Danika. Her memory

stabbed me in the chest. Hell, just invoking her name spiked the pain blooming in my head. Stuck in a loop of anger and agony, the minutes ticked by quickly. Before I knew it, Trev returned and thrust a steaming cup into my hands.

“Black, no sugar.” He picked up the plate with pastries he carried on his lap and placed it on the coffee table before me. “They’re fresh, from the bakery downstairs.”

“Not hungry,” I mumbled, taking a sip of my coffee.

“In that case, you’re dying.” Trev intensified his visual scrutiny. “Deltas always eat when they can and I’ve never known you not to be hungry. Should I call the ambulance?”

More like the execution squad. The agony tearing me apart was too painful to bear.

“Mac?” Trev said. “Might as well tell me what’s the buzz and get it over with.”

I knew better than to try to throw flak Druid’s way. There was zero point in doing that when the guy could read SEALs and Deltas with his eyes closed. Plus, I didn’t want him to question my current mental state and my commitment to the mission. He was right. Might as well get this over with.

“We had *the* talk,” I announced without preamble.

His mouth set into a straight line. “I take it that it didn’t go well.”

“It didn’t go as I expected, that’s for damn sure.”

“Were you ever under the mistaken assumption that a talk like the one you needed to have with the mother of your child would be easy?”

“Nah.” I looked down at my cup and caught a glimpse of my reflection in the dark liquid. I looked like I felt. Like crap. As if I’d fought a pitched battle and lost.

Hell, how I hated to lose.

“So?” Druid prompted me.

“So, it was worse than my worst expectation.”

“Ah.”

“What do you mean, ‘ah’?” I lashed at him, unable to bite back my anger. “Did she talk to you before me? Do you know what happened?”

“She didn’t talk to me at all about your private affairs, and I don’t know shit about what happened between the two of you,” he offered flatly. “But a smart woman like Danika doesn’t keep a secret like Kenzie for seven years without reasons. You were never gonna like those reasons.”

Why did Druid always have to be so fucking right?

“She didn’t think I wanted to be a father.” I tightened my hold on the cup and watched as my knuckles turned white. “She was afraid I’d ask her to end the pregnancy. She wanted a baby, but she didn’t want to ‘trap me’ into fatherhood. She wanted to ‘protect’ me and my life from the burdens and responsibilities of having a kid.”

“Huh.” Trev took a sip of his coffee and mulled on that. “They sound plausible if not totally fair reasons to keep a secret.”

“Really?” I glared. “Are you gonna take her side?”

He lifted a brawny shoulder. “Maybe.”

“Dude! What the fuck?” I threw a hand in the air. “You’ve known me a lot longer than you’ve known her. You’re supposed to be *my* friend.”

“Precisely.” He picked up a pastry from the tray, bit a chunk out of it, and took his sweet time chewing.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That when your head goes hot, mine goes cool.” He pointed the flaky bun at me. “That when you burrow your ass

in the past, I drag your ass to the present and kick it, so you can look at the future with a smarting ass but clear eyes.”

“You don’t even know the worst of it yet.” I plunked down the mug so hard that the liquid spilled over the edges and spattered the coffee table.

“Okay.” Trev took another vicious bite of his pastry, tossed the remainder on the plate, and spoke and chewed at the same time. “Are you gonna tell me or am I gonna watch our dicks withering while you take your damn time sulking?”

“*Sulking?*” I croaked. “You think I’m sulking?”

“Affirmative,” Trev said. “You are sulking. So what?”

“Maybe I have a right to sulk.”

“You mean you *had* a right to sulk, and all the time in the world to feel sorry for yourself, fuck up your personal life, make bad decisions, drink too much, run around with the wrong crowd, do whatever the hell you wanted. I hate to be the one to have to tell you, Mac Ego, but you’ve lost your rights to self-centrism.”

“What?” I leaned back on the cushions. “When?”

“On the day you found out you were a father,” Trev announced, his tone solemn. “That’s when you stopped being

all about you—something that you do extremely well, I might add—and began being all about your kid.”

I scrubbed my face. “Do you really think I’m that self-centered?”

“Supremely so.”

I cocked my eyebrows. “Irresponsible?”

“Outside of missions, you mean?”

I nodded.

“Affirmative.” Druid didn’t hold back. “You’re extremely responsible about being consistently irresponsible.”

“So you agree with Danika.” I slumped on the couch. “You don’t think I’m father material.”

“Did she say that?”

“I inferred it from her data dump.”

“I see.” Trev settled his cup on the coffee table and seemed to mull that over.

“She got pregnant on purpose,” I blurted out, filling the silence gap.

“*On purpose?*” Druid’s forehead split into deep furrows. “You mean it wasn’t an accident?”

“No accident.” Facing the truth again multiplied the misery. “She planned the whole thing. She wanted to have my baby. In her own words, she ‘stole’ my DNA.”

“Holy shit.” Trev stared at me, his eyes wide. “There’s something I didn’t see coming.”

I found small consolation in the fact that even our hard-to-surprise resident genius seemed shocked and speechless.

“Did she tell you that?” he finally asked.

“She did.” I clasped my hands and hung my head. “Not only did she lie to me and keep me from my daughter. She played me, Druid. She ignored my rights as a father. Hell, she ignored my rights as a human being.”

“I’m sorry, bro.” Trev rolled closer to me and squeezed my forearm, his eyes now softening with compassion. “I can’t even imagine how you’re feeling right now. This sucks. Majorly.”

“I know, right?” I blinked off the water flooding my eyes. “And here I was, thinking Danika and I had a future together. The minx told me that she loved me. She slept with me. She gave me hope. And then... this?”

“Jesus, man.” Trev shook his head. “What she did? Not kosher. You’ve got every right to be upset. But here’s what I don’t get. She didn’t have to go as far as revealing her secret to anyone. Why would she tell you this?”

“One theory is that she wants to get rid of me. Forever and for good. If that’s the case, mission accomplished,” I spat bitterly. “We are done and over.”

“Is that what she said?”

“No.” I scrubbed my face. “She said she wanted to come clean and tell me the truth. So that I knew everything before I decided whether I was in or out. So that I could start anew with Kenzie and I could trust her going forward. She said that if I thought about the hell she was putting herself through to be truthful with me, I would understand why she did it.”

“And do you?”

“I’m not stupid, Druid. She wants me to see this as some sort of sick proof that she loves me. But I can’t believe her. I can’t hang out with a woman who cheats and lies to do as she wants. I just... can’t.”

“I get that, man, I do.” Trev let out a long exhale.

“Trust is at the root of all relationships. If you don’t got that, you’ve got nothing. Did she apologize?”

“Several times and in many ways.”

“Do you believe that she’s sorry?”

“It doesn’t matter, does it?” I ground out. “Because *I* can’t trust *her*. I will never be able to trust her. Can you believe that she asked me to forgive her?”

“Can you?”

“You’re talking to me, bro. I don’t forgive my enemies. I don’t even try. Payback. That’s all I know. If I’m gonna be brutally honest, I don’t know what forgiving is. I’ve never done it before. I’m not gonna start now.”

“It’s a lot to ask, that’s for sure.” Trev leaned back in his chair and stared at me for a long moment. “Look, I get that this is bad, man, really bad. But...”

“But what?”

“There may be something positive about all of this, flattering even.”

“What the fuck, Druid?” I barked. “Positive. Really? Are you shitting me?”

“I’m trying to look at the other side of this crappy coin you’ve been dealt,” he said. “*She* chose *you* to be the father of her daughter. That means something. No?”

“She chose my DNA, not me,” I shot back. “She kept *me* away from her daughter for seven fucking years.”

“You’re right,” he said, nodding his head. “All I can say is that I’m here for you. Whatever you need. I’m here.”

“Let me ask you this.” I swallowed around the boulder stuck in my throat. “After she did what she did, do you think she was right leaving me out of Kenzie’s life?”

He lifted his brawny shoulders and let them fall. “Does it matter who was right and who was wrong anymore?”

“Of course it matters,” I countered. “I had a right to be part of the original decision. I had a right to know!”

“Sure,” he said, pacifying me with his agreement. “But does that matter now that you do know?”

“Huh?”

“I know you’re mad but think, dude.” Trev motioned with his hand. “You’ve got a daughter now, a smart, extraordinary girl.”

“You’re telling me to pull my shit together and make her my priority.”

“No, *you* said that, because no matter what happens, you’re gonna be a great dad.”

I lifted my gaze to Trev. “Do you really think so?”

“I *know* so,” he said with a certainty that heartened me. “I get you’re hurting. I get how you feel about Danika. Your emotions are legit. You get to deal with them at your own pace and as you see fit. But right now, you’ve got to think about what matters.”

“Kenzie.”

Trev nodded.

He was right. My dream of getting back with Danika was in tatters, but out of the shambles of that wreck, I had a daughter. She deserved all I could give her.

I made a vow to myself. I could never forgive or forget what Danika had done. I could never trust her again, but I would put Kenzie ahead of all of that to be the father she deserved.

One of Trev’s computers alarmed. He rolled his chair to the table so fast I spotted only a blur. The blue light on the

screen reflected on the deep frown that overtook his features.

“My team’s got something,” he announced.

I set aside my heartache and ramped up my operational mode. “Source?”

“Danika’s embassy email account.”

“Wait. What?” I stood from the couch. “You hacked Danika’s email accounts?”

“It’s called covert surveillance,” he offered flatly.

“Did she give you permission to access her stuff?” I asked, crossing the room.

“That would defeat the purpose of hacking her accounts, no?” He gave me a cutting glance. “I don’t ask for permission. I just do my job. We don’t want her to change any of her patterns when others could be watching as well. How else am I supposed to protect her?”

He made a hell of a point. As a black ops specialist, I’d never asked for permission from an asset or a high-value target to do, well, anything. This was the meaning of the “black” part of the job. Trev’s work was as black as mine. Who was I to judge him?

None of that meant Danika was gonna like it if she found out, but then again, her feelings were no longer my concern.

I stood by Trev's side and looked down at his screen. The only thing in the email was a clip. It played on one of the large screens, magnified. It wasn't polished or professional. Just one guy filming another guy with his cell. On the other hand, the star of the movie got my attention.

The clip showed Kozlov, standing in the historic Old Town Square by the Orloj, a medieval clock that was one of the most famous tourist spots in Prague. He looked pale and he moved stiffly, but he was very much alive, carrying a gym bag on his shoulder, flashing his square, yellow teeth in a mirthless smile.

"He's alive," I muttered, eyes glued to the screen. "The beast is here, in Prague."

"It could be a doctored picture or an effort to misdirect." Trev's eyes narrowed on the clip. "If it is, it's a good one. We're conducting further analysis as we speak."

"What's he doing now?" I leaned over Trev's shoulder and watched as Kozlov settled the duffel on the ground and unzipped it.

Trev's frown etched deeper on his forehead. "We're about to find out."

The camera went in for a closeup. Squinting, I made out some sort of a prop, a mask perhaps. Then I realized I stared at a human head topped with a mop of dark hair.

My pulse sped up.

When Kozlov reached into the duffel and tilted the head up, I spotted a pasty face with thin blue lips that bent slightly beneath a hooked nose. A pair of half-lidded eyes stared out at the sky, but only the whites showed between the eyelids. The severed neck, crusted with dried blood, showed that the man's head had been chopped off.

Recognition iced my guts. I knew this man.

"Fuck this." Trev slammed a hand on the table, shaking his head at the same time as if denying what he was seeing. "Is that...?"

"Cy." My stomach hit the floor. "That's Cyborg."

Chapter Eighteen

Mac

“I don’t like your plan,” Trev announced, his jaw set at an intractable angle. “It’s half-baked.”

“Half-baked, my ass,” I countered, standing before the mirror in the bedroom of Trev’s temporary quarters. “This is our one chance to get Kozlov. He won’t be expecting me. He never saw me.”

“Oh, come on.” Trev glared. “He knows Danika had help in Ukraine.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I insisted. “This is our opportunity to strike.”

“We’re a team,” Trev shot back. “I don’t like the solo nature of your expedition.”

“Bullshit. I won’t be alone.” I picked up the smart glasses and set them on the bridge of my nose. “You’ll be coming along with me. In your own words, you’ll ‘see what I see, hear what I hear.’ Right?”

“I’ll be here, in this apartment, monitoring you, sure,” Trev admitted. “But that’s not the same as having someone

watching your back. We should enlist DS for backup on the ground.”

“It will take hours for them to get authorization. We don’t have time to waste.” I fiddled with my tie. “Also, I’m not DS’s asset to protect, so they’ll deny our request and forbid us from executing our plan. Technically, we don’t have jurisdiction and they won’t wanna risk a diplomatic spat. So, no. We’re not bringing DS into this. We’re doing this my way.”

Druid let out an aggravated huff. “Why did I know you were gonna say that?”

“It’s just a recon mission.” My newly acquired twill suit fit me just right, but the tie was a problem. No matter how I knotted it, it hung way above my belly button. I attempted to adjust it again. “I’m gonna do a little scouting and see if I can get a fix on Kozlov.”

“Right,” Trev grouched, unable to conceal his exasperation. “Because if you get a lead on Kozlov’s whereabouts you’re not gonna go after him.”

“The sooner we take him out, the sooner we finish this. Kenzie will be safe. Danika, too, I guess. You and I can go back to base.”

“True, but why do I whiff the stink of revenge reeking from you?”

“The fucker killed Cyborg,” I bit out the words and met Druid’s stare in the mirror. “My friend was beheaded by a savage beast who is a stain on the human race.” The loss punched me in the gut all over again. “So, hell yeah, that stink in the air is the smell of vengeance. I’m gonna hunt down Kozlov and send him to meet the devil.”

“That was quite the speech, you preening peacock.” Trev glowered. “Cy was my friend, too. I feel the loss. I wanna do the same thing.”

“I know.” I sighed. “But one of us had to say it aloud and I guess it was me.”

“Look, I’ll do whatever needs doing to find the son of a bitch,” Trev pledged. “But you are in a reckless mood and our resources are limited. We could use local expertise to navigate these waters. I know Danika is on the wrong side of your rage at this point, but Prague is her turf. We should bring her in on this. She’d want to be in.”

“I give zero fucks about what she wants.” What I needed to do was end this clusterfuck, deliver Danika alive to

my daughter as I'd promised, and forget the rest. "I don't need her help."

Trev searched my face with a somber gaze that managed to combine compassion, solidarity, and shrewdness. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I lied, fiddling with the stupid tie.

"Is your head really in this mission?"

"Of course it is," I huffed. "I can keep my compartments tight and my brain in the game."

Trev huffed. "If you say so."

"Fuck." I ripped off the recalcitrant tie. "Are you sure that Professor Jonathan Wilson needs to wear a tie today?"

"I'm sure." Trev wheeled himself to my side. "Professor Wilson is a classy kind of guy. Plus, he's coming from one of those think tank meetings that serve as his cover to be in Prague. Crouch down. Let me do this."

My knees creaked as I squatted down and got eye-level with Druid.

He appropriated my tie and undid the mess I'd made. "Apparently, you and ties don't get along and I'm officially your valet."

“Don’t give me shit, Druid. I’m not in the mood.” I tilted my chin and stretched my neck so he could work on the tie. “I can handle the mission. If you’re mad because you have to stay here, then get over it. I know you’d prefer to be out in the field, but I need you to stick with Danika and keep this place secure. Her safety is priority one.”

“Because of Kenzie.”

“Yes,” I assured him, denying any personal concerns I may have harbored for the woman who’d managed to seduce me twice. “I also need your super cyber skills to fill in the blanks.”

“So.” He lasered me with his stare. “It’s not my wheels keeping me out of the action?”

“Fuck that, man.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Since you’ve been with Elite, have your wheels ever kept you out of the action?”

“No.”

“There’s your answer.”

“Promise me you won’t rush to do something I wouldn’t do.”

“That gives me an awful lot of leeway.” I grinned, trying to dispel his worries. When his frown didn’t budge, I sighed. “Copy that. I promise.”

He finished knotting the tie. I straightened and looked in the mirror. The twill suit. The sharp-looking glasses. The perfectly knotted tie. Yup. Professor Wilson was ready to go.

“The lunch bell is about to ring.” I checked my watch and flashed my teeth at Trev. “It’s go-time.”

Mariska Grigoris sat across from me at the window-side table at one of Prague’s most famous Art Deco cafés. It overlooked the river and provided us with views of the Charles Bridge in the distance. After polishing off a hearty bowl of borscht, I dunked my remaining piece of dark bread at the bottom of the plate, scooped up the last of the broth, and swallowed the sippy treat.

“Mm-hmm.” I licked my lips and smiled at Mariska. “Delish.”

“I see that you enjoy the local cuisine,” she remarked in her softly accented English.

“Very much so.” I wiped my mouth with the immaculate napkin.

Her gaze slid down to my lips. “Has your hearty appetite been sated?”

“One aspect of my appetite, perhaps.” I could play this game as well as she could. “I have room for dessert if it’s available.”

“Oh, it’s available.” She hooked the front of her foot over my calf. I couldn’t help but notice she’d ditched her shoe for now. The brazen operative brushed her bare toes up and down the slacks that covered the back of my legs. “Shall we have a heart-to-heart before we go to your hotel room?”

“Sure, why not?” I motioned for the waitress. “Coffee, please. *Preso* for me.” I looked at Mariska. “You?”

“I’ll take a *preso*, as well.”

“I’ll also take a slice of one of those fruit sheet cakes.”

“One *bublanina*, please,” Mariska translated for me.

The waitress cleared our table and signaled to someone else. Another waitress approached our table pushing a dessert cart. I relaxed in my chair and watched her cut and plate the

cake. Disregarding the waitress's presence, Mariska continued her under-the-table footsy adventures, smiling, always smiling.

The midday sun poured in through the elongated windows and set ablaze the colors of the geometric patterns refracting through the stained-glass designs. A kaleidoscope of red, blue, and yellow rays pierced the dining room, reflected off Mariska's dark hair, and highlighted the harmony of her petite features—a perfect nose, a pair of round pouty lips, and the sweeping arch of her brows over her shrewd eyes.

Those eyes. Man. They matched the bejeweled green of the stained-glass windows. They also didn't miss much. Over lunch, they'd examined me as she tested my cover with a barrage of smart questions cleverly concealed as casual conversation. She asked me to tell her stories from when I was a child and then moved on to test my knowledge of modern military history.

For the most part, I held my own, but since the devil was always in the details, it was nice to have Trev's voice whispering the specific facts and morsels of minutiae that served to solidify my assumed identity.

The woman was an excellent spy. She could make a grunt flap his lips nonstop and feel like a god talking about

himself. She wore a mini-wrap dress that turned heads. The sexuality that radiated from her would've blinded most men. But not me. *Uh-uh*. I was used to handling this level of danger. No woman was ever gonna seduce me again for her wily purposes.

While one waitress placed the cake in the middle of the table, the other returned with our coffees. It was only after they retreated that Mariska grabbed a fork, dug into my cake, and after swallowing a bite, hit me with her astute stare. "So, business before pleasure?"

"What business are we talking about?"

"Oh, Jonathan, don't play coy with me." Her foot breached my knees. "It doesn't suit you. You want something from me. I want something from you. That's why we're here. Right?"

"Silly me." Using the side of my fork, I carved out a piece of cake and tried very hard to ignore her toes crawling up between my thighs. "And here I thought we were getting together to fuck all afternoon."

I didn't miss the moment when her eyes widened and sparkled with lust, but she quickly schooled her features into a neutral expression.

“Oh, but we are, darling.” The smile she gave me was a promise that would’ve lifted the cocks of marble statues. For a moment she brushed her toes over my groin. My dick obliged, the fucking he-whore. “You feel... nice.” It was only after Mariska made sure she’d created a lasting impression that she withdrew her foot altogether. “We’ll get to the fucking part as soon as we complete our deal.”

“A deal, huh?” I set my fork on the tablecloth and, leaning back in my chair, crossed my arms and legs, the latter for protection. “Why is it that it’s always a deal with you people?”

“I’m assuming you’ve dealt with my government before?”

“Academic studies on modern military history require highly placed sources if they’re to become best sellers.”

“Oh, yes.” She nodded knowingly. “Your books, of course.”

It was time to get to the point. “What do you want from me?”

She flashed me a wily smile. “Sex and... information, of course.”

“Of course.”

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“Sex and...” I let out a short cackle. “Information, of course.”

“I like you, Jonathan.” She grinned, pointing the tines of her fork at me. “I think we’ll have a very productive friendship.”

“I like what I’m hearing so far.” I picked up my coffee and, holding the delicate porcelain handle with two fingers, motioned toward her. “You go first. What kind of information do you need?”

“I don’t want to sound sly or anything.” She set down her fork. “But I’d like to know more about Danika Kos.”

“*Danika?*” The fine china made a delicate clink as I returned the cup to the saucer. “Why her?”

“I have reason to believe she has some ‘misinformation’ that could hurt our cause.”

“I see.” I pretended to think about that. “What kind of ‘misinformation’?”

She pressed her lips together and eyed me closely before she put her cards on the table. “Pictures from our latest

hardware taken in Ukraine.”

“Surely you don’t believe that Danika really went to Ukraine?” I let out a few chuckles, hoping they sounded authentic. “She’s not that type of gal. She likes opera, as you well know. I mean. Opera. Really?”

Mariska laughed at my grimace.

“Danika is harmless,” I said. “She’s boring, really.”

“But you are banging her, aren’t you?”

“A gentleman never tells.” I grinned, but the answer was all there.

“I bet you stayed with her last night,” she said, confirming my suspicions that she had someone follow us to Danika’s flat. “You slept with her after the opera, didn’t you?”

I didn’t bother to deny it. Not only was it true, but it explained my comings and goings from Danika’s place, including my absence from my hotel room last night and why I’d walked to my lodgings this morning before I called Mariska, things she was bound to know if she had eyes on me as I suspected she did.

“You are a harsh mistress,” I teased with a straight face. “We haven’t even hit the sack and you’re already

demanding an exclusive?”

“Oh, you. You. I like you.” She lifted a petite finger in the air and returned my grin. “I *am* a harsh mistress, and I would love to tie you down and spank that lovely ass of yours with my favorite crop while I squeeze your dick dry, but you’ll have to put out or shut up if we’re gonna get along. At this very moment, all I’m asking is for you to do a little sniffing around next time you see her, hopefully soon.”

The order of things suited me fine. Ordinarily, I was open to all kinds of games in bed, but I wasn’t letting this woman anywhere near me with ropes or cuffs or a crop, for that matter. As to my ass, my dominant nature would never allow it to be under anyone’s jurisdiction, let alone hers. Mariska’s sexual appetites might require a little tamping down.

“Why would I want to hurt Danika?” I leaned forward on the table and fingered the golden edge of the dessert plate. “She’s been nothing but helpful to me. I wouldn’t want to put her in danger or to somehow damage her career.”

“Oh no, dear, you misconstrue my intentions.” Mariska reached out and patted my forearm as if appeasing a puppy. “I don’t want to hurt Danika. On the contrary. It’s in my best

interest that she never learns about my little information-gathering project.”

“I don’t understand.” I deepened my frown. “Why are you so keen on her?”

She slumped back in her chair and crossed her arms. “The less you know, the better.”

“Sorry, but I’m a scholar.” I flashed an apologetic smile. “Curiosity is at the heart of everything I do.”

“So, now I have to cater to your curiosity as well?” She shook her head in annoyance. “Very well. If I can prove that Danika went to Ukraine and retrieved whatever ‘misinformation’ she thinks she has, it would be a career-changing opportunity for me.”

“So this is all about your career?”

She lifted a skinny shoulder. “What else?”

Invading Ukraine. Wrecking international relations between Western allies. Killing more innocent people. I didn’t say any of that.

“Hmm.” I tapped two fingers over my mouth, trying to strike the right note between interested and reluctant.

“Personally, I don’t think Danika has what it takes to survive

in a war zone, but if I were to do this, how do you propose I get this ‘misinformation’ for you?”

“I bet a big fellow like you can really tire a gal.” She looked at me between her lashes and, after dipping her hand in her purse, set a tiny pill box on the table. “Once she’s down for the count, you should have plenty of time to look around for evidence. A pair of soiled shoes could help us identify Ukrainian soil, for example. And...” She placed a thumb drive next to the pill box. “You could copy her computer files. That would be so very helpful to me.”

A bold move.

“Wow.” I made a show of frowning. “You want a lot from me. Wouldn’t I be breaking some privacy laws if I did that?”

“Only if you got caught, which you won’t,” she assured me. “Those little pills in the box will turn her into Sleeping Beauty, and surely you know enough to erase a laptop’s download history.” She paused to gauge my reaction.

“I’ve never roofied anyone before,” I muttered because I imagined that Professor Wilson, as mercenary as he was about to be, would be reluctant to slip drugs to a woman.

“You’ll be fine and so will she.” She waved a dismissive hand in the air. “At worst, she may have a small headache in the morning. That’s all. Trust me.”

Sure, like I trusted venomous spiders and deadly scorpions.

“You could also facilitate our access to her flat,” she continued. “DS agents are protecting her at the moment, but if you invited her to, let’s say, dinner, for example, the agents would go with you.” She set a small block of putty next to the pill box and the thumb drive. “A print of her house key would make it all go so fast and smooth.”

“I don’t know.” I pretended to consider the idea. “I don’t want to be involved in a diplomatic spat.”

“I guarantee that if you work with me, you won’t be.”

“Don’t take this as an insult.” I held her stare. “That’s a brash promise to make.”

“Darling,” she purred. “I know what I’m doing.”

I didn’t doubt that. Still, it wouldn’t do to concede so easily.

“What about your revamped, renamed KGB operatives?” I matched her daring. “Surely you people have

plenty of agents here in Prague who can do this stuff much better than me?”

“But you already have access,” she explained, as if addressing a small child. “She won’t suspect you. Plus, I don’t want to get the embassy or other agencies involved in this.”

Well, that was interesting. *If* it was true, something I had yet to determine. “Why not call in the home team?”

“Involving the local assets would be more dangerous for you, for Danika,” she offered, as if she cared. “This is a personal project, and I wouldn’t want to reveal or compromise my sources.”

Personal project, my ass. “So, you’re thinking long-term?”

“Why not?” She lifted a skinny shoulder. “You and I could go the distance.”

What she wasn’t telling me was that, once Jonathan Wilson was compromised, he’d have no choice but to continue to work for her or risk being revealed as a spy in the US. This was the Russians’ MO, how their recruiting program worked. It was like the Eagles sang in “Hotel California.” You could check out any time you liked, but you could never leave.

“I don’t know, Mariska.” I backtracked like any smart scholar thinking about betraying his country would do when facing choices like the ones she proposed. “I’m not convinced.”

“Oh, I can be convincing, very persuasive.” She batted her eyelashes at me. “And don’t forget. I’m willing to return the favor. What kind of information are *you* looking for?”

“I’m afraid you may be disinclined to fulfill my request.” I shrugged. “But then again, it’s tit for tat.”

“Tit for tat.” She gave me a firm nod. “Name your price.”

She’d fed me her lines. Now I got to feed her mine. “I’m writing a book.”

“Of course.” She tittered, a cascade of amused giggles. “It’s always about a book with you professor types.”

“It’s kind of a touchy subject.”

“Oh?” Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “How touchy?”

“At first glance, your big boss won’t like it. In fact, he’ll hate it.” I paused and let her think about that. “Shall I continue or is our deal off?”

“You don’t want your friend Danika hurt,” she rallied.
“I get that. I don’t want the motherland hurt. That’s a dealbreaker for me.”

“You gotta love a patriotic gal.” It was my turn to chuckle. “Well, here’s the thing. I think my book would be helpful to your motherland.”

“Why?”

“Because the subject of it is hurting your country.”

Curiosity flashed in her eyes. “How?”

“It’s generating the worst PR in the history of horrible PRs,” I offered as I began to build a credible argument. “It’s a big part of Russia’s image problem in the global community and it will eventually bring down the brunt of international law on your nation. You get me the info I need, and, in the future, you might be able to improve your country’s image abroad.”

Leaning forward, she propped her elbow on the table and her chin on her hand. “I’m listening.”

“I write this book. I give your government plausible deniability. Then your big boss will like it because he’ll have an exit strategy when the time comes to get rid of my subject matter. And believe me, the time will come when he or his

successor will need a viable exit strategy. I can assure you, by then you'll be praised for doing your civic duty."

"Those are some high stakes." Mariska eyed me with something between suspicion and alarm. "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

I clasped my hands together on the table. "I think you do."

"You're entering dangerous territory." She had the tradecraft to pale visibly. "You're going to get hurt, American."

"Aw. Thanks for caring." I flashed my most appreciative grin. "But way before anyone notices, I'll be snug back in the States and out of the line of fire. I can manage to keep myself in play *if* you give me what I need."

"You're making this difficult." Her accent thickened as her irritation surged. "What if I don't have access to the information you require?"

"You do." No sense in leaving this fish dangling from the hook too long. "At the very least, you are well-informed about my subject matter, and you've made contact."

Tiny lines appeared between her eyes. “How do you know this?”

“It was your lipstick on the mirror in the ladies’ lounge at the National Theater.” I smirked. “I was there when you conveyed the ‘special’ message to Danika. She didn’t tell me what that was about, but she looked alarmed. I put two and two together. That’s when I realized that you could be extremely helpful to my scholarship.”

“The order came down the line,” she mumbled, looking very unhappy about being put in a compromising situation. “I didn’t have the option to decline, and I didn’t have direct contact, if that’s what you think.”

“I’m not asking you to risk your life, or your career,” I reiterated. “This is strictly about two independent players exchanging information. You don’t tell on me. I don’t tell on you. We’re both good.”

Forehead furrowed, she seemed to consider her options. “No one can know about this.”

The lie came easy to me. “Agreed.”

“Okay. Let’s play.” She lifted her chin in the air. “What exactly do you need from me?”

“I’m glad you asked.” I widened my smile. “I need any and all information you have on the Bruckner Group, and the current whereabouts of Stanislav Kozlov.”

Chapter Nineteen

Mac

I managed to shock Mariska. Even an agent as sophisticated as her—a woman who'd wrestled me for the dominant position throughout our lunch and given me a good brain-based run for my money—even she could not hide the fear that flared in her eyes when I mentioned the words “Bruckner” and “Kozlov.”

So, okay, she smothered it quickly, hiding her reactions in record time, but The Unit had trained me well. Cue in my analysis and interpretation mode.

Had she been shocked because my request was so outlandish? Did she fear Kozlov and didn't want to get in the line of fire? Or had her reaction betrayed that she understood the opportunities my request entailed, and also the risks associated with it?

All of the above, I hoped. Now I just had to seal the deal and reel in the big fish.

“We are asking a lot of each other.” I motioned for the waitress to bring me the check. “I understand if you don't want to proceed, but if this is going to work for me, I'm gonna

need a firm commitment from you. So..." I took a key out of my pocket and placed it on the table next to me. "I don't need the putty. You can have *this* key to Danika's apartment. I will hand it over and follow through with your other requests if you meet me at my hotel suite with the complete file and the location for Kozlov in one hour."

"*One hour.*" Her pressed lips slithered like worms before she spoke. "You are a cocky son of a bitch."

"I've been told before." I hardened my stare. "What's it gonna be?"

She started to protest, but she was interrupted when the waitress dropped off the check, placing it on the table next to me. I took out my wallet, counted out the bills, and added a substantial tip before closing the leather folio and meeting Mariska's glower.

I rumbled. "So?"

"I can't possibly do what you're asking," she whispered across the table before she got ahold of herself and spoke more calmly. "I need time. The files you want won't be easy to get. Bruckner is a Kremlin project. Kozlov is hard to find. Do you think I'm a magician?"

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do.” I countered her pout with my pearly whites. “I think you’re very good at what you do, and I believe you already know where he is. I’m giving you one hour to confirm your info and bring it to me.”

“You don’t understand. Kozlov is a dangerous man.” Her voice trembled ever so slightly. “Why do you want his location anyway?”

“You’re gonna laugh.” I slumped against the back of my seat and flashed her a grin.

“*Laugh?*” She drew back. “What are you, crazy?”

“Nope.” I lifted my arms in the air. “This is me, neat, no mixers added. This is why I’m a best seller. I’m not crazy. I only want to interview the guy.”

“*Interview Kozlov?*” She gaped. “That’s... impossible! He won’t talk to you. He’ll kill you before he gives you an interview.”

“He won’t,” I stated with total conviction. “This is his chance to tell his story, to make his case to the world. I’ve studied Bruckner and Kozlov for a long time, and I know what Kozlov wants more than anything.”

Mariska's bottle-green eyes preyed on me. "Enlighten me, please."

"Glory," I said. "Kozlov craves glory. He can't get it out in the open, but if he speaks to me, I can manufacture it for him."

She opened her mouth and closed it. I could see her calculating the odds in her head. I guessed what she was gonna say next.

"Kozlov wants one kind of glory, but you crave your academic laurels, and you value them over your life."

"This interview will be the highlight of my career," I admitted. "Can't you see? To stay at the top of my game, I must have it. We are talking about propelling both of our careers forward. If we do this, Kozlov will never know you were involved, and Danika will never realize that you got into her stuff with my help. We both win."

"I don't know if I can give you what you want."

"Will you at least try?" I dared her.

She let out an aggravated exhale. "I can try, but I can't guarantee anything."

“Whereas I can guarantee you this key and the computer files you need.” I picked up the key and returned it to my pocket. “Also, I can guarantee a hell of a good time when we consummate our agreement.”

“*Guarantee?*” She scoffed, wrinkling her nose. “Nobody is that good.”

“I am.”

I slid my foot out of my loafer, ran my stockinged toes between her legs, and discovered she wasn't wearing panties.

How convenient.

I curled and uncurled my toes against her pussy's intimate folds until I found her clit with my big toe and pressed it gently in small circles. She was already so wet that her private moisture dampened the tip of my sock.

The minx got off on dangerous negotiations. In her line of work, her libido served her well and probably worked overtime. I wondered if she planned to betray me before or after.

“Okay.” Her pupils dilated in response to my furtive caress and the outline of her nipples broke through the thin fabric of her dress. “One hour.”

Returning my foot to my loafer, I cut her off, knowing quite well that we were both playing our parts in a dangerous game. The win was up for grabs and the possible outcomes were all dangerous, but it was worth the shot. For Cy. For Kenzie. For the world.

I gathered the tiny pill case and thumb drive, dropped them in my pocket, pushed my chair back, and rose from the table.

“It’s been a pleasure.” I bent over and brushed my lips over her mouth.

Her mouth responded quickly, almost mechanically, deepening the kiss and appropriating my lips, performing with convincing passion. I mirrored her reaction until she ran out of breath.

I whispered against her mouth. “I hope to see you at my hotel in one hour.”

“Me too,” she whispered back, her cheeks flushed, her breaths coming in short bursts.

I strolled out of the restaurant at a leisurely pace, knowing that for only the second time this day, the Russian spy had told me the truth.

Danika

“Wake up, Danika. Wake up,” a familiar voice called in my ear. It reached like a distant echo into the dark well where I had fallen after crying myself to sleep. It was cold and humid in the well, and a shallow tide lapped at my toes and turned the ground beneath my feet into a sticky mire.

Drip, drip, drip. Where was all this water coming from?

We come from you, the water answered in my dreams.
We are your tears.

“Danika!” The voice insisted, and a firm hand shook me. “I need you to wake up.”

It wasn't *him*, the man who'd reduced me to nothing with his scorn. Just thinking his name made me hurt all over again. *Him* I couldn't face. Neither did I want to face anyone else just yet.

“Go away,” I mumbled, batting the annoying touch out of the way.

Keeping my eyes stubbornly closed, I grabbed a pillow and plopped it over my face. For once in my life, I was down

for the count. We had to stay put for the moment and, according to my self-imposed grieving schedule, I had twenty-four hours to feel utterly devastated and miserable before I had to pull myself together.

“No can do the going-away thing.” Trev lifted the pillow from my face. He grabbed my arms, pulled me up until I sat on the bed, and swept my legs over the edge of the mattress. Parked beside my bed, he sat in his wheelchair, looking as exasperated as I’d ever seen him.

“What is it?” I pushed a lock of hair away from my face.

“We’ve got work to do.”

“Well, good morning to you, too.” I pushed off the bed and, holding the sides of my robe together, tied the belt around my waist. “Since when did you turn into a slave driver?”

“It’s way past morning,” he said. “It’s almost two o’clock in the afternoon.”

I’d already spent at least half of my self-allotted grieving time and I didn’t feel any better.

“If you’d had the kind of night I did, you’d be dragging, too.” I threw the curtains aside and regretted it when

the harsh sunlight stabbed at my retinas. I covered my eyes and groaned.

“If it’s any consolation,” Trev said, “Mac is really upset.”

“He’s got reason to be, so no consolation for me.”

Feeling like an old lady, I forced my feet to move.

“Sorry about that.” He rolled behind me as I padded to my dresser. “But, right now, we’ve got work to do and you can’t do your part looking like that.”

“Like how?” I looked at the mirror hanging atop the dresser and, letting out a little shriek, jumped back. “Holy shit.”

“Yeah, not your best look,” Trev agreed all too readily.

“You’re not helping, Druid,” I ground out between stiff lips.

“Sorry, Kos, but we need to move on fast from ‘poor, pitiful me.’”

“I don’t do ‘poor, pitiful me.’” Chin up, I stepped up to the dresser, but my bravado was a lie. The face of the Wicked Witch of the West reflecting in the mirror startled me all over again. It was only missing the nose wart.

My nostrils were angry red, my skin was mottled and sallow, and the bags under my eyes looked like bruises. The whites of my eyes were littered with broken capillaries. As to my hair, it looked like a squirrel had built a nest on my head.

So this was what falling apart looked like for a woman who'd never lost it before. For years, I'd fought hard to keep it all together, and yet all it took was one bitch of a conversation with Mac for me to crumble in despair.

First time for everything.

I slid open a drawer, grabbed two Tylenol from the bottle, and popped them into my mouth. The soles of my feet stepped over a mess of pretzel bits as I hurried into the bathroom. The wheels of Trev's chair also crunched as they crushed whatever small pieces remained when he trailed after me. I opened the faucet, slurped the water directly from it, and, throwing my head back, swallowed the pills.

“Two beers, that's all I had, but I'm suffering from the most terrible Mac hangover.” I cupped my hands under the faucet and splashed water on my face. “That man. Ugh. He almost killed me, and I don't mean that in a good way. Well, the good way came first, and then...”

I looked in the mirror and watched in horror as my eyes filled up anew. The babbling. The crying. This just wasn't me. Was there no end to this pain?

"Death by Mac." I snatched the hand towel from the ring and whirled on Trev. "I volunteered to get my heart ripped out of my chest and he did it, no holds barred. I'm still bleeding."

"So is he." For two seconds, his gaze gleamed with a hint of compassion, then his face hardened. "We'll have to talk about this later. Right now, I need you up and fully operational in your cultural attaché persona, and I mean stat."

"What's the emergency?" I asked, drying my face.

"Emergencies, plural," Trev corrected me. "Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I ain't got time for monkey minding you at the moment. Cyborg is dead, Kozlov may be in Prague, and Mac's in trouble."

He might as well hit me over the head with a bat three times in a row. An avalanche of questions overwhelmed me, and so did my emotions, shock and grief for Cy and terror at the thought of Kozlov being nearby; but it was the last part that struck me the hardest.

I blinked once. “Did you say Mac’s in trouble?”

“He is.” Trev gave me a curt nod. “I also know that he is the last person in the world you wanna face and that you are the last woman in the universe he’d want help from right now, but we’re all he’s got.” The urgency in Trev’s usually calm demeanor hit me in the belly. “We gotta go, now.”

“Got it.” Without a second thought, I raced to my closet. “We’re going.”

Mac might hate my guts forever, but I wasn’t gonna let anyone hurt or kill my daughter’s father, who also happened to be the only man I’d ever loved.

I just wasn’t.

Chapter Twenty

Mac

I took a taxi to my hotel, a ride that gave me the opportunity to identify my tails as the driver negotiated the heavy traffic. It was easy for my trained eye to spot the gray Skoda Fabia following me for the first five minutes and the red Jawa motorcycle that took over surveillance after that. It stuck with us as we arrived at the location from where I'd launched my op this morning.

Trev had booked Jonathan Wilson in this high-profile, five-star hotel to make sure my cover held. It wasn't far from Danika's flat and, first thing in the morning, I'd strolled over and called Mariska using the landline from my room there.

Although the place was graced with its original, palatial facade, inside it was a combination of traditional charm and modern rooms. The same old man sat on the velvet couch in the lobby, reading the same old paper. I was trained to note the small details and I had a keen eyesight. The newspaper was dated yesterday.

Either somebody was getting careless or perhaps they simply wished to announce their presence. Either way, I took notice. This was what happened when predators preyed on each other. Several players were in on this one. Figuring out who was who was always a challenge as we tracked, trailed, and stalked each other.

It didn't faze me. This was my game. Hunts within hunts within hunts.

My suite was on the fifth floor, the uppermost level of the hotel. After unlocking the room, I went inside and closed the door behind me. I kicked off my shoes, stretched out in the king-size bed, and fiddled with my phone, pretending I was checking my messages. Instead, I brought up the encrypted BB app disguised on my cell.

Sure enough, I had a coded alert from Trev, a spatial plan showing that two heat signatures had swept my suite. The pair who had scouted my room had been careful and thorough. They'd looked for tracking tech everywhere.

Battle Brothers' proprietary technology had helped me to make sure nobody could find the heat and motion detector I'd secreted in the room, and that included the KGB or

whatever scrambled alphabet soup name they were calling themselves these days.

The innovative gadget concealed inside the battery of my electric razor was BB's exclusive design. Ajax "Mayhem" Battleson and Druid had collaborated to produce the diminutive marvel. While in passive mode, it tracked intruders but emitted no active radio, magnetic, or electrical signals, which made it impossible to find. It could also be used as a signal scrambler. Lying in my bed, I programmed it to activate exactly thirty-seven minutes from now.

The assets that had searched my private space had probably left behind some tracking tech of their own, audio and video bugs most likely. I was on a tight schedule, and I didn't have time to check. Using the same app, I notified Trev I was in the space. Within moments, Druid traced, identified, and hacked the devices. After he hijacked the technology, he remote-activated the decoy feed.

We'd recorded the decoy feed before I left for lunch with Mariska. While we prepared the decoy, Druid ran an hour of a manufactured feed that showed me taking a nap to appease the surveillance team watching the single mini-cam we'd identified in the suite.

Now, whoever was monitoring me would track, hear, and see me getting ready for a tryst—settling the lube and the box of condoms on the night table, turning down the sheets, closing the curtains, and streaming a jazz playlist. Then they would see me going into the bathroom and taking a pre-sex shower.

With the visual, audio, and thermal decoy feed running, I was now free to prep.

First, I needed to claim my weapons. They'd originally been brought up to the room inside several pieces of luggage as part of our team's contingency plan. Before flying out of Prague, Sebastian—the only one at Elite who had any hopes of bulking up to my size and appearance, had impersonated Jonathan Wilson, checked into the hotel in my stead, and dropped off my luggage.

Yeah, we at Elite always hedged our bets.

Like me, Seb was a former Delta operator. He and the rest of the team knew how to deliver the goods. I trusted them with my life. I stood on the mattress, perched my hands on my hips, and contemplated the upholstered headboard.

From floor to ceiling, it consisted of several white fabric panels flanked by corrugated metal walls at either side

of the bed, a sleek, modern look that dominated the suite.

The headboard's upholstered panels were of different sizes and geometrical shapes. They fit together like a puzzle. I had no doubt that the tangos who'd searched the room while I'd gone to lunch with Mariska had employed a metal detector to sweep for arms, but my weapons' metal signature had been concealed by... more metal.

Having previewed the room over the internet, Sebastian had arrived prepared with a drill, spare screws, and lightweight iron sheets cut to size concealed in my luggage. Kane and Knox had infiltrated the place as a pair of brawny bellboys and took care to transport the bags. They'd also lent Sebastian a hand during the installation, while Karma ran overwatch from the building across the street.

As Kenzie often said about good things, being part of a top-tier team was "Da Bomb."

The guys had painstakingly uninstalled the headboard's upholstered panels and mounted the pre-cut sheets of iron behind each panel. In one specific panel, the rectangular one in the third tier, they'd installed two sheets and sandwiched my weapons between them. This strategy guaranteed that any metal detector would scream bloody murder when focused on

the headboard. Considering that the walls on both sides were also metal, the job became daunting and useless to boot.

It was time to find out if our ruse had worked.

I turned up the jazz playlist, pulled my multi-tool from my pocket, and unscrewed the rectangular panel, whistling to the notes of an old Louis Armstrong tune. After lowering the panel from the wall, I laid it down on the bed and popped off the top iron sheet. Right before my eyes, neatly tucked in a foam frame, were a combat knife, a Sig Sauer, a sound suppressor, and several loaded mags.

I let out a wolf whistle. “Well, hello lovelies.”

They weren’t as sexy as an M4 or an HK416, but hey, they’d do.

Thanking the guys in my head, I returned the panel to the headboard and affixed it to the wall. At this point, I had no clear idea of Mariska’s capabilities, so I deployed the weapons strategically throughout the room and slowed down to prepare a special champagne flute for her.

Contingency thinking was all about having options.

I loved having options.

When I was done, I had all of five minutes left to jump in the shower and dress loosely in a pair of low-riding sweatpants and nothing else. I'd just finished fastening the strings when a firm knock drifted from the door.

I sent a code, notifying Trev that I was ready to go. The green light that flashed on my app indicated that the decoy feed would stop playing in three seconds. I counted down, then walked out of the bathroom and seamlessly patched my real actions to the spot where the decoy feed ended.

Towel in hand, still drying my hair, I padded to the door. A peek in the peephole showed me that Mariska was alone. I was half Irish, but how long could my *suerte* last?

I opened the door and let her in.

She strolled into the suite, betraying the confidence of an operative who knew there were no weapons in the room. In turn, I assumed that one or more weapons were neatly stowed in her tote. She took in the expansive room with avid eyes, balancing on those impossibly high heels of hers.

Her gaze paused briefly over the condoms on the night table and the champagne flutes. She allowed for a small smile. Swinging her hips, she crossed the room, walked to the

window, took a seat on the wingback chair, and after crossing her legs, inspected me from head to toe.

“Well?” I said, scrunching my curls with the towel.

“You do realize that I could’ve walked in here and taken that key from you whether you wanted to give it to me or not,” she announced, her gaze doubling back up to my pecs.

“I do, indeed.” I dropped the towel on the console, leaned against the door, and crossed my arms.

She arched her eyebrow at me. “But?”

“No buts. I figure I’d take the risk. You strike me as an intelligent woman. Your job is to build networks of foreign collaborators, which incentivizes living sources of information and de-incentivizes killing your prospective collaborators.”

Other people do your killing, I didn’t add.

“Your balls must be the size of cantaloupes,” she offered flatly.

I perched my hands on my hips. “Are you ready to find out?”

“We are quite the mercenary pair.” She tilted her head. “I like your choice of music, by the way. Subtle but sexy.”

“I’m glad you approve.”

She didn't need to know that the playlist was specially designed to hide the radio frequencies now coming from the miniature gadget concealed in the battery compartment of the electric razor.

She didn't need to know that it was just now beginning to jam the bugs, upping the static and blurring the images, feigning equipment malfunction; or that the gadget would also shield the room, preventing anyone else from eavesdropping on our conversation.

I opened the chest's top drawer and, making sure my back was never exposed to her, set the single key on the polished surface. "Your turn."

"This is everything I have." She pulled a file from her purse and dropped it on the table next to her with a huff.

"Happy?"

"Ecstatic." I couldn't muster the necessary enthusiasm for the next phase of the mission, but I went for it anyway.

"Now what?"

"Now you're gonna deliver on the guarantee you made to me." She uncrossed her legs and separated her knees, giving me an excellent view of her assets. "That is, if you're up for it."

“*Up for it?*” I took a few steps and came to stand at the foot of the bed, grinning like the cocky fool I was playing. “Turns out Mariska is also a comedian.”

“I do have a good sense of humor.” Wielding her vixen’s smile, she got up from the chair, strolled to me, stopped three feet away, and batted her mascara-laden eyelashes at me. “But I must admit, seduction is my forte.”

I couldn’t disagree with her.

Keeping her eyes on me, her gaze projected electric hunger, longing, and desire. Moving slowly, sensually, she undid the knot at her waist, allowing her wrap dress to, well, unwrap from her figure. To a song by Duke Ellington, the dress fell on the carpet.

Mariska Grigoris stood before me naked, her small body a study of minute perfection. She bared her small breasts, her large nipples, and her shaved pussy for my eyes.

So it was gonna be after. Or perhaps during. Yeah, during would be optimal.

She meant to take me by surprise. She was planning a reprisal of Samson and Delilah. I’d be nothing more than another lost academic who disappeared without a trace.

The woman was good. Beautiful as well. My dick twitched, the mercenary traitor. My cock might be a he-whore, but my mind and heart were still wallowing in sorrow.

“Champagne?” I made a quick detour for the mini-fridge and, ignoring her surprise when I didn’t jump her, uncorked the bottle and poured two flutes.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I noted a slight hardening in her gaze, but at this point, I was gonna do everything I could do to prolong the foreplay because a) I needed to be ready, nimble, and unencumbered to face whatever was coming; b) I didn’t wanna fuck a viper who’d strike the second I wasn’t looking; c) Even fresh from my heartbreak, she wasn’t Danika.

I offered Mariska one of the flutes. She took it from me. I clinked glasses with her and sipped on the bubbly. The woman lifted the glass to her lips, then paused.

Damn my rotten luck.

I’d pulverized the roofies she’d given me for Danika at the bottom of her glass. The bubbles disguised my ruse, but she was either suspicious, careful, or too eager for sex—maybe all of the above. She rose on the tip of her high heels,

and after, cradling my head and lowering my face to hers, claimed my lips, a sudden, violent mauling.

Holy shit. She sucked on my face as if she was a leech. I swear I heard the sound of tearing when she ripped her mouth from mine. My lips smarted. Snatching the flute from my hand, she settled both glasses on the dresser and then looked at me, eyes glowing like radioactive stones.

“I hope you like it rough.” She wrenched my eyeglasses from my face and threw them over her shoulder. They bounced on the carpet and got lost under the console.

Goodbye, Druid. I felt like I should be waving.

With acrobatic flare, she took a step back and, standing on one foot, perched her other stiletto on the grid of my stomach. “Yes?”

I made a noncommittal sound.

She pushed, hard, and I dropped back on the bed. Sprawled on my bare back, I met her lascivious stare.

“Good.” Her accent thickened. “Rough is how I like it.”

She reached down, grabbed my sweats, and yanked them down halfway to my knees. My treacherous dick swelled

just enough to cover my disdain for the woman.

“Good boy.” She pounced on me.

In one agile leap, she sat on my lap, grinding her hips, rubbing her soaked pussy all over my dick. In a purely reflexive reaction, her natural lube stiffened my sex more. For the first time in my life, I cursed my reactive nature. I shocked myself when I visualized another woman altogether. A woman I couldn't have.

Leaning over me, Mariska's ferocious mouth claimed my lips. She pushed her tongue inside and raked my lips with her teeth. At the same time, she clawed at my chest, a stinging rake of nails that sank into my skin. For a moment there, I wondered if she had carved my nipple off my chest. With her other hand, she grabbed my fingers and landed them with a slap on her ass.

“Come on, big boy,” she ground out in a low, guttural voice. “Show me what you've got.” Her teeth sank into my lower lip, and I tasted blood.

Holy fuck. Only the knowledge that I was holding back my strength prevented me from going into defensive mode. For a second there, I felt doomed, but then I remembered I

could take her out of commission with a flick of my wrist. I wasn't helpless and I was not gonna be anyone's victim today.

The electronic buzz of a keycard running over the door lock drifted from the door. I made my move. I rolled on the mattress and pinned Mariska under my body at the edge of the bed.

For a small woman, she was surprisingly strong. She fought me hard, and by that I meant she wriggled under me, brushing her breasts all over me, grinding her sex against mine, wrestling to climb back on top of me as if she was in heat.

Leaving her legs flaring at either side of my hips, I kept her pinioned beneath me, trapped her wrists in one of my hands, and reached for the gun I'd tucked in the underside of the bed. My fingers were already wrapped around the Sig Sauer when a familiar voice stopped me from taking a shot at the intruder.

“Jonathan!” The female voice hit me like a hammer to the head and so did the sound of the door as it slammed shut. “What's the meaning of this?”

Craning my neck, I recognized Danika standing by the door, wearing a cream blouse and a royal blue pantsuit that

matched the current hue of her wide eyes—the color of fury. She sported a fearsome frown and a mouth so straight her lips had disappeared on her face.

Oh, shit. She was the last person I expected here. And she looked pissed.

What the hell was she doing here?

Chapter Twenty-one

Danika

There were sights that no sane version of me wanted to see, especially if they involved the person who'd stolen my heart, the same merciless man who had so summarily destroyed it last night. It was even more painful that my current view entailed my hunky obsession doing it with a shrewd, perilous vixen who was now my professional and personal adversary.

And yet here I was, experiencing the terrible shock, even though, intellectually, I knew that my emotions mattered little compared to the dangers we faced. I clutched the leather weekender I carried under my arm, perched my hand in the front pocket of my pants, and, cocking my hip, aimed my glower at the lovers entwined in each other's arms.

"*Danika?*" Mac pushed himself off Mariska but kept his leg perched over the lower half of her body as if trying to maintain the connection between them or perhaps to keep the writhing snake still. "It's not what you think."

"Oh?" The visceral fury boiling in my belly spiked. "How do you figure that? Do you think I'm braindead,

perhaps?”

Mariska tittered, a shrill, irritating sound that poked at all my wounds.

“It is exactly what you think it is.” She lifted on her elbows and deployed the slyest of her smiles to taunt me.

“Professor Wilson needed a good time after your boring performance last night. *He* called *me*. He knew he wouldn’t get boring from me.”

Ouch. She hit where it hurt the most, at the center of all my fears and insecurities. She also reminded me of all that I’d lost last night.

“I think it’s time you leave,” Mariska suggested, and I was torn between doing exactly that or wiping the smirk off her face with one or two slaps. “Jonathan, why don’t you tell her to leave us alone to enjoy ourselves?” She waved a regal hand in the air. “Go on.”

It said a lot about my heart’s broken state that as I stood there, watching Mac and Mariska’s naked bodies partly stacked one upon the other, my chest ached as if my ribs were being cracked open.

“It would be for the best if you leave now.” Mac indulged Mariska, twisting the knife already plunged into my back while at the same time widening his eyes at me, urging me to go.

My heartache turned to fury.

“You’re a man whore,” I spat, and his scowl did nothing to alleviate my pain. I took a deep breath and forced myself to follow the script, which wasn’t hard since it felt acutely true at the moment. “I can’t believe I ever put my trust in you.”

The grimace that twisted his handsome face reminded me he didn’t want me.

Druid had tried to prepare me for the range of threats I could face in undertaking this mission. He’d gone over several scenarios and possible outcomes, but in truth, nothing, not even Trev’s thorough briefing, had prepared me for the possessive wrath that burned through me.

It didn’t help that the man at the center of my jealous rage wanted nothing to do with me.

Being human, having a heart?

It sucked.

On the upside, I didn't have to pretend to play the role of the jilted lover for Mariska's benefit. On the downside, I had to keep ahold of my anger and clear my head to safely extract Mac from what was fast becoming a critical situation.

"Green, this is Red," Trev announced over the micro-comms systems tucked in my ear. The BB design was almost invisible to the eye, built to look as inconsequential as a transparent hearing aid and further hidden by my hair. It allowed me to hear Druid, and also the reverse.

"Be advised," he said. "We've got two unmarked vans pulling up at the hotel's back entrance. Stand by for additional information."

Standing by. I acknowledged the warning, but only in my head.

"Danika, dear, why are you still here?" Mariska provoked me with a leer. "Surely this is rather humiliating for you. No?"

I kept my glare on Mac. "I came here for those afternoon delights you promised."

"*Afternoon delights?*" He rallied. "You said you were busy."

“I changed my mind, so I brought my stuff.” I slammed my overnight bag on the console. “I was going to spend the night with you, but now we’re leaving.” I shot Mariska a hate-filled glower and returned my attention to Mac. “You need to come with me.”

“Why?” Mariska widened her arrogant smirk. “He’s a free agent and he’s made his choice. It’s clear he prefers me to you. I wonder why?”

Bracing back on her elbows, she fingered her stiff nipple and allowed a knee to drop to one side, displaying her glossy pussy.

I bit down on my lips. Did she think we were a pair of female chimpanzees competing for the alpha male’s attention? The glee in her leer permeated her tone. She was enjoying this, my humiliation, my pain.

But this wasn’t about me.

It was about surviving Bruckner and keeping Kenzie’s father alive and in one piece. It was also about getting out of Prague alive.

“Green, this is Red,” Trev’s voice crackled in my ear. “I’ve got movement inside the vans. Something’s off.”

We didn't know with certainty if Mariska was working alone, if she was part of a larger group of threats, or if she was being used without her knowledge as bait by Kozlov.

However, Trev had picked up chatter in the Russian embassy's server that mentioned me, and also Mac's alter ego, Jonathan Wilson. This suggested that something was in the works.

If Mariska was working for Kozlov there was a high probability that she was prolonging this scene on purpose, to earn herself more time, time that whoever was in the vans could use to trap and exterminate Mac and me. In any case, we'd planned for worst-case scenarios.

Mac spoke up. "Danika, I—"

"Shut up," Mariska and I snapped at the same time.

Disentangling her lower body from Mac's leg, she rose from the bed and strutted to me, still wearing her high heels. Flaunting her flawless nudity, she stood as tall as her frame would allow. "I'm afraid you've lost this one, Madam Attaché. I have plans for him, and you are not included."

"I'm afraid this man belongs to me, Madam Attaché." I planted my shoes on the carpet. "I don't plan to give him away to a slutty bitch like you."

“Ladies, please.” Mac pushed off the bed, pulled up his sweats, and stood by the side of the bed, his gaze shifting between us. He babbled something about not making an unpleasant situation worse.

“Green, this is Red,” Trev whispered in my ear. “Twelve men dressed in blacks have just exited the vans, carrying suspicious cases.”

My heart sped up. *Hurry this up, Kos.* I returned my attention to Mariska.

“You know what a bitch is, right?” I flashed my teeth, accelerating the inevitable confrontation in light of Druid’s info. “Do you need a translation for ‘slutty’?”

The woman’s face flushed. She swung her fist, but Trev had made sure I was prepared. I ducked her punch, shifted one foot slightly in front of the other, and pushed my hand deeper into my pocket. Threading my fingers through the loops of the brass knuckles Druid had lent me, I flexed my knees and took my shot.

Time slowed down as my fist flew across the air. I launched my right hand across my body, pivoted on the ball of my back foot, and rotated my hips. From the corner of my eye,

I registered Mac lunging toward us, but I didn't want or need his help.

Mariska had been a Russian agent for a long time. She'd been in the biz well before I expanded my attaché duties to dabble in the intel department. Even wearing flat shoes, I was taller than her, but in an all-out fight, she would have the advantage over me. This had to be a conclusive knockout, which explained why I'd settled on a cross punch, and also Trev's insistence on me having hardware at my disposal.

A small exhalation escaped through my teeth—*beesh*—right before my loaded fist struck. The impact rattled my wrist and sent pain shooting up my elbow. The blow landed at the top of Mariska's jaw.

Metal hit bone.

I followed through as Trev had reminded me I would need to do, causing her head to spin hard to her right. The surprise in Mariska's eyes lessened as her pupils lost luster. She stumbled to one side, crashed against the dresser, and slumped down to the floor.

I stared from the brass knuckles to the woman sprawled at my feet and squeaked. "Did I kill her?"

Mac knelt next to the woman and pressed two fingers to her throat. “She’s alive.”

I let out a breath of relief. Physical rage wasn’t my style and there was no scenario where killing a fellow cultural attaché worked out well for me or anybody else.

Mac got up, looked through the woman’s purse, and came up with a pair of cuffs.

Cuffs?

“You two had some hardcore plans,” I muttered crossly.

“*She* did,” Mac snapped as he held her hands behind her back and fastened the cuffs around her wrists. Moving quickly, he dragged Mariska to the closet. He closed the door, jammed a chair under the knob, and locked her inside.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded, snatching a T-shirt from the dresser and jamming it over his head.

“Saving your ass,” I pointed out the obvious.

Mac drew back. “From *her*?”

“Yes, from her.”

He growled. “I didn’t need your help.”

“Well, you got it, so get over it,” I spat, wrestling with his anger and trying to keep mine under control. “Trev picked up some suspicious chatter after you left. We have reason to believe there’s trouble heading your way.”

“Green, this is Red,” Trev spoke in my ear. “Those elements dressed in unmarked blacks are heading to the south service stairs.”

My pulse sped up.

“What’s going on?” Mac demanded.

“They’re here.” I retrieved my bag and plunked it on the bed. “They’re coming.”

“My plan worked.” Mac grabbed a hoodie from the drawers and shoved it on, looking way too pleased with himself. “It’s go time.”

“Your plan was stupid.” With a yank, I unzipped my bag. “Going solo is never the right call. Hush,” I added, pressing the comms in my ear when he tried to deliver an angry retort. “Go ahead, Red.”

“Confirming, twelve heat signatures climbing the south service stairs and about to hit level two,” Trev reported.

“You’ve got a lot of company en route.”

“We need to hurry.” I rummaged through the weekender. “We’ve got twelve tangos heading our way via the south stairwell.”

“Is Kozlov with them?” Mac stuffed his feet into a pair of sneakers, but otherwise, he was so cool you’d think he was about to get a visit from a dear old aunt.

“It doesn’t matter.” I extracted the items I needed from my bag. “There are too many tangos. I came to warn you of a possible attack, but now they’re here. We need to get out.”

“The hell it doesn’t matter.” He slid out a Sig Sauer from its hiding place in the frame of the bed and tucked it in the back of his sweats. “Is our target part of the assault forces or what?”

“Druid says stand by,” I relayed to Mac. “He’s trying to track the intruders through the hotel cameras. He’s activated his facial recognition program. Here.” I tossed Mac a new cell phone and a single ear pod, a mini-comms system like mine. “Druid wants you to ditch your cell and use this one just in case they’re tracking you. You’re Yellow. Trev’s Red. I’m Green. Closed loop, continuous comm system. It’s only the three of us.”

He caught both items, slipped the new cell into his back pocket, and then stuck the mini-comms in his ear and activated it with three taps.

“Red, this is Yellow.” Mac’s voice echoed in my ear as well. “What’s cooking?”

“A whole lot of trouble, Yellow.”

“Do you have target acquired?” Mac demanded as I retrieved the parts of a carbine and began assembling the M4A1 I’d concealed in my overnight bag.

“Working on it,” Druid said, “but you’ve got other targets to worry about.”

“Focus on identifying our high-value target.”

As I continued to put together the carbine, Mac threw his old cell on the floor and stomped on it until it was nothing but a bunch of fragments.

“Hard to run facial recognition software when everyone on the stairs is wearing masks.” Frustration darkened Druid’s voice. “They’re being cautious.”

“What do you mean?” Mac asked, collecting a combat knife from under the pillow and mounting the chair before he began to unscrew the end of the curtain pole.

“The fuckers are deactivating the cameras on the landings of each floor as they ascend, making us blind,” Trev reported. “At the current rate, you’ve got less than five minutes for them to get to your floor. Stand by. Two police vans just pulled up to the front of the hotel.”

“Red, this is Green,” I said, clicking the mag into the well of the M4. “Since the attack hasn’t begun, that’s a fast response time, don’t you think?”

“Record time response,” Trev agreed above a flurry of audible clicks. “Give me a sec here.”

“Make it fast, Red.” Mac slid a gun’s sound suppressor from inside the curtain rod. “We ain’t got time to burn.”

“Roger that.”

After affixing the suppressor to his Sig Sauer, Mac jumped down from the chair and peeked through the curtains. “Where is Druid staged out of?”

“He’s perched on the penthouse across the street, the one with the floor-to-ceiling reflective glass windows.” Joining Mac, I pointed at the building through a small crack between the curtains. “The owner’s away and the penthouse gives Trev an excellent view of this place. In addition, he’s

hacked into the hotel's security systems. He has access to all exterior and interior cameras.”

“Is he watching his back?”

“He's hacked the security cameras in his staging building. This includes cameras inside the flats as well. He can see everything that's happening over there.”

“Good man.” He offered me his handgun and stretched out his other hand. “Wanna trade?”

“You can keep that. I brought my own.” I showed him the Sig Sauer Trev had lent me and handed him the M4. “With Druid's compliments.”

“Gotta love the guy. *Mwa*.” He kissed the carbine and made a comical face that had me smiling in the middle of this shitshow. “Welcome, pretty mama.”

My grin wavered. He was talking about the rifle, not me.

“This is Red,” Trev reported over the comms. “Stairwell contingent has reached the third floor. Twelve policemen have entered and are staged in the lobby.”

“Red, this is Yellow,” Mac said, tucking his handgun in the back of his pants. “The police. Good guys? Bad guys?”

“They’re wearing Czech police uniforms, but the details don’t check. Wrong insignias, ranks worn upside down, no name tags, non-regulation boots. All of them except one are carrying Uzis.”

“Bad guys, then.” Holding up his M4, Mac opened the door, peeked out, then swept the hall, looking through his optics. Finding the hallway empty, he raced down toward the green arrow captioned *Exit*. “Cover my back.”

He didn’t have to tell me. I stood by the door, aiming my gun at the north end of the hallway. Flanked with numbered doors at either side of the hallway, the corridor was pretty long, about the length of a football field.

Lots of ground to cover, Kos.

Three ornamental arches rose from sturdy bases at each end and in the middle. The hallway was also wide, maybe eight or nine feet across. A quick look over my shoulder showed me Mac. He stopped halfway down the hall. He broke the glass of the fire alarm box and pulled the handle before he sprinted to the end of the hallway and turned the corner.

I couldn’t see him anymore.

My eardrums vibrated as the fire alarm began to blare. Since it was the middle of the afternoon, only a few rooms on our floor were occupied. When a couple of doors opened, I concealed my gun behind my back and traded a nervous look with the alarmed folks who scurried out of their rooms.

“The fire door on the south stairwell has been activated and is currently locked,” I explained in my best Czech, not wanting innocent civilians to fall prey to the thugs climbing up the back staircase. “Stay away from the elevators as well. Use the west service stairs. Hurry.”

A suited businessman with a receding hairline and a pointy chin walked out from a few doors down and paused before me. “And you?” he asked.

“Don’t worry,” I lied. “My girlfriend is in the loo. We’ll be right behind you.”

“Don’t tarry,” he called out over the blaring alarms. “You never know when one of these drills is for real.”

He turned the corner as Trev’s voice crackled in my ear.

“This is Red. Be advised. Several fake policemen have boarded the elevators. Three men in each of the two lifts. ETA,

three minutes.”

Mac came around the opposite end, backing away from the sounds of some very loud bangs, his weapon up and ready. “I jammed the access and activated the fire doors. I don’t think they’ll be able to get in from this direction, but they’ll go down a floor or two, and come at us from the other side. Red, do you have a location on my HVT?”

“Negative, Yellow,” Trev replied. “You gotta buy me more time. You can also postpone your meet-and-greet and get the fuck out of there.”

“Might be too late for that, Red. I’m gonna form a one-man greeting committee at the north end of the hallway.” Mac started down the corridor again. “I’ll create a bottleneck at this end. The elevator foyer is about to become a death zone. Green, watch my six. Holler if anyone gets through the south stairs.”

Mac moved swiftly to his position. Taking cover behind the wall that overlooked the sprawling elevator vestibule, he went on one knee and cased the space with his weapon.

Ding.

I held my breath. Here came Armageddon.

Chapter Twenty-two

Danika

The delicate sound of the elevator's chime contrasted with the barrage of firepower unleashed a few seconds later. At the current fire rate, Mac would need more ammo soon. I ran inside the room, grabbed a few loaded mags from my bag, and sprinted down the hall.

"Here you go." Even as I dropped the mags in his hoodie's pocket, he kept aiming and shooting.

"Stay back!" he shouted over the ruckus of the firefight and the fire alarms. "Keep an eye on our rear."

I sprinted back to the other side of the hallway and put my ear to the fire doors. "Yellow, this is Green. I'm not hearing any attempts to get through back here. Expect more tangos coming at you."

"Roger that." Mac's voice was hardly audible. "Prepare to move on my orders."

"This is Red," Trev announced in my ear. "We've got a hit. I repeat. We've got a hit. Our HVT is in the house. He's disguised as one of the fake police officers. Black beret. Blue

uniform. Bulletproof vest with the word '*Policie*' printed on the back. He's carrying an AK-47."

"Facial confirms?" I asked.

"Affirmative," Trev said. "He's not wearing a mask. He's also sweating, so I caught a glimpse of swastikas on each side of his neck beneath a melting layer of makeup. He's flanked by four—scratch that, five—equally dressed operatives. They're riding the second elevator and about to hit the fifth level."

"That's our guy." Mac hooted. "Now we just have to mow down his assault force and let him come to us."

"That's gonna be tricky," Trev's voice crackled over the comms. "We've got more police arriving and this time they're checking as the real deal. Firefighters are also responding to the alarms and streams of people are moving through the building. A SWAT team is setting up a command post with a suit in charge. I also have movement in my building. Three men, carrying a big case, entering the apartment on the sixth floor directly across from your room at your hotel."

"What we got?" Mac demanded.

“Stand by,” Trev muttered. “Magnifying. Shit. They’re setting something in there. I confirm a compact grenade launcher, folks. Time to check out of your suite for good.”

“Green, with me,” Mac called out, even as he kept shooting, holding back the enemy forces gathered by the elevator bank.

“In a minute.” I ran into the room, grabbed my weekender, and, reaching for the folder that Mariska had brought for Mac, dropped it in the bag. Hooking it on my shoulder and securing it under my arm, I pushed the chair aside, twisted the lock, and threw open the door to the closet.

A dazed Mariska spotted the gun in my hand and groaned. A huge bruise marred the side of her face where I’d struck her. I should have felt a little bad about that, but I didn’t.

“Foolish me,” she spat groggily. “I never made you for a killer.”

“I’m not here to kill you.” I hooked a hand under her arm and dragged her out of the closet. “Can you stand up?”

She blinked up at me as if I was asking her to climb Mount Everest. At the very least, I’d given her a concussion.

“Get out of there, Green.” Trev’s warning had an urgent tilt to it. “Weapon is in position and ready to launch.”

“Green!” Mac barked between shots. “You heard Red. Out. Now!”

“I’m going.” Clutching the bag under my arm, gripping my gun in one hand while keeping hold of Mariska’s arm in the other, I dragged the cuffed and naked woman over the carpet as fast as I could. She was small and dainty, but she was also dead weight. I might as well be hauling a horse through quicksand.

“Weapon’s loaded,” Trev reported. “Shooter is taking aim. Finger on the trigger.”

“Green!” Mac shouted. “Where the fuck are you?”

“You wanna die here, girlfriend?” I shook Mariska with all I had.

“*Het,*” she mumbled.

“Then help me out, will you?”

I don’t know how, but I lifted her to her feet, and, supporting her at the waist, half-carried her across the room. She stumbled, and almost fell, but I caught her before she hit the floor.

“Incoming,” Trev called out.

“Go,” I yelled, and her legs gained a measure of speed.

We’d barely cleared the threshold when I heard the telltale sound.

Pfsssssss.

A burst of glass preceded the *boom* that sent us flying. A rush of hot air picked me off my feet and wrenched Mariska from my hold. That same burst must’ve blown the door to the room opposite ours. We catapulted into the empty suite. The explosion slammed us against the far wall so hard that my brain rattled in my skull. The world went black.

Mac

“Report!” I shouted over the ruckus of gunfire. “Green, report, now!”

Nothing from Danika, but lots of Bruckner’s rounds plunking into the walls all around me, sending splinters of wood flying around like additional projectiles.

“Red!” I bellowed as I peeked around the corner and took out another thug. “You got eyes on Green?”

“Nope, negative,” Trev announced. “The smoke is too thick. I can’t locate Green.”

Fuck this.

A wallop of grief and anger slammed me on the chest. The grenade had hit its target and smoke poured out of what had been my suite in ominous black puffs. The fire’s toxic smog drifted into the hallway and reached into my lungs, making me cough. Nothing in that room could’ve survived the direct hit.

Danika. Was she dead?

My chest squeezed so hard I couldn’t breathe. If Danika was dead, Kenzie would hate me forever. *I* would hate me forever. For a man who’d once hoped to build a future with a woman, Danika had gone to her death knowing only hatred and rage from me. For that, a brick of guilt sat on my chest. The oddest emotion smothered all others. I wanted to cry.

My training came to my assistance. I kept shooting the motherfuckers, ignoring the watery film I had to blink off my eyes. The old anger flared. How could I grieve for a woman who’d used and betrayed me? It was the smoke making my eyes sting, I told myself.

“Anything?” I demanded, acquiring a new target and taking it out.

“Nothing.” Trev’s voice had a steady but frantic quality to it. “Maneuvering to secure a better position. You’re gonna need backup.”

“You keep looking, you hear me?” I fought a surge of desperation even as my carbine’s recoil hammered against my shoulder. “Don’t stop. Keep looking.”

“On it,” Druid shot back between heaves. “You keep fighting, you hear me?”

The ape somehow knew I was being assailed by more than Bruckner, by the enemy inside.

“I need your word, Yellow,” Trev insisted. “Promise me.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I’d keep fighting. I pulled the trigger. *Tap, tap, tap.* The truth was, I didn’t know how to stop. But one realization kept dragging me down. If Danika was dead, I’d failed Kenzie.

I couldn’t shake the sense I’d also failed myself.

Danika

For a moment, the world was dark and silent. I may have lost consciousness. When I forced my lids to open, I couldn't hear a thing. Then a high voltage hum gave way to the high-pitched whistle that screeched in my throbbing head, bringing tears to my eyes.

My entire body ached, but I didn't have time to do a self-check. Mariska lay sprawled next to me. Her eyes were closed and a nasty gash bled at the top of her forehead, but she was breathing.

I forced myself to inhale and succeeded only at aspirating smoke, dirt, and ashes. Across the hall, smoke billowed from the suite's door. Flames flared, but the fire sprinklers rained water on the fire crackling in little pools everywhere.

Had we been in that room a second longer, we would've been dead.

It dawned on me that my hearing had returned, but only because Mac kept shouting in my ear. "Report, Green. Report!" *Crack, crack, crack.* "Where the fuck are you? Speak up. Now!"

Bossy Delta. I tried to talk and ended up coughing up half a lung.

“Is that you, Green?” Trev’s voice brightened. “If it’s you, please identify.”

Another attempt at speaking failed.

“Dammit, Green, that better be you!” Mac shouted in my ear. “I need to know you’re okay.”

He *needed* to know I was okay?

“This is Green,” I managed between hacks. “I’m alive. I got our guest out.”

“You are so fucking reckless.” Mac’s rage crackled in my comms. “Can you walk?”

Leaning on the wall, I pushed myself up on my feet. My knees were shaking and I tasted blood in my throat, but I took a step and my legs held. “I can walk.”

“I’m coming for you,” Mac said. “Red, I need three minutes. Are you in position to hold the line?”

These two had come up with a plan while I’d been out.

“I am now,” Trev rasped, his breaths loud in my ear. “You’re on your own for the next few. Ready to execute.”

“Execute, execute, execute,” Mac called out and the comms went silent.

The barrage of firepower doubled. I found my gun still in my grip. Leaning over, I snatched my bag from the debris-covered floor. Fighting to regain my balance, I stumbled across the room, tripping over heaps of destruction. Ten seconds later, the threshold framed Mac's larger-than-life form.

"Holy shit." Eyes wide, carbine slung across his back, he pounced toward me, grabbed me by the shoulders, and patted me down. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine." I wiped the trickle of blood dripping from my nose.

He held my chin and looked into my eyes. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, and if you ask again, I'm gonna punch you in the face."

"Sounds like you." He grabbed my elbow and pulled. "Let's go."

"What about her?" I nudged my chin in Mariska's direction.

"Those are her buddies out there. She'll be found when the dust settles. We ain't got time to linger."

After peeking out of the threshold, Mac led me down the hall in a fast advance, casing the space with his carbine. The hallway snaked before me, but with every step, my gait grew more assured. When we got to the south end, we turned the corner and faced a pair of formidable steel doors.

“Only the fire marshal has the code to open these,” I pointed out.

“We ain’t got time to wait for the fire marshal. Keep an eye on our rear. I’ll take care of this.” Shouldering his weapon, he braced his feet apart, dug his fingers in the split between the doors, and, breaking through the rubber seal, began to push the doors apart.

I peeked out from behind the wall, casing the space with my gun. The hallway remained empty. Trev was keeping our attackers pinned by the elevators, but there was only one Druid and many Bruckners. Kozlov was among them.

I looked over my shoulder. The muscles in Mac’s back flexed. His biceps bulged. The tendons on the back of his neck roped and his veins began to pop on the side of his throat. Opening those doors was an impossible mission, and yet inch by inch the crack appearing between his knuckles widened.

When he got them a couple of feet apart, he moved swiftly. He shimmied between the doors and pressed his back on one side and his feet against the other, keeping them open.

“Come on,” he panted, pitting his strength against the hydraulic system while his body quavered from the effort.

I climbed over his legs and made it to the other side.

Crack, crack, crack.

The first few rounds struck the drywall facing the hallway, plunking a slew of holes in the fancy wallpaper. Moving quickly, Mac shifted positions, then jumped out of the way into the same space where I stood. With a quiet hiss, the fire doors closed behind him, separating us from our attackers.

He peered through the door’s glass insert. “Clear.” He punched the bar and advanced to the top of the stairs. Crossing a finger over his mouth, he peeked over the railing. “Clear again. Stack up. Hand on my shoulder. Let’s go.”

It was a sketchy climb down the south service staircase. There was a lot of scrambling going on in the stairwell. Once we spotted a SWAT team below us, clearing the building floor by floor. Further down the stairs, we avoided

a meeting with the firefighters. To evade them, we stole into a small utility closet and locked the door behind us.

There was barely any space in there. Ignoring the smell of dust and stale air, we stood chest to chest, crammed between tall shelves.

A small amount of light filtered around the doorframe, providing a dim illumination. Cleaning supplies, paint cans, caulking tubes, electrical extensions, scattered tools, and even an old, hand-held, drywall saw piled on the rusted shelves. Industrial versions of brooms, mops, and buckets also packed the space. When I looked up, a straight line of white light fell over Mac's face, dividing it in two.

“Red, this is Yellow,” he whispered. “Do you copy, Red? Over.”

Only static came through the line.

Mac tried a couple more times then exhaled in frustration. “This closet is built into the stairwell. The concrete and steel are blocking the signal.”

“I hope Trev is okay,” I murmured.

“He's not an easy target,” Mac whispered. “Do you hear that? The fire has stopped.”

“Do you think they gave up?”

“Kozlov? Give up?” He scoffed. “Never. He might have pulled back his assault force. They’re probably blending in with the authorities as we speak. Kozlov didn’t come to Prague to give up. I bet you he’s somewhere in this building, waiting to ambush us.”

My heart missed a beat. I wished I never had to face the beast again.

At the sound of steps rushing up the stairs, we both grew quiet. I felt a little dizzy on my feet. A wave of vertigo forced me to brace on Mac. He stiffened against my touch, then relented and reached out to steady me. The adrenaline that had sustained me until now drained out of me. I slumped against him.

“You are still reeling from the blast,” he whispered, and I had no idea if he realized that he was caressing my back in slow, soothing circles. “Your hearing is probably off and that can affect your balance. We’ll get you checked out as soon as possible. Going back into the suite was the most dangerous, irresponsible, thoughtless thing you’ve ever done.”

A trickle of laughter escaped me, an odd giggling that flirted with hysteria. “Because a solo attempt at baiting Kozlov

was the epitome of prudence?”

“It was a calculated risk and a pragmatic decision.” He gave me a stern look. “Might as well take care of the problem as quickly as one can. He came, didn’t he?”

“Oh, yes, he did, and now we’re stuck in a freaking closet,” I spat in a low voice, keenly aware that, lately, most of our arguments had to be fought in whispers.

“I’m not done yet, not by a long shot.” He didn’t look chastened in the least. “At least I had a plan. Whereas you came in with guns blazing. Or should I say with brass knuckles attached?”

“Hey, it worked,” I protested. “That bitch got what she deserved.”

His lips twitched. “I’ll admit you’ve got an impressive hook, but I never made you for a brass knuckles kind of gal.”

“Trev’s idea.” I gave credit where it was due. “He’s the best instructor ever.”

“I’m gonna have to pound his ass,” Mac grumbled.

“Why?”

“For impressing you, I guess. Plus, he shouldn’t have sent you in. I had things in hand.”

“You had Mariska’s ass in your hand, that’s true.” I couldn’t hide the resentment that soured my tone.

“Meanwhile, Bruckner mercenaries were coming for you. How else were we supposed to warn you?”

He shrugged his big shoulders. “A phone call, I suppose.”

“We considered the option,” I informed him in a whisper. “But what were the chances the landline was not intercepted with Mariska in your room?”

“Low,” he admitted.

“How about zero?” He needed to know. “Druid checked. He was also worried about your cell being tracked. This is why he sent another cell with me. He exhausted all the options before we settled on me. So, give the man some respect and get off his ass. He’s the best.”

“You’re right.” His warm breath blustered over my face. “You gave me a good assist at the right time. Is that what you want me to say?”

“Me *and* Trev. Don’t forget, without him, I wouldn’t have had a prayer. You wouldn’t have had the carbine or the ammo to keep the attackers at bay. You also wouldn’t have the

information you traded in exchange for doing Mariska.” In the dim, dank closet, I angled a glare at his face.

“So, wait.” A frown dented his forehead. “You retrieved the folder from the suite?”

“Of course I did, on the off chance that there could be something helpful in there.”

“Can’t complain about that, but...”

“But what?”

He aimed a solemn stare down at me. “I didn’t ‘do’ Mariska.”

“Sorry.” It was pure pettiness, but it escaped my lips all the same. “Did I arrive too early?”

He blew out a blustering huff. “Danika, please.”

“Forget I said anything.” I disliked myself for acting like a scorned woman and yet I was unable to stop myself.

“For king and country and all that.”

“I did *not* fuck Mariska,” he repeated stubbornly. “I wasn’t gonna.”

“So your erection was just for show?”

“Danika...” he grumbled before he evened out his voice. “I planned to put her to sleep.”

“Awesome.” I tried moving away from him, but in the cramped space, there was nowhere to go. “So, you didn’t have to make the ultimate sacrifice. You got the info for free.”

“This is not the time to discuss this,” he rumbled.

“You’re right, we discussed everything we needed to discuss last night,” I muttered. “As Mariska said, you’re a free agent. If you wanna fuck the enemy, by all means, do.”

He groaned, a low roar. “Woman, you are doing that witchy thing again, where you line up facts in your head and then leap to all the wrong conclusions. My point is that everything *you* did was extremely dangerous. You should’ve followed my orders.”

“So now you think I should’ve left the information *and* Mariska behind to die in that suite?”

“She would’ve been no great loss to me,” he grouched. “She’s one scary number.”

“I could’ve told you that, but no, Mac likes to go at it alone.” It was my turn to huff. “Look, it’s not as if I liked the ho before, but this time around she really pissed me off.”

A flash of white teeth slashed through the dimness.

“Are you jealous, Kos?”

“*Jealous?*” I sneered. “No way, no sir. Why would I be jealous? I was just doing my job. We’re done. Remember? You said so yourself.”

“I wasn’t the one who lied and manipulated the other to get what she wanted,” he retorted in a furious whisper.

“I apologized for my behavior, but apologies are not enough for you, are they?” I hissed. “I’m sorry that you are here, stuck in a closet, with me, the woman you hate so much. I’ll relieve you of the burden of my presence as soon as possible.”

He didn’t speak. He didn’t deny any of what I’d said. He just stood there, fisting his hands. A muscle by his jaw flinched on and off, betraying his angry clench. A terse wall of silence rose between us.

Outside, the sounds of rushing steps and the occasional shouted order echoed in the stairwell. Inside, our breaths combined with Mac’s fury and heated the air. The contempt he exuded threatened to suffocate me. The firemen and police running up and down the stairs ensured I couldn’t escape his scorching presence.

“Why the hell did you come after me?” he demanded quietly, after a while. “Why would you put yourself in the way of Brucker and Kozlov? I know how much you fear that fucker.”

“Because I had to,” I snapped, then worked to soften my voice. “I didn’t want you to die.” *I love you*, I didn’t say. “I did it for Kenzie. So she can have a father if you decide you’re in.” *I did it for me, too*, I also kept this to myself. Even though he didn’t want me, his presence on this planet gave me the courage to forge on.

“You about killed me from the fright,” he muttered darkly. “I’ve never been so close to crapping my pants.”

His words threw me off balance, and still reeling from the explosion, my brain wasn’t in working order yet. I went for casual. “Your intestinal fortitude is the stuff of legends, Blaze. Maybe you had some gas, ate some bad food.”

“You are the most exasperating woman on the face of the planet,” he ground out, massaging the bridge of his nose.

“You’re sounding less like you and more like me.”

I was, wasn’t I?

Why?

Adrenaline discharge? Cheekiness? Misery?

“I didn’t eat bad food,” he murmured. “I was afraid you were dead, woman. *Dead*. Understand that?”

“Why would that matter to you?”

“Really?” He choked out.

“Really.” I wanted to know.

“Because...” He inhaled all the air in the little room.

“I... I...”

He stopped short of saying whatever he was going to say, leaving me craving the slightest hint of forgiveness in his voice. I perched on his every word. His Adam’s apple rippled on his throat as he looked away. When he met my gaze next, his stare was hard and hollow.

“I’m in,” he said evenly.

My heart skipped a beat. “You mean with Kenzie?”

“Yes, and I don’t wanna hear about me being out ever again. Got it?”

“Got it.” A sense of relief coursed through me. If I’d secured Mac for Kenzie, then the agony of my own loss was worth it.

“I also don’t want my daughter to grow up without a mother,” he mumbled. “Think about it. Would you trust me to raise Kenzie alone?”

It was my turn to swallow. A dry croak announced I’d managed the deed. I’d promised him the truth. I had to give it to him. “My heart breaks at the thought of not seeing Kenzie again, but at least now I know something I didn’t know before.”

He cocked his eyebrows. “What’s that?”

“That if something happens to me, she has you. If she has you, Kenzie’s going to be okay.”

A thick silence crowded the already cramped space. Waves of his emotions blustered over me like a storm-driven tide.

His voice came so quiet I barely heard him. “Do you think I’d be good enough for her?”

There were a lot of things I wasn’t sure about but, “Yes, of this, I’m sure.”

In the dim light, I watched the surprise that lit his eyes. Something changed in him. What that was, I couldn’t guess, but his stare softened.

He lowered his face to me, close, closer still.

Butterflies took flight in my stomach and fluttered upwards in my chest. I lifted my face to him, and breathed his air by the gulp full, craving more of his vanilla and cinnamon scent, even if it was spiced with traces of gunpowder and salt.

Our lips touched, a brush so light I wondered if I dreamed it. My heart revved up to full pounding speed and hope bloomed in my aching chest. I closed my eyes. He was gonna kiss me. *Please, please, kiss me.* Had he found it in his heart to forgive me?

He stopped. The pressure of his mouth on mine eased. I opened my eyes. Cursing under his breath, he pulled away from me and straightened to his full height.

“I can’t,” he muttered, crossing his arms like a barrier between us. “I can’t do this.”

My heart died all over again. I swear it cratered in my chest. I felt as if tiny particles of jagged glass were rubbing against my wounds, making me bleed all over again. He had not forgiven me. He was not capable of doing so. Nor should I have expected that he would.

I swallowed my pain and put up a brave front. “I understand.”

“The only thing I can do now is to take you back to Kenzie,” he murmured.

“Fair enough.” I let out a long breath, and pulling the broken pieces of me together, rallied on behalf of my daughter. “You said you were in.”

“I am, all in.”

“Then I’m taking you back to Kenzie, too. *Two* parents. She deserves a mother *and* a father. Can we please agree on that?”

“We can,” he rumbled. “That’s our new objective.” He hesitated, then met my gaze anew, his eyes clouded with something akin to sadness. “Do you think we can pull it off?”

“We have to.” I repressed a sob. “For Kenzie’s sake.”

“For Kenzie.” He nodded. “I’ll do everything in my power so that she’ll be happy and we can function as co-parents.”

I squeaked. “Okay.”

It was more than I’d expected after last night, and it gave me hope that he wanted to be a good father for Kenzie, that perhaps he would work out a way to be around her at least every once in a while, maybe between his missions.

But I couldn't lie to myself. It was going to be hard to parent alongside Mac. Not even his rejection, fury, and scorn had managed to smother the affection I felt for him. This was my punishment. My need for him would go unfulfilled even though I would always love, want, and cherish him. No one else. *Him.*

“Things have quieted down.” He cleared the cobwebs from his voice. “We need to get back to Kenzie.”

“To do that, there is one loose end we've got to tie.”

“Kozlov.”

In the semi-darkness, I flashed him my fiercest smirk.
“Let's go get him.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Mac

The place was in total disarray. Alarms blared, smoke scented the air, and police, firemen, and confused people were everywhere. The lobby was crowded with folks demanding to know what was happening.

A hotel crammed with hostiles operating undercover was a classic scenario for urban warfare training. The presence of innocent civilians, the intricate structure of the building, and the complexity of searching and engaging the enemy in a public place of this size were a warrior's worst nightmare.

My senses were ramped to hyperalert. It was tricky to stay above suspicion with law enforcement agents combing through the building and trying to clear the floors, but since they followed a standard search pattern, I operated around them.

Most of the time, I stuck to the shadows and relied on stealth to look for Kozlov. On occasion, I blended in. I'd left the carbine behind with Danika, but the hoodie I wore concealed the handgun and the knife. Somewhere inside this

building, disguised as part of the local law enforcement, Kozlov was also looking for us.

Time was short. It was chaos unleashed right now, but sooner or later the authorities would take control of the scene. At that point, Kozlov would melt into the background and slip away, as was his MO. My action funnel got narrower every minute that passed.

Itching to get back to Danika, leery of leaving her alone for a second more than necessary, I retraced my steps and took the service stairs leading to the fifth floor. The firemen had taken over this level and contained what remained of the fire in my suite. I kept to the shadows as I sneaked to the elevator lobby and bided my time, waiting for my chance.

I was on a scavenging mission.

The weapons were gone, but the bodies of Kozlov's downed minions remained, littering the space where the battle had taken place. The crime scene investigators would be arriving soon. When the police element went to meet with the fire marshal down the hall, I seized my chance.

Silent as the dead, I stole a couple of tactical vests from the corpses and made my way down to the second floor. The latter had already been cleared by the police. Whether it

had been cleared by Kozlov and his goons was a different story.

As long as Kozlov was on the scene, he wouldn't give up his hunt.

Neither would I.

On the second-floor landing, I paused to listen for signs of people. I propped open the door and scouted the hallway. A couple rushed down the hall carrying their laptops and rolling their bags. I waited for them to pass by before I stole down the corridor, sneaked into room 206, and shut and locked the door behind me.

"It's me," I murmured, gun in hand. "We're clear for the moment."

Danika stepped out from behind the curtain and lowered her gun. "Anything?"

"No sightings of Kozlov as of yet," I reported, tapping on my comms, but getting only static. "Have you heard from Trev?"

"Not a word." Worry lines furrowed her forehead.

"The guy knows what he's doing." I dropped the tactical vests on the bed. "If he's not on the horn it's because

he's got a good reason. He'll contact us as soon as he can."

Danika's chest deflated with a sigh. "I hope so."

She engaged the safety, slid the gun in the back of her pants, and, after untucking her blouse and rearranging it to hide her weapon, eased down on the wingback chair in the corner.

Keeping my radar at full alert, I went to the mini fridge and grabbed a couple of bottles of water. I uncapped them, handed one to Danika, and drained mine in one long, satisfying gulp.

While I was away, Danika had cleaned up. She'd added some makeup from her bag to hide the more visible scratches and bruises she'd sustained from the explosion. She'd also shed her suit jacket. The back of it had been visibly singed. Miraculously, her hair, skin, and the cream blouse she wore beneath the jacket hadn't sustained any burns.

Fuck, but that had been a close call. Too close for my taste. My belly soured when I thought about what could've happened. I could've lost her.

*You've already lost her, Mac Loser. Remember that?
You feel nothing for her. Not a thing. She deceived you. Lied to*

you. From now on you're just co-parents.

And yet my gut was not a hundred percent behind my decisions.

I made for the bathroom and splashed some cold water on my face. Whatever had almost happened in the closet was a manifestation of the treacherous emotions that threatened to undo my resolve. Stopping myself from kissing her had been an act of sheer willpower. Even now, I fought an urge to go to Danika and kiss her until she smiled again.

I scrubbed my face dry with a towel. *Fuck*. I was a mess. I couldn't deny the feelings tearing me apart, but I couldn't cave to them, either. I couldn't trust her.

Are you sure about that?

Dial down the emotion. Action now. Feelings later. You promised Kenzie you'd bring her mom home, whole and hale. She's not out of danger yet and Kozlov remains at large.

I tossed the towel into the bathtub and padded out to the room.

"How is it looking out there?" she asked from her perch in the corner, sipping her water.

“It’s doable.” I plopped down on the bed. “I’ve identified a viable exfil route. I can get you out of here.”

“*Me?*” She drew back. “What about you?” She plunked the bottle on the side table and shot up to her feet. “Oh, no. No. You’re *not* ditching me and you’re *not* going to hunt Kozlov alone. It’s not happening, so can that plan.”

“We need to play this one by the book—”

“Don’t you dare throw the playbook at me.” She braced on her legs and perched her fists on her hips. “If we’re going after Kozlov, we’ll do it as a pair or not at all.”

Damn the stubborn woman. She wasn’t backing down and I didn’t have time for arguments.

“Okay,” I said in a blatant attempt to appease her. “You’ll stay here and wait for me until I get eyes on Kozlov.”

“Two pairs of eyes work better than one.” She lifted her imperious chin in the air. “I’m coming.”

“What if—?” My cell buzzed in my pocket. “Hang on.”

I slid out the cell and put in my code. An encrypted message from Trev popped up on my screen. *Comms compromised. Uploading tactical info. Oscar Mike.*

“Shit.” I ripped the comms off my ear and tossed it to Danika. “Ditch it. Yours too. Now.”

She caught the small earpiece and shed her own on the way to the bathroom. *Plop, plop*. She dropped them in the bowl and flushed them down the toilet.

“What’s going on?” she asked, rushing back into the room.

“Someone must have gotten a fix on our radio comms. They’re likely attempting to track us down through our transmissions. That’s why Druid went dark.”

“Kozlov,” Danika concluded, her face grim. “What about Trev?”

“He’s compromised and on the move, but he’s still in play.” My cell buzzed again and I entered my security code. “Let’s see what he’s got for us.”

Another text appeared on my screen, delivering a single link. I tapped on it. With Danika looking over my shoulder, the connection activated. A 3D blueprint of the place popped up before my eyes, all six floors of it.

“Druid, you are one in a billion.” I manipulated the blueprint with my fingers.

The layout was simple enough and confirmed what I already knew. The lobby, restaurant, boutique, and conference rooms were located at the street level. I was already familiar with the south service stairs. The west service stairs were old, steep, and spanned only the top levels, which made them useless to me.

The gift that Druid had given me was the detail contained in the blueprints. The elevators on every level opened to a spacious vestibule on the building's northern facade, same as the fifth floor, where the suites were located. Floors two, three, and four held the bulk of the mini suites and standard rooms, some of them interconnected to host families and larger groups.

“Wow.” Danika sat next to me and stared at the interactive blueprint. “That’s cool.”

“This is what we call Advantage Elite.” I tapped the blinking red dot advancing quickly across the lobby. “Here’s our quarry.”

“Kozlov?”

“Or one of his bodyguards. Druid has managed to pin an electronic tracker to his radio signal or his cell, I don’t

know which, but I'm damn happy to know where the fucker is."

"Do we have a plan?" she asked.

I examined the 3D diagram, enlarged it, and moved it around, looking for what I needed.

"Yes, we have a plan." Given that we had a fix on Kozlov, I had to seize the opportunity. "Is there any way I can persuade you to sit this one out, for Kenzie's sake?"

"For her sake, I can't sit this one out." She got up, retrieved the carbine from its hiding place behind the curtain, and handed it to me. "A father *and* a mother for Kenzie. We agreed on that. You need me to back you up."

She wasn't wrong.

"It was worth a shot." I traded her the carbine for one of the tactical vests. "Put this on."

Danika donned the protective plates, fastened the straps, and monitored my screen while I stood up and strapped on the other vest.

"We need to hurry," she said. "Kozlov is moving around fast."

“Do *not* get hurt, Kos.” I clicked on a fresh mag on my M4. “That’s an order.”

“Do *not* get hurt, Cienfuegos.” She grabbed her bag and wagged a finger at me. “That’s also an order.”

“Acknowledged.” I shouldered the carbine and held her luminous stare. “Now that we’re clear on that, I’ve got a question for you.”

“Shoot.”

“Do you wanna be prey or predator?”

Danika

Clutching my bag to my chest, I huddled in a corner of the third floor’s landing, watching the red blip moving up the service stairs on the screen of Mac’s cell.

The chase had been going on for over thirteen minutes now. Allowing Kozlov’s minions to spot me and making mistakes on purpose wasn’t my thing, and yet it was necessary. When I heard the steps charging up the stairs from the floor below, I leaped to my feet, went through the door, and let it clank to a close behind me.

I'd led this goose chase all over the place. Straining under the weight of the tactical vest that Mac had insisted I wear, I sprinted to my position, roughly about halfway down the hallway, and tucked myself behind the buttress of an arch. Facing the stairwell access, I dropped the cell into the vest's front pocket and raised my gun.

Seconds went by. A minute or two dragged in slow motion. My mouth was parched, and my arm started to shake. Kozlov was being careful. He was taking his sweet time.

At last, the bar clanked and the heavy door at the end of the hallway flew open. One thug sprayed fire down my way, while two others flung themselves across the corridor and took cover in the thresholds of the open doors. I loosened a few shots from my Sig, managing to hit exactly nothing helpful.

My terrible aim emboldened the squad.

Two more hostiles barged into the hallway. They all wore bulletproof vests and ceramic plates that bulked them up. They looked like a bunch of evil terminators. Unimpressed with my aim, they formed up, sending bursts of rounds my way. Kozlov stepped out of the stairwell and took his position, protected at the center of the diamond-like formation.

His appearance was my cue to get going, and yet I lingered to make sure it was the beast himself. Peeking out from behind the column, I got my first good look at him.

I recognized his broad face, his barreled chest, and his bowlegged gait. His steps betrayed a limp. He seemed to be moving slower than the others. When he spotted me hiding behind the buttress, his freckled lips stretched out to flash his square teeth in a savage leer that made my stomach sink with the weight of doom.

It's him, Kos, not his look-alike. Move it, now.

This time, when I loosened my shots, I landed a couple of good hits. The tight formation scattered, but they sprayed fire on me. A round or two zipped by, too close for comfort.

Your job here is done.

Pressing my back to the wall, I scurried down the hallway, counted three doors—all of them closed and locked from the inside—and ducked into the fourth.

Mac

The mechanics of a linear battlefield were always chancy. The odds of death and injury increased when facing direct fire

within the confinement of a straight hallway by a numerically superior force. My tactical plan was designed to change the battlefield's physics and better our odds.

As soon as I heard the song of Danika's Sig, I made the sign of the cross.

Showtime.

Hiding behind an open door, I tracked the sounds of footsteps trampling on the parquet. Peeking between the door hinges, I spied the men firing their weapons as they advanced past my position near the south end of the hallway.

I waited for the last man to pass and came around the door. Bringing up the right rear guard, he was bleeding and moving slower than the others.

Danika had done me a favor.

Silent as night, I scurried up to him, pulled the trigger on my sound-suppressed Sig, and shot him in the back of the head.

Adios, pendejo.

Focused on chasing Danika, the rest of his crew didn't notice. The gorillas were doling out rounds as if bullets were

free of charge. I took advantage of the ruckus and eliminated the second target in the left rear flank.

Two tangos down, four to go.

Hoofing it at high speed, I crossed to the other side of the hallway, entered the room, and locked the door behind me. Quietly sprinting through two sets of connecting rooms, I paralleled the crew and arrived at my next position ahead of them.

The existence of several connecting rooms on this floor was the main reason I'd chosen this level as my zone of action. Leading Kozlov in a chase throughout the hotel, Danika had bought me the time to make my preparations. Now precision became my key to success.

"We've got casualties on the ground," one of the thugs whined outside in the hall.

This was my cue to open the locked door. The men had slowed and turned to see the two mercs sprawled on the floor. Coming from behind him, I lunged at the left forward guard and took him out of commission. Banking on my momentum, I shot the right forward guard on my way across the hallway and dove into the next room.

Four down, two to go.

Kozlov's only surviving minion cried out in English.

“He's in this room!”

He charged toward the room with his carbine up and ready, but Kozlov's guttural voice stopped him before I had a clear shot.

“Get back here, you idiot,” he commanded, also in English, the common language that Bruckner used to communicate with its mercenaries, who came from different countries. “Going in there is exactly what the fucker wants you to do.”

Okay, then. Kozlov had my number. He also called for reinforcements on his radio.

No time to lose.

I scampered through to the adjoining room, approached the threshold, and took a peek.

Crack, crack, crack.

A barrage of rounds followed my hasty retreat. And yet I'd gotten a good look at the scene. Kozlov stood in the middle of the hallway, back-to-back with his mercenary douche. Eyes

on their scopes, both men cased the access points in both directions.

Not unexpected, but it threw a wrench in my ability to maneuver on the ground.

On the ground, sure, but not beyond it.

Danika

Heart stuck in my throat, I huddled in the back of the room, heaving in great big breaths and listening to the sounds coming from down the hall. I missed my tidy office at the embassy and the kind Marines who watched after us every day and kept us safe. I also missed sitting across the conference table and talking about security threats over a cup of coffee.

The difference between talking and doing hit me hard.

I'd always respected the roles of the boots-on-the-ground operators that followed up on our intel work, but over the last few weeks, I'd developed a newfound admiration for the silent warriors who put their lives on the line, operators like Mac and Trev. To think that most Americans didn't even know what they did and how carefully they did it.

Kneeling on the carpet, huddled behind the wingback chair with my back to the corner, the fear pounding on my temples was very real. Following Mac's instructions, I'd moved two rooms up from my last position and locked the connecting doors as I went. This put some distance between me and our attackers, and yet the sounds of the firefight reached me in bursts whenever Kozlov and his animals let loose.

I forced myself to breathe through the fear. I fished for Mac's cell in my vest pocket. My fingers found only bits and pieces of the phone.

Crap.

A bullet had grazed the pocket, destroying the phone and my ability to track Kozlov's approach.

Better the phone than you.

I dumped the pieces of the cell on the carpet.

I couldn't estimate Kozlov's location, but bursts of fire coming from the hallway signaled a reaction from our enemies. I bit down on my lip.

Keep safe, Mac. Be smart.

A lull in the ruckus spiked my fears for him. Kozlov was no amateur. He was a treacherous tactical fox. But Mac was excellent at what he did. He would prevail.

He *had* to prevail.

The late afternoon breeze alerted me to a change in the room. We'd drawn the curtains in all the rooms before we lured Kozlov to the chase, but now a small wind made them flutter lightly.

I frowned. Had the window been open before?

A big hand clamped down on my mouth, smothering my cry.

“Don't move,” a heavily accented voice muttered against my ear.

My heart stopped when the unmistakable circle of a gun muzzle etched its shape on my temple.

“Drop the weapon, Ms. Kos. Do it now.”

Chapter Twenty-four

Mac

The crawl space between the concrete floor above me and the fake ceiling below me measured less than three feet in height, the minimum required to run the industrial plumbing, electric, and the vast network of HVAC ducts that snaked all around me, the product of a recent renovation. Carefully supporting my weight on the wooden trusses that upheld the fake ceiling, I slithered from one beam to the other.

The trusses creaked under my weight. It didn't help that I carried my carbine strapped to my back and that my tactical vest added to the load, but better safe than sorry. I halted when I calculated that I was, more or less, where I needed to be.

The 3D blueprint that Trev had provided was the basis of my plan. Anticipating Kozlov's possible reactions, I'd stolen the old electric saw from the utility closet where we'd first taken refuge and cut two access holes in the roof of the closets in two different rooms at either side of the hallway.

We at Elite were true believers in the saying, *Failing to prepare is preparing for failure.*

I'd hoped to avoid using these access points, but sandwiched in the crawlspace, creeping around like a giant spider, I congratulated myself for my foresight.

The electric saw had served its purpose during the prep phase, but it was useless now. On the other hand, my Ontario fixed blade had no trouble taking on the drywall. Crucially, it did it quietly. I whittled a small hole in the fake ceiling and lowered my eye to it.

Kozlov and his surviving minion were slowly advancing down the hallway. Pressing their backs to each other, they cased the sides of the corridor, spraying a burst of rounds in random patterns, shooting into the rooms as they inched forward, demonstrating that Kozlov was as resolved to kill us as I was to kill him.

Problem number one. They were approaching the room where Danika had taken refuge. Problem number two. My current location was behind them. Problem number three. The steps of a significant contingent reverberated above me. Someone was coming and whether they were Kozlov's

mercenaries or the local authorities, neither group was likely to be friendly to my cause.

Gotta move, Blaze.

After enlarging my peephole, I slid my knife into the sheath at the back of my pants and unhooked the M4 from my back. Proceeding quietly, I set my carbine to full auto, inserted the barrel through the hole, and angled it toward the fuckers.

I tapped the trigger, rained down ten seconds of razzle-dazzle that sent the mercs diving for cover, then braced my hands on the beams and punched my legs hard through the fake ceiling, putting all my weight on it.

I dropped down shooting and landed at a deep flex on my feet. My skeleton absorbed the shock. One advantage of being so tall was that the fall was shorter, but being large also made me a bigger target. Rounds zipped all around me, stinging like bees.

I kept firing, rolled to one side, and took cover in one of the thresholds. The men split. Each dove into rooms on opposite sides of the hallway. I took fire from both at different angles.

Fuck.

I returned fire, but when I next checked, only one stream of rounds came at me. I turned around just in time to spot the fucker who burst through the connecting door, firing at me like a madman.

In one swift lunge, I dove behind the bed. Half a second later, I popped up and took my shot. One round. That's all it took to blow out his brains. He could've kept them if he hadn't signed up with the most brutal militia in the world.

Five down, one to go.

Kozlov.

Danika

Keeping my left hand perched on my bag, I slowly lowered my right hand and deposited my handgun on the carpet. The man must've climbed across the ledge outside the building, opened the window, in-filled through it, and concealed his approach behind the curtain until he was behind me.

An operator then. A skilled one.

“Who are you?” I demanded, unable to look over my shoulder on account of the gun pressing against my temple.

“I’m a great admirer of your work.” The man crouched behind me, his breath warm on my ear. “I believe you and I could collaborate on a certain project.”

“So,” I ground out through my teeth. “To ‘entice’ me into this ‘collaboration’ of yours, you sneaked up on me and put a gun to my head?”

I was sick and tired of this shit. By now, I was numb to fear, exhausted from being afraid, and unwilling to fail Mac, even if that meant forfeiting my life. Moving an inch at a time, I slid my hand into my unzipped bag and fisted it around a hard surface. If this asshole thought I was going to help him kill Mac, he was in for one big surprise.

“I apologize, Ms. Kos,” the man purred. “But you have an uncanny ability to get out of sticky situations and war-torn countries.”

“You’re right about that.”

In one quick motion, I twisted my left arm behind my back, pressed it hard against his flesh, and fired my other weapon.

Mac

The hallway echoed with shouted orders and the approach of hurried steps coming from both directions. Laying on the ground by the threshold, nose to the carpet, I took a quick look.

At my three o'clock, the Czech SWAT team was setting up their shields, although I had no idea if they were legit. At my ten o'clock, a contingent of armed men—some dressed in blacks, others dressed in police uniforms—turned the corner and advanced, loosening a barrage of firepower on the SWAT team.

Well, that settled things a tad. The thugs to my left were Bruckner. The discrepancies that Trev had pointed out in their uniform and the predominance of Uzis gave them away as the mercenaries in question.

The SWAT team to my right was on the ball. They'd showed up to take care of business. They kept a small group huddled behind their shields in the middle to attract enemy fire while the rest dispersed. A small contingent retreated from the fight. I guessed that they were gonna try to outflank Bruckner by coming at them from the south side.

I liked their style.

My problems, however, were far from over. Bruckner pushed down the hallway fast and furious, and although the Czechs were giving them a run for their money, the corridor became a kill zone. Danika sheltered on the other side of the hallway with orders to stay put until I came for her. Worst news? Kozlov prowled somewhere on the same side of the hotel where Danika hid while I was stuck on the opposite side.

Well, not stuck, not really. Deltas didn't get stuck. As long as we were alive, we were in the game. Sure, I could've waited for the smoke to clear and let the Czechs do the job, but Danika wasn't safe and as long as Kozlov was alive, she continued to be his main target.

I shimmied back from the door, slung my weapon across my back, and, running at a low crouch, sprinted through the connecting door to the next room over. I burst into the walk-in closet and took a running leap.

Reaching through the hole I'd cut in the ceiling earlier, I caught hold of the beam inside it with both hands. My muscles quivered and burned as I performed the most important chin-up of my life. Then I was on the go again, negotiating my way high above the hallway, where Kozlov's mercs were on a seek-and-destroy mission.

Danika

I jumped to my feet and whirled. Putting some distance between me and my attacker, I held the Taser gun with both hands, aiming at my enemy.

Trev had insisted on including the Taser in what he called my “defensive” bag. I’d set the weapon to “drive stun,” to deliver pain on direct contact without firing the projectiles. If the man so much as blinked wrong, I would fire the Taser’s probes and hit him again.

I took two steps and kicked his gun and mine out of his reach before I retrieved them. Driven by cold anger, I set his gun on the bed, transferred my Taser to my left hand, and, gripping my Sig with my right hand, pointed both weapons at him.

Mac always said it was good to have options. Now I did.

“You... shhhhhouldn’t... ha-ah-ve... done... t-t-that,” the man managed to speak, his voice quivering as he convulsed on the ground, temporarily paralyzed by fifty thousand volts jolting through his body.

“Right.” I sneered. “I shouldn’t have Tasered you because you put a gun to my head?”

It was a testament to the man’s training that he fought the Taser’s neuromuscular incapacitation, scooted away from me, and slumped against the corner, even though his muscles were still spasming like crazy.

Swearing a string of foul curses in Czech, he cupped his package and stared at me in surprise. “You crazy witch. You hit me in the groin.” He struggled to regain his functions. “I may never have children now.”

“And if you don’t keep your hands up in the air where I can see them, I’ll hit your bullseye again.” I kept both guns aimed at him. “This time, I’ll make sure that if you survive, you’ll sing soprano for the rest of your life.”

“Easy, now.” The man lifted his quaking hands above his head. “I need to talk to you.”

“Really?” I flashed an icy smirk. “Most people don’t need a gun to talk.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Kos. I miscalculated. Please, let’s talk.”

“Oh, yes, *you* are going to talk, and fast.” I tilted my head in the direction of the hallway, which was now eerily quiet. “My partner will be here any minute and he’s not as willing to listen as I am. I want to know everything you know about Stanislav Kozlov. Let’s start with what is your position with Bruckner?”

“But—”

“No buts.” I took in his thin face, his pointy chin, and his balding pate, and then narrowed my eyes. Something seemed vaguely familiar about him. “Do I know you?”

“We have not been formally introduced.”

“Then why is your face familiar to me?”

“Because you’ve seen me once before,” he offered tentatively.

“In the hallway.” I remembered now.

He was the businessman who’d evacuated from a few rooms down the hall when Mac triggered the fire alarms and all the guests had fled the fifth floor. Although I’d spoken to him in Czech, he’d addressed me in English. In the back of my mind, I’d noticed the discrepancy, but I’d been too worried about the upcoming attack and getting innocent civilians out of

the way to dwell on it. The man wasn't dressed like a businessman now. He wore tactical gear.

I fought an urge to Tase him again. "Were you spying on us?"

"Yes. No!" he rushed to correct himself when my finger twitched on the trigger. "Don't shoot me!"

"You better talk fast." I chanced a glance at my watch. "Any time now, we're leaving, and I doubt my partner will want to leave witnesses behind."

"We have a common friend, Ms. Kos," he rushed to say. "If you check in with her, she'll vouch for me."

"*A common friend?*" I sneered. "Who?"

The connecting door on the south side of the room swung open and Mariska Grigoris burst through the door with a gun in her hand.

"Oh, good, you're still alive," she heaved as she closed and locked the door behind her. "Bruckner is closing in on your location. They're coming."

Chapter Twenty-five

Danika

“Drop your gun.” I shifted my Sig toward Mariska while keeping my Taser aimed at the man in the corner.

“Calm down, American.” She lifted her hands in the air but kept her grip on her gun. “I’m here to help.”

“Don’t shoot,” the man pleaded, wisely showing me his palms.

For a moment there, I hesitated. Mariska looked awful, barefooted and wearing an oversize shirt that hung down to her knees, something she’d probably found in one of the rooms. She sported the dark bruise I’d given her on the side of her face, the bloody gash she’d sustained on the explosion, and the cuffs, dangling from her left wrist only. None of this seemed to affect her much. Her eyes were as bright as a pair of high beams.

Mariska’s stare narrowed on the man. “Are you hurt?”

“I Tased him,” I volunteered without feeling an ounce of regret.

“Damn you, Kos, I’d forgotten how mean you’ve gotten lately.” The glower she directed at me could’ve seared my skin. “Listen, you hotheaded American, we don’t have time for this shit. Bruckner is on my heels.”

“Are they coming from the south or the north?” the man asked.

“I’m not sure,” Mariska said. “Can we go out the way you came in?”

“The rusted ladder gave way when I transferred to the ledge,” the man reported. “It’s no longer a viable escape route.”

Mariska swore in Russian. “We’ll have to hold out here for a few minutes until we figure out which is the safest way to go.”

The man glanced in my direction. “If we don’t get her out of here soon, she’s going to die, and us, too.”

“What the hell is happening here?” I was so freaking confused. “You two are working together?”

“We are,” Mariska said.

“I don’t get it.” I studied the woman’s face. “First, you deliver a threat from Kozlov. Then you try to seduce my date.

And now I'm supposed to believe you want to help me?"

"Why would I be here, right now, if I didn't want to help you?" Mariska glanced at the man in the corner. "He's here to help you, too."

I opened my mouth to ask more questions, but a barrage of bullets swept over the room, punching through the walls, shattering the windows, and destroying the porcelain lamps.

Heart pummeling my ribs, I hit the ground. Mariska dropped below my line of sight. The man lunged for his gun and landed on his belly right next to me. From my place on the ground, I rolled to my back and aimed both guns at him. I didn't shoot him, but only because he didn't point his weapon at me. Instead, he propped up on his knees and, taking cover behind the bed, aimed his gun across the room.

What the hell?

Pushing myself up, I knelt next to him, tucked the Taser in the back of my pants, and aimed my Sig at the door as well. Mariska's compact frame scurried around the bed on her hands and knees. I wasn't taking any chances. I angled my gun at her.

“No.” The man put his hand over my gun. “Are you all right, Mariska?”

“I’m tougher than a Siberian winter.” She took a position on the other side of me and met my stare. “I can assure you that I’m more useful to you alive than dead.”

It was surreal, and yet here I was, with Mariska Grigoris aiming her gun at the door, seemingly determined to stand by me.

Kos, you need some answers here.

I kept my aim on the door but queried the man next to me. “Who the hell are you?”

“My name is Jan Horák. I’m with the Czech Security Information Service. As Mariska said, we are here to help you.”

“I don’t understand.” I looked to Mariska for explanations. “Kozlov and Bruckner are Putin’s tools, and it was you who delivered Kozlov’s threat and set up Jonathan Wilson.”

“I did deliver Kozlov’s message,” the woman admitted. “I had orders from high above. When you’re in my line of work in Russia, disobeying orders is a capital offense. But not

all of us in Russia agree with Putin and his nasty war in Ukraine. Our soldiers are dying for nothing, and most of us detest Kozlov, Bruckner, and the terrible stain they are on the motherland.”

Wait. What?

Mariska was working against her own government?

“Why come after me?” I demanded. “Why target Wilson? You even threatened my daughter when you brought her name up at the theater.”

“I didn’t *threaten* her.” Mariska didn’t bother to conceal her irritation. “I casually mentioned her name to make sure you took extra precautions to protect her against Kozlov. I wanted your daughter safe and out of the way of that fucked up animal,” she spat, keeping my shock rolling. “At the same time, I couldn’t pass up on the chance to catch Kozlov and end Bruckner’s privileged position in the Kremlin. Surely, you can understand that.”

I rolled my free hand in the air. “You’re going to have to explain some more.”

“I suspected Kozlov was on the ground in Prague.” She inhaled a deep breath and spoke quickly. “I knew that, if I got

in the middle of this, he'd track me to get to you. So, I made it common knowledge that I was looking for you and set things up to have a go at Kozlov."

I gawked. "You were hunting for Kozlov?"

"I was," she confirmed with a nod. "I figured I needed help, so I went to Horák and we made a deal to trap the old fox."

"This guy." I pointed a thumb at the man. "The man who was trying to listen to your tryst with Wilson from a few doors down."

"He's been my covert contact with the Czechs for a long time," Mariska explained. "He was backing me up."

"Not that I could hear anything," the man mumbled sullenly. "Somehow, Wilson managed to neutralize my surveillance."

Druid was behind that feat, but I wasn't going to out him. I considered everything I'd learned. Technically speaking, Mariska was still working for the Federation. She simply didn't think that Kozlov, Bruckner, or the war in Ukraine were good for her country.

She was damn right.

What was it that Mac had said about this mission as we prepared to lead Kozlov to our trap? *Hunts within hunts within hunts. Too many hunters. Too many traps.*

The rounds that pierced through the walls sent all three of us to eat the carpet. My heart beat wildly in my chest. When the shots stopped, we peeked out. The connecting door before us groaned beneath the violent set of kicks assaulting the wood. Outside in the hallway, an all-out war was in progress.

Mac. He was late. *Where are you?*

Mariska braced one forearm above the other and steadied her aim. “They’re almost here.”

“Let’s make sure they’re Bruckner,” Horák said. “Don’t shoot at anyone marked as SWAT.”

“They’re not really SWAT,” I guessed. “They’re your men?”

“Yes, so let’s keep them alive. Mariska, be careful,” he added in Czech and the look that passed between them alerted me to something else.

“Oh, wow.” I smirked. “You two are also a couple.”

“We are not,” Mariska snapped.

I looked at him.

He shrugged. “Whatever she says.”

Crack, crack, crack.

The door flew open and, dressed in their fake police officer uniforms, two Bruckner operatives stood at the threshold, shooting at us. The thick mattress before us absorbed some of the rounds. Feathers exploded in the air.

The three of us fired at the same time. The mercs dropped out of the frame, but two more replaced them. Before I could pull the trigger, Mariska and Horák took them out. Their actions so far were the most compelling argument to support everything they’d said. They also stopped the attack on us, at least for a moment.

“I know you resent me for seducing your professor friend,” Mariska muttered as she reloaded and I tracked our attackers, who seem to be regrouping out of sight in the next room. “I don’t know who he is, but he’s not just Mr. Wilson. No professor I know has abs like him.”

No shit, Sherlock.

I lifted a noncommittal shoulder and kept my gun aimed at the threshold.

“I tried to get you out of the hotel when you first showed up,” Mariska said. “I told you to leave, but you didn’t listen. My point is that I *had* to use you and Wilson to get to Kozlov,”

“You could’ve just asked for our help, you know,” I muttered, not a little peeved.

“Right.” Her accent thickened. “Because I’m Russian and you’re American, and we trust each other so much?”

I sighed. No point in arguing with truth. Given Putin’s iron grip on power and genocidal acts, it was easy to forget that not all Russians supported him.

“I suppose I should thank you for saving my life upstairs,” Mariska bit out, her lips puckered as if she’d swallowed a dozen sour lemons.

“I wasn’t super motivated, but I’m glad I did it now.” I turned my gaze to Horák. “Other than being Mariska’s main squeeze, what’s your stake on this?”

“My government is in alignment with Mariska’s objectives.” He ejected his empty mag and replaced it with a new one. “We want to stop the war in Ukraine. It would bring

Czechia glory to wipe Kozlov's scourge from the face of the earth."

I understood now, barely, but it all made sense. Their stories checked all the boxes.

"Listen carefully," Horák said. "When they next come at us, you will retreat to the next room and keep going toward the north end of the hallway as fast as you can. My men will be looking out for you."

"What about you guys?"

"We'll hold them up for as long as we can," Mariska pledged.

"They're too many," I pointed out. "You need me. It's too dangerous."

"You want to know what's more dangerous?" Horák fixed his dark stare on my face. "You getting killed in Czechia. Or you captured and taken to Russia for debriefing and becoming a huge liability to your country. Or Putin finding out that Mariska and her friends have other ideas about how Russia should be governed. Or—"

"Okay, fine, I get the point."

“Then get ready.” Mariska nudged her head toward the door behind us. “And if we all survive Bruckner, don’t tell anyone about Jan and me. About our collaboration and... the rest.”

“You’ve got my word.” I pinched my fingers across my sealed lips.

The sound of boots galloping toward us preceded the heaviest barrage of automatic gunfire that had yet assailed the room.

Mariska called out. “Go!”

I emptied my Sig on the attackers before I dropped to the ground.

“I’m out,” I called out. “Good luck.”

Elbowing my way to the door at our back, I prayed that both Mariska and Horák would survive the onslaught.

I made it to the door. Bullets flew above my head, splintering the wood paneling and punching holes in the wallpaper. I took advantage of the moment Mariska and Horák fired their weapons to unlock the door and crawl through it, keeping low to the ground.

Closing the door behind me, I darted across the room and opened the next connecting door, still on my hands and knees to avoid a meeting between my head and a stray bullet.

A pair of combat boots stood in my way, anchoring legs the size of tree trunks.

I looked up. And up. The blood drained from my veins.

The muzzle of Kozlov's carbine settled on my forehead. "Hello, blue eyes."

Chapter Twenty-six

Mac

Outside in the hallway, the SWAT team and Bruckner were having it out. A ferocious firefight shook the building and yet this wasn't the worst news. Three minutes into my perilous crossing, as I transferred my weight from one beam to the next, my guts yanked so hard that I took cover against the ductwork and paused.

Something was wrong. All my instincts screamed caution when I had no time to go slow.

Willing my pulse to ease, I listened carefully, but the ruckus of the battle below me made it an exercise in futility. Crawling at low speed, I worked my way along the ducts until I caught a glimpse of the hole where I'd kicked out the fake ceiling before I dropped on Kozlov and his now-deceased minion.

At first glance, there was nothing unusual, but then I spotted movement under the tenuous light that filtered through the broken drywall. The heel of a boot protruded from behind a steel transition box. From their positions in the hallway

below, the mercs must have noticed the hole. They'd figured out what happened and concluded correctly that I was using the crawlspace to move around.

Squinting into the darkness, I spotted another tango concealed in the crawlspace. The two mercs were strategically perched to cover the space I needed to cross to get to Danika. They faced in opposite directions, lying in wait to ambush me. There might be others, too.

Mierda.

Getting the mercs out of my way was gonna waste precious time, but clearing them out was my only path to Danika and possibly our only route of escape as well. I had to do this quietly. If the mercs fighting in the hallway below found me out, they would point their weapons up and turn me into a human strainer.

My guts warned me yet again, seemingly averse to the idea.

No other option.

Sliding out my suppressed Sig, I set out to take care of business.

Danika

“I’ll take this.” Kozlov snatched the empty Sig from my hand, dropped it in his vest pocket, and swung his arm toward the room. “Enter.”

Paralyzed by a visceral fear shrinking my stomach, I didn’t move. He grabbed a fistful of my hair, hauled me out of the way, and closed and locked the connecting door. Then he dragged me into the room like the caveman he was. Rebelling against such harsh treatment, I clawed at his hand and tried to fight him.

With brutality that set my scalp on fire, he lifted me in the air and slammed me on the bed. I landed on my back and bounced violently on the mattress. My brain jostled in my skull, but his aggression did the opposite of cowing me. Rebellion broiled in my veins. I braced on my hands and tried to get up.

“Don’t move.” He pressed the muzzle of his AK-47 against my chest, a harsh meeting of intractable metal and my chest’s breakable bones. “I like you on your back, preferably with your legs wide open.”

The grin that expanded on his face spiked my fury. I struggled to control the rush of adrenaline coursing through

my veins. Fear, humiliation, and disgust tangled in the pit of my stomach and turned it into a big ball of anger.

Be smart, Kos. This man is stronger than you. He's also cruel and sly.

I didn't have the physical strength to defeat him, but could I match his cunning with my own?

Kozlov unclipped the radio from his belt and pressed the button. "This is leader one to all units," he said. "I have the cargo. I repeat. Muster in room..." He pressed his weapon down on my chest, and pinning me between the barrel and the mattress, glanced at the landline on the night table. "Muster in room 310. Immediately. We are ready to exit with our cargo. Acknowledge. Over."

A jumble of voices rose above a burst of static. I couldn't understand what was said and neither could Kozlov. He pressed the radio to his ear and listened. The static kept getting worse; the communication became even more garbled.

He took out his frustrations on my sternum. He pressed his carbine down so hard I couldn't breathe. The slanted point of his barrel dug into my skin. When he finally figured out what the merc at the other end was trying to say, it wasn't what Kozlov wanted to hear.

“I don’t give a fuck if you’ve got casualties and you’re taking fire,” he barked into the radio. “You’ve got three minutes to get your asses over here. Three minutes or you will feel my anger in your flesh. Leader one out.”

Three minutes was a long time to be alone with murderous Kozlov.

With a grunt, he hooked the radio back on his belt, cursing his fate of having to work with subpar imbeciles. When his dirt-colored eyes licked my body from head to toe, I knew I was about to bear the brunt of his infuriation.

“It’s a shame we don’t have time right now for me to teach the lesson I was going to impart to you at The Pravda.” A guttural brutality hoarsened his ground-glass voice. “Not a problem. I will teach you on the way to your final destination.”

“Where’s that?” I raised my chin, pretending I was brave, hoping he couldn’t feel the violent beat of my heart reverberating through his weapon.

“You’ll be my guest in a part of hell you’ll never leave.” He flashed his most malevolent smirk. “The boss won’t care what happens to your cunt between here and there. When he’s done with you, when he’s squeezed the last drop of truth out of your lying trap, he’s promised to give you back to

me. That's when you and I will have the most fun. Oksana's going-away party is going to look tame compared to what I'm going to do to you."

The hairs on the back of my neck bristled, but I refused to cower before him. Terror was the gas that fueled Kozlov, the addiction that had taken him all over the world to exercise it with maximum cruelty. Instilling fear, pain, and death was his chosen profession. I wasn't going to show him my fear. It was what he craved. I opened my mouth to retort, but Kozlov pressed the point of his barrel between my lips.

"Silence, blue eyes," he purred. "Don't forget that, from now on, you belong to me."

To prove the point, he slowly pumped the AK's slanted muzzle back and forth between my lips. It didn't escape me that the carbine's safety was off and that the beast could blow up my face with a single pull of the trigger.

On impulse, I lifted a hand to bat the weapon away from me.

"Do *not* move," he growled like a dog. "If you do, your face will never be the same."

Slowly, I lowered my hand and filled it with a fistful of the bed's comforter. I squeezed the fabric between my fingers until my knuckles ached. It incensed me that this piece of human refuse had total control of me because he had a weapon and was physically stronger than me.

Reality check, Kos. Justice is not natural in our world. This is how every person in Ukraine feels right now. Lots of innocents feel like this every day all over the globe. Don't get mad, get smart. Keep the hope going. Think of Kenzie, of Mac.

Mac. My heart knocked harder for fear of his fate. Where are you? Alive? Wounded? Dead? No, not dead, never dead.

I wasn't at the rendezvous point. Considering the mayhem outside and the jumble of interconnected rooms, searching for me would be a deadly endeavor. He might not be able to find me at all. If he did, Kozlov would kill him.

I had to escape before then.

The vicious grin Kozlov sported while he pumped the compensator between my lips sent icy waves of terror rolling up and down my spine. I felt helpless, like a pile of quivering human flesh. Fighting an impulse to shut my eyes and whimper, I glowered at my captor instead.

Escape. It was all I could think about.

It was a small favor from life and technology that the carbine's front sight post prevented the beast from shoving the whole barrel inside my mouth. Standing upright at the top of the muzzle, it allowed him less than an inch of metal to work with. This small technicality probably saved my teeth, palate, and throat from injury.

On the other hand, the penetration was mortifying. It flavored my mouth with the vile taste of warm metal and gunpowder.

"You did that well, blue eyes." He withdrew the muzzle from my mouth and rested it on the bony ridge below my nose. "You've got training potential."

I clenched so hard that my jaw ached.

"Don't look so disappointed." He puckered his freckled lips and *tsked*. "Once we are on the way, it won't be my gun in your mouth. It'll be my cock. When I've had my fill, I'll pass you around to the boys. Your knees will bleed after sucking dick for hours. Then we'll get started on your pussy. Breaking you is going to be a pleasure."

He ran the end of the barrel over my blouse. He traced the orb of one breast, then the other, before he circled my nipples. The contrast between hard metal and soft silk made me feel even more vulnerable.

Moving lower, he drew a straight line over the middle of my body and perched his weapon at the crux of my legs. The malicious lust that gleamed in his stare shriveled my internal organs and turned them into ice pellets. I couldn't control the heaves that swelled my chest. Feral violence wafted from him, and an unhealthy flush burned on his cheeks like a bad case of rosacea. It darkened the big, brown freckles that speckled his yellowish skin.

That face?

It was the stuff of nightmares.

He hasn't killed you yet, Kos. He needs you alive. His boss wants to meet you.

It was my only advantage.

Time is ticking.

Once his mercs arrived, I would have no chance to escape. I had to make my move now before the crimes gleaming in his eyes became a reality.

His radio crackled. “Leader one, this is leader two. Do you copy? Over.”

Why did the garbled voice sound so familiar?

Kozlov frowned and glanced at his watch. A fearful scowl curdled his already sour features. He lifted the radio and clicked on the button. “Leader two, this is leader one. You were supposed to muster three minutes ago. What’s the problem?”

The jumbled transmission was almost impossible to decipher, but I got a few words like “unable to muster” and “heavy casualties” before the hiss of the white noise overtook the frequency. Cursing and ranting, Kozlov tried to reestablish communication and failed.

If the ruckus outside was any indication, his minions were probably too busy fighting and dying. Also, Druid had found a way to jam Kozlov’s comms. Yes, it had been Trev’s voice on the radio. He’d intercepted the mercs’ transmissions.

“They are not coming.” I met the beast’s malignant stare. “What are you going to do now, Kozlov?”

His pulse beat against the Nazi swastika tattooed on the side of his neck. His lips curled and a muscle twitched on his

face. Rage and murder flickered in his gaze.

“I could kill you right now and enjoy it.” His voice sounded like a throttling engine. “As it stands, you and I are going for a ride, this way, I think.”

He slid his Yarygin from his holster and, keeping his AK-47 on me, aimed his pistol toward the window. He shot out the panes until he had no more rounds left and all that remained were a few jagged pieces of glass clinging to the frame. As he holstered his empty pistol, I spotted a fire escape ladder affixed to the side of the building and understood Kozlov’s new exit strategy.

“I have it from a reliable source that the fire escape ladder is rusted and broken.” I sat up on the bed, pushing back against Kozlov’s weapon. “You get on that thing, and you’ll end up splattered on the concrete.”

“Is that so?” Suspicion never left his stare. “I don’t believe you.”

“Fine, then.” I put all the confidence I could muster into my words. “If you and I end up like pudding splashed all over the alley, you’ll die like the disgraced loser you are, unable to redeem yourself after your failure at The Pravda. That’s why you came to Prague, isn’t it? To get your revenge

on me, but most importantly, to prove to your boss that you are still capable and invaluable to him.”

The growl that rose from his throat confirmed that my assumptions were correct, but when he next spoke, his rasp was eerily calm. “Your mouth is going to get you killed, blue eyes, but your death will be on *my* schedule, not yours.”

Keeping his carbine on me, he glanced through the glassless window, a quick study of the perilous route. I almost moved then, but his glower returned to me all too fast.

“You’re a frightening son of a bitch, but you’re moving slower than before,” I pointed out. “You wince a lot and you’re limping. Did you hurt your leg when you jumped out of the window at The Pravda? Perhaps you even used the rope we left behind to soften your landing. Is that how you escaped?”

He kept his lips pressed together, but his hateful glare confirmed that he’d been one of those figures I’d spotted in the darkness of that hellish night, leaping right before The Pravda got hit.

I pushed harder. “How did it feel to be at the other end of missiles?”

“You are trying to provoke me,” he snarled. “You will not succeed.”

“I’ve already succeeded.” I managed to manufacture a smirk. “It’s obvious to me that I landed a good shot and, in your rush to find me, you haven’t had time to heal yet. I’m going to guess my round got you somewhere in the neighborhood of your side?”

In a reflexive motion, his hand shot up to rest at the bottom of his vest. Narrowing my eyes, I spotted a wet blotch, a darker patch expanding on his dark shirt. That’s where the wound was, the injury he was trying to hide. The hunt and the battles today had reopened it, and the soaked bandage had failed.

When Kozlov caught himself revealing the site of the wound, he pulled his hand away from it. His fingers dripped with blood. At the sight of it, he became even angrier. With a swipe of his arm, he backhanded me.

Pain lit my brain with a silver flash. I winced but the blow allowed me to overplay the whiplash. I fell back on the bed and braced my hands behind my back.

“Get up,” the furious man barked. “We’re leaving.”

“You’ve killed so many innocent people.” Rubbing my burning cheek with one hand, I slowly pushed off the mattress. “You killed Oksana. You killed Cy.”

“I enjoyed their deaths.” He shouldered his weapon and reached out to grab my arm. “They deserved to be tortured and killed.”

“No, they didn’t.”

I slid out the Taser from the back of my pants, aimed, and pulled the trigger. The wires shot out and the probes struck Kozlov in the neck.

A roar issued from his throat and surprise widened his eyes. So did pain, the agony of fifty thousand volts surging through his body, stiffening his muscles, and preventing him from moving. He stumbled and almost fell to the ground, fighting the electricity racing through his body.

For an instant, I thought I had him.

Then I didn’t.

It seemed impossible, but revealing inhuman strength, he swatted his hands and swiped at the wires. He caught them between his clawed fingers. Even as his body convulsed, he

wrenched off the probes and snatched the Taser from my hands.

It was as if the monster fed on electricity. As if he was Frankenstein. I'd hit him with all those volts, and yet they didn't stop him.

I whirled and bolted toward the nearest door, but in two strides, the beast caught up with me. He tackled me from behind, hooked his arm around my neck, and held me against his chest in a chokehold that had my throat buckling beneath his muscular clutch.

He snarled. "Were you so stupid to think that a mere Taser was going to stop me?"

I croaked but no words made it out. Had he been a normal human being, the Taser would've stopped him, or at least incapacitated him for a few minutes as it had Horák.

But Kozlov wasn't "normal," by any means. He was a killer with superhuman strength. I'd pissed him off beyond reason, and the price I had to pay for that was death.

Kozlov tightened his grip around my neck. My lungs pulled and yet no air came through my throat. Small sounds

popped in my ears, the crackle of fragile bones and crumpling cartilage yielding beneath his extraordinary force.

Darkness gathered at the edges of my sight. My vision tunneled. My knees gave out. All I could see now were twin, pin-sized prickles of fading light. The light died slowly, giving me time to project my last thoughts into the universe's black expanse.

Kenzie, I love you. Mac, take care of our daughter. I'm sorry I wasn't able to do right by you, but I loved you from the beginning and all the way to the end.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Mac

It took me almost thirteen minutes to take out the three mercs that shared the crawlspace with me. Thirteen fucking minutes I could've used to kill Kozlov and get Danika out of this place. It didn't help that my suppressed Sig Sauer ran out of ammunition just as I got to the third tango, allowing him to get a shot off right before I finished him off with my bare hands.

When shit went down the plan changed, but that round almost got my ass shot.

The mercs below made a mess out of the hallway ceiling. They had me slithering up there like a snake on the run. Rounds traced me every-fucking-where. I was distantly aware of some stings here and there, but I ignored them.

To stay alive, I had to backtrack, detour, and get creative in finding a new route to go across. I gave the Czech SWAT team credit for keeping up the pressure on the thugs below. The mercs had a hard time shooting at them and me at the same time. That probably explained my survival.

I was late to rendezvous by the time I arrived at the west side of the hallway, slipped through the hole, and landed quietly on the carpet inside the walk-in closet in the agreed-upon room. The racket outside filled the space with the sounds of the gun battle, and yet a preternatural quiet seemed to fill the room on the other side of the closet's door. Inching my way up, I peeked through the crack. What I saw there sent my guts plummeting.

Danika wasn't there.

Instead, the room had been destroyed. Holes riddled the walls, feathers pooled everywhere, and casings littered the floor on one side of the bed where a few blotches of blood stained the carpet.

The notion that the blood on the carpet could belong to Danika made me queasy. Dread slithered up my spine, cold, dark, and terrifying. I'd never really known the meaning of terror until today when Danika's life had been on the line more than once. What if my *suerte* had run out? What if this time around she was really dead?

Don't jump to conclusions. She's not dead. You are Delta. The only acceptable option is success. To succeed, Danika has to be alive.

Working quickly, I made sure that the door to the hallway was locked, lifted the butt of my weapon to my cheek, and moved through the destroyed connecting door to my ten o'clock. A peek showed me hundreds if not thousands of casings. After clearing the room, I bent down and picked one up.

Uzi ammo.

Bruckner had been here in a serious attempt to demolish the room where Danika sheltered. Good news. They weren't here anymore. Bad news. Had they caught Danika?

If she'd been attacked from this direction and had survived and escaped, she would've gone the opposite way.

Please be alive, Danika. Please.

I backtracked through the first room and found the other connecting door locked. After unlocking it, I cracked it open and leaned in one way, then the other, before I cleared the room. The door to the hallway remained locked. There were no casings on the ground, which was good, but after I checked the closet and bathroom, I didn't find any trace of Danika.

Moving on.

I crossed the room and found the next connecting door locked as well. I put my ear to the wood. At first, I heard nothing. Then voices, an awful choking sound.

I shot the lock, wrenched the door opened and, eye to the scope, stepped into my worst-case scenario.

Kozlov's bicep and forearm swelled around Danika's neck, a killing vise. As I came into the room, he flopped her listless head backwards until it lay on his chest. Angling his AK-47, he pressed his weapon's muzzle against her cheek. She slumped in his grip like a broken puppet, but he held her up, using her limp body as a human shield.

I had Kozlov's head in my sights but I couldn't shoot. Even the fastest round left room for him to pull the trigger. From where I stood, I couldn't tell if she was breathing, but if she was, a shot from that angle was not survivable.

The human heart is a pound of muscle that beats steadily at the mercy of our brains. And yet grief is its Achilles' heel, for sorrow and anguish can stop it from beating without the assistance of lethal weapons.

For a second there, my heart quit. It was possible that Kozlov had already killed me without firing his weapon. If

Danika was dead, I'd failed. I'd promised my daughter. How could I face her if I'd failed?

But failure wasn't the most potent of my emotions. Grief hit me like a fucking missile. It struck me that if Danika wasn't on this rock, I didn't want to be on it either.

Fuck.

I'd never admitted to that.

She'd come after me today, risked her life to save mine. If she hadn't shown up when she did, I could be dead. If that wasn't a sign of courage and loyalty, I didn't know what was.

Grief haunted me. I felt maimed, unfit to be myself. What the hell did that mean?

All the years we'd spent apart, I'd taken her life for granted. She was Danika. She had to be better than fine. Then I'd ejected her from my trajectory without realizing what I now knew: that without her, the life I wanted for Kenzie and, most shockingly, the life I wanted for myself could never happen.

Could I even conceive the world if Danika wasn't in it?

“Little Taco to Big Taco,” Kenzie’s voice echoed in my head. *“Go kick butt, Big Farting Mango. And remember Babylon Five, episode five: no surrender, no retreat.”*

The adrenaline hit, fierce, fearless, and merciless. *Fight now. Figure out your shit later.* I tightened my hold on my weapon. Fury roared in my head, an instant clarification of who had to die and how.

Kozlov.

By my hand.

I growled. “Let her go.”

“I don’t think so.” Kozlov smirked. “The moment I do as you ask, you will kill me.”

“If you let her go, I’ll let you live,” I ground out.

“Americans lie. You lie. Instead, you’re gonna put down your weapon, get on your knees, and very slowly stretch out on the ground.”

Where he no doubt planned to put a round in my head.

Hijo de la gran puta.

“No can do.” I kept my crosshairs on his face. “I don’t even know if the woman is alive or dead.”

“She’s alive.” He shook her, hard, and the rise of her chest and a weak groan gave me the vital information I needed, along with a huge sense of relief.

I still had a chance.

“Toss the carbine over to me,” Kozlov barked. “Get on the floor.”

Moving slowly, I engaged the safety and threw the carbine, but on the bed. The beast glared at my disobedience, but there was no scenario where I was giving him more weapons to fight me. Forcing my legs to bend, I lowered myself on the ground and took a knee.

“Let’s meet halfway,” I suggested, bracing my elbows on my knee and keeping my glower on the fucker. “Release the woman, now.”

“*Het.*” Kozlov swept out his weapon, aimed at the sweet spot between my eyes, and pulled the trigger.

Danika

I came to in the middle of a quake that had my brain sloshing in my skull. I quickly realized that I was still trapped in Kozlov’s murderous arms. He was the author of the shaking

that had brought me back to consciousness. My head ached and I groaned, but I kept my eyes closed and forced my senses to work. There was another voice in the room.

Mac. He was here!

I ventured a peek between my lashes. He was unarmed, kneeling on the floor, and at Kozlov's mercy.

Had he surrendered his weapons to save my life?

No. Oh, no. I was not letting him die.

Desperate to save Mac, knowing his timeline was down to seconds, I took a deep breath, fought the vertigo ruling my head, and, keeping the rest of my body limp, pressed four fingers together.

You better strike true, Kos. Otherwise, Mac will die, and so will you.

I felt the movement of Kozlov's body as he swung his weapon away from me. I opened my eyes to find Mac meeting his death with a brave, defiant glare.

At the same time, I swung my left arm and, taking Kozlov by surprise, hit his weapon with the heel of my open hand, knocking it out of his hold, even as the *rat-tat-tat* of several shots echoed in the room.

Moving fast, I twisted the opposite way, brought my right hand around, and, using all my strength, struck Kozlov on his left side, right beneath his tactical vest.

Splat.

My fingertips broke through the drenched bandage, ruptured through the broken stitches, and sank into his wound, the one I'd given him back at The Pravda. Hot liquid gushed over my hand as I rammed it beneath his ribcage and stabbed my fingers as deep as they'd go.

He squealed like a pig and bent over, but he also tightened his hold around my neck. My throat buckled under his vise.

Good try, Kos, but not good enough.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Mac

If the sting on the side of my head was any indication, Kozlov's first round carved a rut above my ear. Not that I cared. The other shots went wide, thanks to Danika, who'd not only taken the beast by surprise, but me, too.

I moved at Delta speed, and yet even as I slid the knife out of my boot and charged, time slowed down to allow me to absorb the full implications of this fight.

Nothing was more dangerous on earth than a woman in protection mode. Nothing. Mothers, lovers, wives, aunts, grandmothers, they were the dreams and the nightmares of the enlightened warrior. It was a known fact that females, the guardian angels of the world, possessed the unique capability to morph into the most vicious weapons on earth.

Good thing that Kozlov had always underestimated women and refused to realize the immense power of the female will. His mistake, given that *my* personal guardian angel kept stabbing the brute with her hand, plunging it again and again into the pus and blood-barfing wound on his side.

He kept squealing—an eerie sound coming from such a big, battle-hardened son of a bitch.

He spotted me coming. I read the realization in his eyes. He couldn't take both of us at the same time. Howling in pain, the beast slammed Danika on the ground with murderous force.

Slammed. My Danika. On the ground.

As Danika went limp on the floor, my huge frame collided against Kozlov's also huge frame. My bones rattled from the impact. Clash of titans. He threw up a block, forcing my knife to strike his vest. It bounced off, but I managed to slam the fucker on the ground.

With a grunt, he landed on his back, rolled away from me, and, demonstrating impressive agility, regained his feet, leaving a bloody streak on the carpet. He held a monstrous blade in his hand, a custom oversized Russian Kizlyar, eight inches of honed steel accessorized with a viciously serrated edge.

“She’s a killer.” Kozlov flexed his knees, assumed an expert stance, and wiggled his fingers, urging me to come to him. “She wants to feed on your blood.”

Feed on my blood, my ass, but my guts urged caution. My Ontario fixed blade looked almost dainty compared to Kozlov's brutal weapon, but it was deadly and I knew how to use it.

The fucker was strong. He'd earned his reputation as immortal for good reasons. He might have been older than me and bleeding from his side like a speared boar, but I could tell he was skilled in hand-to-hand combat, an expert with the blade, and determined to prevail.

I was determined to prevail, too.

A malignant sparkle flared in his eyes as he attacked. I blocked his knife hand with my left forearm, detouring his blade, and leaned in for a slash. When he drew back and avoided my blade, I landed a kick on his tactical vest, sending him staggering back and fighting for balance. He crashed against the far corner but, true to his reputation, rallied immediately into an attack position.

I flexed my knees slightly, raised my left forearm for protection, and held my knife "in the box," between my neck and my belt, and inside the width of my shoulders. Keeping my footwork nimble and my blade aimed at Kozlov, I maneuvered to stay at a forty-five-degree angle from him,

remaining just beyond kicking distance, watching him, waiting for my chance to strike.

The man was no rookie. He knew the way of the blade and he was as tough as they came. His drive to survive was deeply ingrained. He also knew that the key to winning a knife contest was ending the fight as fast as possible. He leaped forward, broke into my space, and after feigning a low stab, slashed up.

I dodged the lethal blow. He missed my carotid by less than an inch. Fast as a snake, he lunged again. This time, I went inside his range and traded a slash to the bicep for a thrust to the face.

He jumped back, demonstrating that neither his age nor his wound hampered his agility. Reading his intentions in his eyes, I slashed low. He saved his guts by moving sideways. At that point, he must've decided he was done. He feigned a lunge toward the door but pounced toward the window.

I was already there, blocking his way. "There's no way out for you today. You're not getting out of here alive."

"The American likes to talk more than he likes to fight." Circling around me, he glanced at Danika, no doubt wondering if he could get to her before I got to him.

“You’re not touching her again,” I snarled, blocking her from his sights.

“She’s dead, American.” Kozlov taunted me with a vicious smirk. “Why waste your blood on a dead woman?”

He believed I’d lose my focus by taunting me. Instead, my outrage sharpened my concentration and turned me into a killing machine. I visualized the lethal dance even as I executed it. Feign low, counter blow, use my nondominant hand to jab my fingers in his eyes.

His eyeballs jiggled like gelatin beneath my bent knuckles. They seemed to retreat from my blow, sinking into his skull. Kozlov jerked and staggered back. His free hand shot up to defend his face. Blinking his watery eyes, his knife came at me almost blindly, stabbing at the air with powerful lunges.

It was all in the timing now.

When he stabbed at me again, I allowed his blade to flirt with my branchial arteries in order to sneak into his space, before crouching low.

Time to defang the snake.

As his arm pulled back, I thrust my blade up and caught him at the wrist of his knife hand. My Ontario sliced through tendons, ligaments, muscle, blood vessels, and nerves before it scraped against bone. It cut deep. With that strategic strike, his hand no longer worked. Kozlov's blade fell out of his fingers.

“Mac?”

I glanced over my shoulder. With some effort, Danika lifted her head from the floor. She looked dazed and weak, but she was alive. My joy lasted less than a second. Kozlov tackled me, ramming his head low against my belly. Gripping my knife hand with his left hand, he slammed me against the wall.

It was a testament to his stubborn brutality that the fucker was still fighting. The beast pounded my hand against the wall. My fingers stretched out reflexively and dropped the knife.

Way to go, Mac Loser. You traded instant joy for extra pain. All the Deltas in the world are laughing at you right now. That's what you get for falling in love.

Oh, shit. I was in love with Danika. It was true and denying it wouldn't change the fact. Nothing she'd done had

killed the affection I held for her. Nothing ever would. I wanted to live long enough to tell her that.

Back to the cycle of shit.

I headbutted Kozlov, then kneed the bastard in the balls, but the fucker had the wherewithal to flip me over his head and slammed me on the ground. The air rushed out of my lungs.

Better up your game, Blaze.

I jumped up, blocking his way to Danika yet again. I planted my feet, lifted my fists, and dared the animal to come at me. He obliged. I took a jab to the jaw so that I could come up from underneath him and plant a punch on the bloody wound on his side.

When he staggered backward, I followed through with a high roundhouse kick that hit him on the side of the face and stunned him. He swayed on his feet. I hooked him on the jaw and followed with an uppercut.

That did it.

The beast collapsed to the ground.

I braced above him, sucked in big breaths, and, after reaching for my M4 on the bed, pulled off the safety and

aimed at Kozlov's head. Now that the man was down, I realized how dangerous the fight had been. I was no cold-blooded murderer, but this poor excuse for a human being did not deserve to live.

“Are you okay?” Danika's voice calmed the gods of war clamoring for Kozlov's blood in my head.

“I'm fine.” For a second there, I was torn between finishing off Kozlov and helping Danika. Reason prevailed. I collected all the weapons in the room and set them aside. Keeping an eye on the unconscious fucker, I went to her, crouched, and patted her from head to toes, looking for wounds. “You?”

“I've got a little headache, but it will pass.” She examined the slash on my bicep, then touched the side of my head and stared at the blood dripping from her fingers. “You're not fine.”

“Nicks and scrapes. Let's get you up.” Holding my weapon with one hand, I helped her stand and sit down on the bed. “Don't go anywhere.”

I did another weapons sweep for good measure, then used the zip ties I found in Kozlov's vest to secure his hands behind his back. Wiping the sweat out of my eyes, I felt as if I

was two hundred years old. I was bloodied and tired, but the rage still burned inside. Kozlov had almost killed Danika.

Almost.

I took a few calming breaths, but the fuse lit up like new when Kozlov groaned and turned on his back. Why wouldn't this *cucaracha* just die?

I stood above him and aimed my carbine at his face. Shooting a man when he was down was a vile thing to do, but Kozlov was not human. He was a global monster.

“You think you’ve won, American?” he spat through a puffy lip. “Well, you haven’t. I surrender. Under your code, you can’t kill me. That would be murder. Yes?”

“You don’t follow any code.” I shrugged. “Why should I?”

Shouldering the weapon, I grabbed him by his tactical vest, lifted him from the floor, and punched him hard in the face. *Crack*. A gush of blood burst from his nose.

“Mac!” I registered Danika’s voice but distantly.

I slammed him against the wall and, pinning him down, landed a hook across his face. “That one was for Oksana.” I hit him again and a tooth burst out of his mouth.

“That one was for Cy.” I delivered another blow and half of his face caved with a crunch. “This one’s for hurting Danika.”

The strikes left him senseless and hanging limply from my grip, but I had a long list of grievances. I was about to pummel him again when the door flew open and Mariska Grigoris marched in.

I slammed Kozlov on the floor. With a foot to the back of his neck, I pinned the senseless fucker facedown on the floor. At the same time, I lifted the butt of the carbine to my cheek, cased the new arrival, and curled my finger on the trigger. I did all of this before Mariska had time to raise her gun.

“No!” Danika jumped in front of Mariska, protecting her with her body.

How I stopped my finger from pulling, I never knew. The blood pumped hard in my head. I was in problem resolution mode. It was a miracle that I didn’t shoot the mother of my child.

“Dani, get the hell away from her,” I snapped, pressing my foot down on the unconscious man, making sure he remained down.

“It’s okay, Mac.” Danika motioned with her hands for me to calm down. “She’s not a danger to us anymore. She’s on our side.” When a man followed Mariska into the room, Danika rushed to add, “He is, too.”

“*On our side?*” I grimaced, checking out the newcomer, who joined Mariska in making the good decision of putting their guns away. “Explain.”

“It’s a lot to explain—”

The doors all around us burst open. I spun to meet the new threats. Several SWAT operatives cased the room with their rifles. The man behind Mariska shouted an order in Czech.

“Stand down!” he then repeated in English. “Nobody shoots. We are all friendlies here.”

The men pouring through the door wore tactical vests that identified them as the Czech SWAT team. It was a good thing they heeded Mariska’s companion and lowered their weapons. They stood at full alert while the man issued a slew of new orders in Czech.

“Who the fuck is he and what’s he saying?” I asked Danika, keeping my weapon at the ready.

“He’s local intel. Last name Horák. He and Mariska helped me survive Bruckner. His men are reporting that the few surviving mercenaries are on the run, but the hallway is clear.”

“I see.” I kept my weapon in play, but I was curious. “Were your people the ones who planted bugs in my suite and trailed me from the restaurant to the hotel?”

“Yes,” Horák admitted without hesitation.

“The man reading the paper in the lobby?”

“He was a pathetically trained Bruckner.” Horák held my stare.

“That wound.” I pointed to the bloodied bandage on his arm. “How did you get it?”

“Helping me escape,” Danika answered instead of him.

So it had been Horák’s blood on the carpet, not Danika’s.

“You’ve got your answers,” Horák said. “Now, my men will take possession of Kozlov for interrogation.”

“I don’t think so.” I kept my foot in place and my weapon up, broadcasting with my body that anybody who

tried to take Kozlov from me would pay the price. “I’m gonna finish the job.”

Horák motioned with his head for his men to wait outside. The rustle of boots announced their retreat. I guessed he didn’t wanna have this particular conversation in front of witnesses. When Horák’s operatives were gone, he looked to Mariska, encouraging her to lead the explanations.

“I’m sorry, Wilson, or whoever the hell you are,” Mariska said briskly. “In as much as we all want Kozlov dead, we must give him to the Czech Intel Services.”

“No way, no hell,” I ground out, picking up Kozlov by the edge of his vest and holding his limp body a couple of feet in the air. “He’s mine.”

“Mac, please, lower your weapon,” Danika ordered as she snatched a case from a pillow and came at me as if I wasn’t dangerous and dialed high into my check-Kozlov-out-of-this-life mode. “Stay still.”

It was a testament of how relieved I was to see her alive and moving that I lowered my carbine and let her do her thing. She placed the pillowcase on top of my wound, and with a couple of small rips, began to tie it around my bicep.

I allowed it, but I kept my hold on my weapon, my grip on the senseless Kozlov, and my glower on Horák and Mariska.

“If you kill him, you’ll have to stay in Prague for a while,” Mariska pointed out. “At least until you’re tried for murder and finish your thirty-year sentence.”

“Mariska,” I rumbled. “Do *not* play games with me.”

“Jonathan, dear, I’m not playing games. Kozlov belongs to the Czechs now.”

“*I* caught him.”

“On Czech territory, may I remind you.” She crossed her arms, standing her ground. “Where you have zero jurisdiction and no protection from the law.”

“Nope, negative, this is not gonna happen.” I stood my ground, too. “I’m gonna finish my mission.”

“Listen to what they have to say.” Danika finished knotting her improvised bandage and met my gaze. Her cobalt irises pleaded with me to see reason where there was none.

“I told you I knew my way around Prague,” Mariska reminded me. “I used my contacts to protect you. I did this for *your* benefit.”

“Really?” Skepticism sharpened my voice. I was still having a hard time believing anything the Russian operative said. “What exactly is it that you did?”

“I traded Kozlov to Horák.”

“What do you mean you *traded* Kozlov to Horák?” I stepped up to Mariska, dragging Kozlov’s listless body along like the garbage bag he was. “He’s not yours to trade. In any case, what the hell did you trade him for?”

“I traded Kozlov in exchange for your life, for Danika’s life,” Mariska said. “In the hunt for Kozlov, Horák’s men could’ve killed you both. Cleanest, smartest course of action, as you probably know.”

She was not wrong there.

“So, in exchange for Kozlov,” she continued, “Horák tasked his men with protecting your lives. Which really complicated their mission to net Kozlov. I also negotiated so that you and Danika can make a quick exit from Prague, although there’s a time stamp on the deal.”

“We have agreed that we will not press charges,” Horák put in, assessing me with his dark eyes.

“*Charges?*” I scoffed and glowered at the man. “You should send me a thank-you note for netting the beast.”

“I’m afraid thank-you notes are not in my purview, but charges are applicable.” Horák’s eyes twinkled with a hint of humor. “We’re willing to overlook those if you leave now.”

“It’s a good deal, professor,” Mariska warned. “Take it.”

“This man is an animal.” I shook Kozlov in my grip. “He’s dangerous. He needs to die.”

“Agreed,” Mariska said. “Let someone else finish the job.”

“Someone else like who?” I demanded, incensed.

“Like the Ukrainians,” Horák replied. “After we interrogate Kozlov, the Ukrainians are his ultimate destination. Let them avenge the damage that this devil and his mercenaries have unleashed in their country.”

“There’s justice to that,” Danika offered quietly. “Cy would’ve loved it.”

She was right, but I didn’t like leaving things half done.

“You have one hour to leave the country,” Horák said.
“After that, I won’t be able to control the narrative of what happened here or guarantee yours and Danika’s freedom.”

“Come on.” Danika took my arm. “Let’s go.”

I balked but I didn’t shake off her touch. “This feels wrong to my gut.”

“I know.” She squeezed my forearm. “But Kozlov is out of commission and this is the only way we’ll accomplish our most important objective. Remember?”

Two parents for Kenzie.

“Yeah, I remember.”

Her eyes pleaded with me. She was asking me to choose between completing the job and Kenzie; between being the deadly, efficient operator I was and becoming a father.

If I finished off Kozlov, I would spend a while in some prison or another. Sure, Elite would eventually get me out, but this meant time away from Kenzie and no chance to sort out my personal life.

Well, then. I didn’t have a choice.

My priorities had changed, but at some point, I’d come to terms with the fact that my past and my future were gonna

look different than my present. With a huff, I dropped the bloody beast at Horák's feet and shouldered my weapon. If there was justice in this world, the Ukrainians would do the rest.

“We appreciate your help here today.” Horák tried to appease me, while I tried very hard not to snort in his face. “You must understand. There are larger forces at work here.”

“Yeah, sure, you better keep me in the loop, man. I wanna know when he's gone. Kozlov is a danger to humanity.”

“I'll do that.” Horák motioned for two of his men to secure Kozlov and got busy supervising that it was properly done.

Taking ahold of Danika's hand, I marched to the door, aiming for a quick exit before I listened to my gut, changed my mind, and committed to finishing the job. Mariska followed us to the hallway. It looked like carnage out there, but the Czechs were nothing if not efficient and cleanup on level three was already in progress.

“Goodbye, professor.” Mariska offered me her hand.

I still didn't trust the woman, but Danika had said the Russian spy had helped her drive back Bruckner, so I shook it.

Mariska turned to Danika and inclined her head.

“Madam Attaché.”

“Madam Attaché.” Danika returned the gesture. “I hope to see you again at the end of this war.”

“Yeah, me too, American.” Mariska sighed. “Me too.”

The expression on her face reminded me of Cyborg's on the day he'd picked me up at the border, wistful but not hopeful.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Danika

After a smooth takeoff, the luxurious Bombardier purred beneath my seat like a tame kitten, cutting an elegant swath through the clouds as it ascended to its cruising altitude. The lights of Prague coalesced behind us, until the city became a luminous patch on a quilt of darkness below us. And just like that we were on our way to safety, to Kenzie.

I leaned back on the plush leather seat, closed my eyes, and forced myself to take even breaths. I still wore my soiled and rumpled clothing. I felt gritty, crusted with old sweat, and dirty. My bones hurt, I had bruises in places I didn't know could bruise, and I stank of smoke and gunpowder.

And yet all I felt was gratitude. We were alive, and in a few hours, I would be reunited with my daughter.

The one hour of grace that Horák had secured for us had gone quickly. Mac had insisted on a fast visit to a discreet private clinic to make sure I was okay. My oxygen levels checked and a CT scan of my brain showed no lingering effects from Kozlov's brutality.

While at the clinic, I'd made sure that the doctor took care of Mac as well. The doctor stitched Mac's sliced bicep and covered it with a waterproof bandage. He also treated the bullet rut on the side of his head, cleansed his other nicks and scrapes, and pumped him full of antibiotics to prevent infection.

After that, I'd only been allowed a few minutes in my flat to pick up my purse, my docs, some clothes, and a few valuables. The only other thing I tucked in my suitcase was the small painting of Kenzie and me by the Vltava. Then we were whisked away to the private airport where one of BB's jets waited for us.

The staff at the embassy would take care of packing my belongings and sending them on—to where, I didn't know. My present and my future were in shambles at the moment. Heck, my employment with the State Department had probably ended today. One other thing was for sure: my time in the Czech Republic was over.

“Take a look at this.” Sitting across the table from Mac and me, Trev picked up a bunch of pages from the folder opened before him and slid them over to Mac. “I highlighted the important parts.”

Mac caught the papers and skimmed through the pages. Trev opened up his laptop, connected to the plane's Wi-Fi, and began to type something fierce. The frown that stamped his features churned my stomach.

"Are these the documents Mariska traded with Professor Wilson?" I asked as the plane leveled off and the seat belt sign went off.

"Yup." Mac swore under his breath. "Jesus, Druid. I can't believe what I'm reading."

"Yeah," Trev murmured. "It's a lot of shit to take in."

Unlike us, Trev looked clean and crisp in his usual black T-shirt and jeans, unruffled by our latest adventure. I'd learned that cool under pressure was his MO and he wasn't one to boast about his deeds.

He'd saved our lives several times in the last forty-eight hours. He'd also risked his own and manned a sniper rifle to give us a chance against Bruckner. When I'd asked him to tell us his side of the story, he'd looked at me and shrugged.

"I did my job," was all he said.

I shifted my stare between the men. "Why do you two look so worried?"

“Wanna do the honors while I catch up?” Mac rumbled and kept reading.

Trev stopped typing, leaned back on his seat, and rubbed his eyes, the only sign that confirmed he was as exhausted as I was. “These reports are informative but alarming.”

“How so?” I asked.

“We’ve known for some time that Kozlov was the operational head of Bruckner. We’d never been able to get a lock on him until you did. Thanks for that, by the way.” He allowed for a brief smile. “We’ve also been looking for Bruckner’s CEO, Kozlov’s boss, the man who directs and funds the mercenary operation, the person who is the bridge between Bruckner and the Kremlin.”

“And those papers reveal his identity,” I concluded dryly.

“They do.”

Trev paused as the flight attendant approached us and asked what we wanted to drink. The man returned quickly and poured from a trio of oversized beer bottles. He left the bottles on the table next to the frosted mugs, then parked a plate of

sandwiches in the middle of the table. The three of us attacked the food and drink as if we hadn't eaten in years.

“Who is Kozlov's boss?” I asked between bites.

“His name is Oleg Laskin,” Trev replied as he devoured his sandwich.

“The name's familiar.” I washed down a bite with a sip and went through my mental list of Russian oligarchs. “Isn't he the one they call ‘Oleg the Weasel,’ on account of his last name?”

“That's the guy.” Trev nodded and swigged from his mug. “He's vermin, all right, a close associate of Putin's. Apparently, he was the tyrant's chauffeur early in his career.”

I wasn't surprised. In my intel briefings I'd heard of so many turds elevated to important and profitable positions simply because they supported the tyrant.

“We know very little about Laskin,” Trev continued. “Only that he's a reclusive billionaire who does the Kremlin's dirty work, but...”

“But what?”

“We've come across his name before.”

“Yeah.” Mac took a big bite of his sandwich and mumbled through a full mouth. “Unfortunately.”

“How?” My curiosity spiked. “Where?”

“It’s kind of a long story.” Trev seemed reluctant to share. “A complicated one.”

“Tell it to her.” Mac turned another page. “She could be helpful.”

“All right.” Trev took a deep breath, pushed his plate away, and grabbed ahold of the baseball-size rubber ball sitting next to his laptop. “Last year, Elite Team unmasked a highly organized attempt at undermining democracy in the United States to advance the interests of a specific set of rogue states and global bad actors.”

I gawked. “You mean a *coordinated* effort?”

“Yes.” Trev’s biceps and forearms bulged as he squeezed and released the rubber ball, exercising his muscles even as he sat in place. “It’s an incredibly well-funded, all-out assault on the people and institutions that uphold the basic principles of democracy in our country for the purpose of destroying the USA, preferably from within.”

I drew back and looked from one man to the other.
“That’s an intelligence agency’s worst nightmare, a theoretical threat that has never been viable before.”

“Until now.” Trev’s eyes darkened.

I moistened my parched throat with another sip of my beer. “How does it work?”

“They use a combination of methods.” Trev transferred the ball to his other hand. “It includes bribing officials at the highest levels, buying the media, dominating and manipulating social media, bombarding the American public with divisive rhetoric, promoting and financing violence, targeting moderates, and funding extremist groups.”

“In other words, divide and conquer.”

“You got it.”

“An operation like that would require a lot of money flowing to a lot of places undetected,” I pointed out.

“You’re right about that.” He tossed the ball in the air and caught it swiftly. “Elite has spent the last year unmasking the players and following the money trail. Gracie and Sebastian exposed the fuckers who ran the stateside money-laundering operation. Karma and Knox took out the

international crypto magnates who collected and routed the funds. Kane and Alix defeated the terrorist who tried to launch an attack on the US Capitol.”

“Wow.” Talk about power couples and an effective team. “What happened next?”

“We understood this was an organized conspiracy.” Trev set the ball on the table and met my gaze. “We’ve been working a list of suspects, looking for the mastermind, the leader of this blatant attempt to undermine our national security. It turns out that Laskin is on this list. We didn’t know the extent of his role, but Mariska’s documents reveal that Kozlov’s boss, the head of the Bruckner Group, appears to be at the helm of this international conspiracy.”

“Makes sense,” I mumbled. “Bruckner specializes in undermining democracy everywhere.”

“And there’s more bad news.” Trev set his hand over the folder. “According to these papers, Laskin is also behind an extensive Russian hacking network that has caused havoc around the world. They call themselves Hellbound.”

“Now, see, that’s new to me.” Mac set the papers aside and leaned forward on the table. “Who are they?”

“They are cyber mercenaries,” Trev said. “They’re no joke. I’ve tussled with them before. I won’t lie. They’re good. They’ve taken down satellite networks and national power grids. They’ve hacked into departments of defense all over the world, attempted to take over nuclear weapons, and stolen billions from governments, companies, institutions, and individuals. To say that I’ve been after them for a while is an understatement.”

A ferocious determination flashed in Druid’s eyes.

“They sound rapacious.”

“They *are* rapacious.” Trev twisted his mouth in disgust. “Moreover, they’re believed to be associated with the Russian cyber military unit of the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence organization. Of course, the GRU denies it.”

I scoffed. “That’s convenient.”

“Hellbound is suspected of some very nasty crimes.” Trev pressed a few keys on his laptop and turned it around to show us a file on the hackers. “Tampering with the US elections, hacking candidates’ servers, attacking the servers of DOJ, DOD, FBI, the White House, you name it.”

I squirmed in my seat.

“If this checks out, your friend Mariska has given us invaluable information.” Trev turned his laptop around.

“Laskin might very well be *the* mastermind behind the plot to destroy America. If he is, then we know the attack is the work of a certain tyrant from a certain country, hellbent on destroying the US and global peace.”

“There’s one more thing you’re not saying.” Mac’s voice sounded dark and somber.

“Yeah, there is,” Trev admitted, “but you know it anyway.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“This is not over, not by a long shot.” Mac’s hands fisted on the table. “If Laskin gets a whiff we know all of this, Elite will become its main target.”

Chapter Thirty

Mac

Trev's laptop alerted with the tone he used for his priority calls, but his face relaxed as he answered what had to be a very important video-call.

“Hey, sunshine.” He smiled at his screen. “What’s up?”

“Hey, Druid.” Kenzie’s musical voice revealed the reason for Trev’s levity. “Gracie said you guys were on the way back. Is Mama with you?”

“She is, and so is Mac.”

“Oh, yay.” A little clap came over the speaker. “Can I please talk to Mama?”

Trev’s eyes shifted to Danika. When she nodded, he widened his smile.

“Of course you can.” He began to type on his keyboard. “Let me call you right back. I’ll connect to the satellite and patch you through a secure connection to my tablet.”

“Sure, but don’t forget to dial me back,” she sing-sang before she hung up.

“I’ll need three minutes to secure the connection,” Trev told us as he put on his headphones and got to work.

“Mac?” Danika tapped me on the shoulder. “I think I should take this call on my own.”

“Why is that?” I stiffened in my seat. “I thought we agreed to parent our kid together.”

“I’m not going back on my word.” The sadness I spotted in her eyes tempered my reaction. “I’m not trying to edge you out. I want to give you every advantage so that you and Kenzie can have the best relationship possible.”

I eyed her suspiciously. “Then what’s this about?”

“There’s something I need to do before Kenzie can move forward.”

“What is it?”

“I need to tell her about Baba.”

Oh, shit. With all the commotion, I’d overlooked the fact Kenzie didn’t know about her great-grandma’s death yet.

“Are you sure you wanna tell her over a screen?”

“Kenzie is a child of the cyberworld,” she said. “To her, the screen is as real as it gets.”

“Okay.” I accepted that. “But wouldn’t it be better if you told her in person?”

“That might be true for other people, but Kenzie is not like other kids. Remember what I told you before about her special needs?”

“Yeah, but she’s still a kid,” I countered. “Won’t she be sad to learn that her grandma is gone?”

“She’ll be very sad, but she has Gracie and Alix there to comfort her and I’ve held back this truth from her for too long already.”

“What if we wait until we get there, and we both tell her, you know, together.”

“If we do that, she’ll be mad as a hornet because we kept this from her. Her Cienfuegos temper will flare, her anxiety levels will spike, and all we’ll get from her is attitude, distrust, and anger. Whereas if I tell her now, she’ll trust that this is the earliest opportunity I’ve had and the bad news is over.”

“You’re trying to keep her trust.”

“Exactly.” Her loose hair fell over her face as she inclined her head. “For Kenzie, trust equals stability. Telling her now will also give her a little time to process her loss. With the sad news out of the way, your reunion will be easier.”

“You mean easier for me, as I won’t have to deliver the bad news.” I paused and stared at Danika. “Are you trying to protect me?”

“Maybe a little.” She shrugged. “But trust me. I know my daughter.”

“You’re right.” I set aside my doubts. “You know her best. We’ll do it your way.”

Her eyes went liquid. “Thanks for trusting me.”

I almost reached for her hand, but I killed the impulse when Trev slid off his headphones.

“That took for-fucking-ever,” he grouched even though it hadn’t been long at all. “BB’s satellites were giving me grief. Gotta look into that. Here you go.” He handed Danika his tablet. “Press ‘call’ when you’re ready.”

“If you need privacy, there’s a suite at the back of the plane,” I suggested.

She took the device, excused herself, and, setting her jaw at the stubborn angle that revealed her resolve, disappeared down the aisle.

“She’s a hell of a woman,” Druid commented as he kept working on his laptop.

“How would you know that?” I asked, fighting a flare of... what? Anger? Jealousy? Guilt?

“She raised a hell of a kid.” He kept his stare on his screen. “That kid is now the center of your life. Plus, I have eyes to see, and I worked with Danika to save your ass, remember?”

“You did not need to save my ass.”

“You’re right,” he shot back. “*Danika* did that.”

I looked out the porthole. Darkness and more darkness. The flashing lights of the airplane’s wing reflected on the clouds as we flew through them. My gut was doing the yanking thing. It was alerting me about more than the dangers that stalked Elite. It was warning me about the enemy within.

“Shame about what she did,” Druid commented, almost casually, although I knew better. “It’s inconsistent with the person she is today. But hey, people sometimes do weird

stuff. Most of us don't change, do we? Look at you. You're still a jackass."

I glared. "Why the hell are you up my ass?"

"Cause it's *your* ass on the line, Blaze, and I'm your friend." He lifted his gaze and met my stare, his tawny eyes alight with clarity that defied my internal confusion. "Look, I'm a guy. I get it. Her mistakes? Inexcusable."

"You got that right, bro." I grabbed the beer bottle, refilled my mug, and took a long draft, trying to squelch the emotions fighting in my head.

It didn't work.

Keeping his stare on me, Trev leaned back in his seat. "It's hard to watch that, no matter how hard she tries, she can't right her wrong."

"You think she's tried?"

"I can see she's tried," he said with total certainty.

"Can't you?"

She'd risked her life to save mine. She'd faced her worst fears to see me through. Even now, she was delivering bad news to Kenzie to ensure I had a chance with my daughter.

It was noble. Altruistic. But I couldn't admit that out loud.

Could I?

"I can also see her efforts are in vain," Trev kept at it. "By your own account, you've got no idea how to forgive."

"Are you baiting me?" I narrowed my eyes at him. "It sure feels like you are."

"Maybe." He reached for his mug, and inspecting the golden liquid in it, turned the glass in his hand. "The way I see it, you make all kinds of decisions every day—tactical and strategic, programmed and non-programmed, organizational and personal. Hell, you just decided to drink that beer and not this one." He nudged his chin at the bottles standing between us. "But forgiving? Yeah, no. Not in your skill set."

"Shut up, dude." I tightened my hold on my mug. "Forgiving is not a decision you make. That would be too fucking easy."

"It's not?" He raised his eyebrows at me. "What is it then?"

"I don't know," I rumbled. "It's volunteering to go into a state of amnesia or something along those lines."

“Don’t be a dense turd.” He scoffed. “Look it up, dude. Forgiving is a decision you make, one that doesn’t entail forgetting at all, but letting go of the hurt and anger chewing at your insides.”

“You would know that, you brainiac,” I spat crossly. “You think you know everything.”

“No, not everything, but I know a little about you.” He paused and then ordered. “Go.”

“We’ve got work to do,” I pointed out, frantically trying to avoid facing my conflicting emotions. “We need to find Laskin and figure out if he’s aware of—”

“I’m on it,” Trev offered firmly. “You go.”

“Druid, I...” I set my glass on the table and scrubbed my eyes with the heels of my hand before I confessed. “I’ve got no idea what to do.”

“It doesn’t matter.” He leaned forward and softly tapped on the table. “Go, Blaze. It’s now or never, and I don’t recommend never since it’s gonna make you the most insufferable, arrogant, and miserable meathead on the planet.”

“You’re missing my point,” I ground out. “I don’t fucking know how to do this!”

“There’s no manual written about it,” he said. “So, I can’t print it out for you.”

“And if I fail?”

“Really, Mac?” He scolded me with a glower. “You are Delta. You don’t fail. You try again until you get it right.”

“This is different.”

“Okay, this is different, so do you want my advice on how to deal with different?”

“You’re gonna give it to me anyway,” I grumbled.

“You’re right.” His voice hardened. “Go, now. And don’t fail.”

I padded to the back of the plane feeling uncertain about... everything. Too many worries whirled in my head as I made my way, too many emotions battled for control of my brain. For a happy-go-lucky grunt, things had gotten rather somber lately. Trev’s findings were beyond disturbing. They were extremely dangerous—for Elite, for our nation, hell, for Planet Earth.

Druid was not someone intimidated by the prospect of a hard fight, but today I’d seen something odd in his gaze, a

new level of alarm that hadn't been there before. He knew more about Hellbound than he let on. If he thought things were this bad, then things were really fucking bad. The question was: what were we gonna do about it?

Here I was, thinking we'd made the world a little safer with Kozlov's capture. Now we knew he was just a cog in a big, fucked up conspiracy, the tip of an iceberg that could sink our nation.

The cycle of shit was never-ending.

My bruised jaw ached. My overworked muscles had set like dry cement. The fight today had taken a toll. My body was not happy with me. I was getting too old to play Whack-a-Mac.

As I arrived at the back of the plane, my personal worries leapfrogged to the forefront. On the other side of this plane ride, Kenzie awaited me, my beautiful daughter, my special needs kid.

During our time together, Danika had been generous with her explanations. She'd given me an idea of what it was like to be Kenzie's parent. It didn't look simple or easy, but it hadn't dissuaded me from trying, either.

And then there was Danika, the woman who'd played me, lied to me, and kept me from my daughter for all these years. The old anger still pooled somewhere in the pit of my stomach, corroding my insides, but for some reason, I couldn't muster the outrage that had sustained me all these years.

Druid was right. Danika had saved my life. In the process, I'd almost lost her. The terror was fresh in my mind. It hovered over me like a guillotine waiting to strike.

Hell if I knew how to put together the emotions jamming my throat right now. The battle against Kozlov might be over, but the mission was incomplete, and my personal battle, the fight for my life, for my future?

I didn't know how to begin to fight it.

I parked before the suite's door, raised my fist, and knocked, seesawing between ignorance and insight, agony and hope. I had to do right by Kenzie. She came first.

You also have to be true to yourself.

What the fuck did that mean?

I knocked several times, but no one answered. When I turned the handle, the door opened. I stepped into the posh suite. The tablet lay abandoned on the bed, but the room was

empty. The hiss of the shower had me angling toward the sound.

“Danika?”

I peeked into the bathroom and took in the polished marbled floors, the gleaming black cabinets, and the lit-up mirrors hanging over the double sinks. Even by the high standards of pricey private jets, this bathroom was over the top.

Danika’s clothing was piled up by the door. Inside the stall, the shower gushed, steaming the glass. It was like a foggy London morning in there.

“Hey, Danika?” I called out again.

Silence.

“Dani?” I lumbered into the room and approached the misty stall. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she finally replied, but her voice cracked, betraying that she was the opposite of fine. “Go away,” she barked, and then a gentler, “Leave me alone, please.”

Her command to go away gave me a legit chance to run. Since the day that Danika had ghosted me, I’d chosen to run away from pain, to tread lightly through life, and not

engage in relationships that could entail agony like the one I'd suffered at her hands.

It would've been easy to walk away now. It would've been consistent with my old self, but the last few weeks had changed my life, my priorities. This time around, I chose to stay.

I stepped up to the stall, swung open the glass door, and, peering through the haze, caught sight of a Danika I didn't know.

She was slumped beneath the showerhead, naked and curled over her knees with her forehead pressed to the floor. Her face was buried between her arms and her black hair was plastered on her back. The water pounded on her, but it wasn't the force of the flow that had her shaking. Her heart-wrenching sobs wracked her body and echoed softly in the stall.

I felt sick to my stomach.

"Dani?" I kicked off my shoes and rushed in. Getting drenched in the process, I turned off the shower, grabbed a towel from the warming rack, and fell to my knees. I threw the towel over her and leaned down trying to catch a glimpse of her face. "What's wrong?"

When she didn't answer, I wrapped the towel around her, sat in the corner, and lifted her onto my lap. Her tremors coursed through my flesh. Her anguish wafted over me as if it was contagious.

“Talk to me.” I shook her gently. “You’re killing me here. Say something.”

A whimper rose from her throat. Her lips moved, but no coherent words came out. Her face looked swollen from crying, and her mouth twisted into a permanent wince of pain.

“I’m here.” I hugged her to my chest and cradled her on my lap. My worst fears flashed in front of my eyes, torturing me. “What’s going on? Is Kenzie okay?”

“It’s... not... Kenzie,” she sobbed. “She’s... okay... I mean... sad... but okay.”

If Kenzie was alive and breathing, I could deal with whatever this was.

I prodded her gently. “Then why are you crying?”

“It’s me.” Her blue irises swam among a sea of red capillaries, even as she blinked the tears and managed to focus on me. “It’s... just me.”

“What do you mean?” I held her tighter, wishing I could get into her head, find what was paining her, and kill it with my own two hands. “Why are you so upset?”

“I... I... told Kenzie.” She hiccupped. “About Baba. It... It brought it all back. The losses. The heartache. My mistakes.”

“I should’ve never let you go at this alone.” I planted a kiss on the top of her wet head. “We should’ve done it together. You’ve hardly had any time to process.”

“Kenzie,” she heaved. “She took it like a big girl. Her strength... It broke my heart. *She* tried to console *me*.”

She dissolved into more tears. I felt for her. For my daughter, too.

“Gracie and Alix,” she hiccupped when she could speak again. “They were with her. God bless them. I know they’ll help her through this. But after I hung up, I don’t know what happened to me. I fell apart. That’s twice I’ve fallen apart lately. *Twice!* I’m not that woman, Mac. What kind of a mother falls apart when her daughter needs her the most?”

“The kind that cares,” I offered. “The one who has her own feelings to deal with and is trying her best.”

“I’m not trying hard enough,” she ground out through clenched teeth. “I’m a weak person, a pathetic human being.”

“You are not weak.” I hated to see Danika broken down like this. “You’re not pathetic, either.”

“You know I am,” she whimpered. “You know better than anyone else.”

“You are a strong, independent woman.” I caressed her back. “You’re also human. You’ve made mistakes, but you’ve dealt with the consequences as best as you could. You’ve tackled every challenge that life has thrown at you with courage. That’s who you are, Dani. Don’t ever forget it.”

“I’m sorry, Mac.” She wept some more. “I’m sorry that I robbed you of your right to make your own choices, of the joy of seeing your daughter being born, for the years I kept the two of you from each other. I know I wrecked our chances. I’ll have to live with that for the rest of my life. But Kenzie needs you. Please. Don’t give up on her because of me.”

The grief and despair radiating from her stripped me from the last vestiges of anger. I felt suddenly empty. Except for my arms. They were full with her.

“I’m never gonna give up on Kenzie,” I pledged. “It’s not gonna happen. You’re not the only one who made mistakes. I’m sorry, too.” The words took me by surprise, but they felt right as they came out. “I’m sorry I wasn’t the man you needed back then. You were right. I probably wasn’t ready. In hindsight, perhaps *you* spared *me* from making a terrible mistake.”

“I misjudged you,” she sniffed. “I should’ve trusted your character, your honor.”

“I would’ve liked that,” I admitted. “But I should’ve also told you how I felt back then, how you were changing me. Instead, typical me, I got batshit angry. I didn’t fight harder for you, for what we had. I’m sorry for that.”

“You don’t need to apologize to me,” she said. “For anything.”

“Yeah, I do.” It was all so clear now. “I’ve been in the grip of my rage for so long that I’ve failed to convey to you how grateful I am for our daughter.”

“You... are... grateful?” she stammered.

“Very grateful.” It felt so good to say it out loud, so freeing, as if I’d shed a thousand pounds off my shoulders.

“My life has changed since I learned she’s mine. The world looks different, more meaningful, brighter with her in it.”

“It does,” she murmured as if she’d just discovered that herself.

“I’m grateful for Kenzie’s life,” I said. “I’m thankful you gave birth to her, that you cared for her so spectacularly well, and for all the work you’ve put into raising our daughter into a healthy, happy child, an incredible kid. I can’t imagine it was easy to do this alone, but now I’m here, and I’m gonna step up to the plate. You’ve got my word on this.”

“Thank you.” She threw her hands around my neck and hugged me, planting small, wet kisses all over my neck and chin. “This means so much to me. Thank you!”

“There’s more I have to say to you.” Whatever was happening inside me felt like a milestone, as if some gate I’d built inside myself had lifted and I was free to speak about what I’d buried so deep within my heart.

“Go ahead.” Her hands fell to her lap. She wiped the tears from her face, set her jaw, and met my gaze. “Whatever it is you want to say, I deserve it.”

“I... I’ve been hurting all these years.” I fought to get the words out. “When I hurt, I get mad, and when I’m angry, I burn inside. I don’t feel, hear, or see things clearly.”

Two small lines appeared between her eyebrows.

“Things like what?”

“Like the fact you saved my life several times in the last few weeks,” I said. “You risked yourself to help me. You stuck with me through thick and thin and you put your neck on the line to protect mine.”

“We were partners in this mission,” she offered. “I did what I had to do to accomplish it.”

“No, you did more. You went above and beyond.” I hesitated, not sure how to bring up the most important part of this conversation. “You also told me that... that you loved me.”

“I’m sorry about putting you in a bind,” she rushed to say. “The truth just blurted out, right there, under the sea, but I don’t expect you to—”

“You don’t love me anymore?”

“Mac... I...” She paused, leaving me suspended over an endless void. “I’ve loved you since I met you. I’ve loved

you through the years even when you weren't there. I kept track of you, thought of you, saw you every day reflected in our daughter." She took a deep breath. "I'm pretty sure I'm never going to stop loving you, but I understand you deserve someone you can trust, someone better than me—"

"Stop it right there." I sat her up on my lap and stared at her, touched by her admission, heartened by her words, fighting to express things I'd never known how to say before. "You need to know," I finally managed. "I've made a decision."

She squeaked. "*A decision?*"

"Yes." I nodded forcefully. "I've decided to leave the past behind."

She opened her mouth and closed it. "W-what do you mean?"

"I've decided to move forward, to see you and me not for the people we were years ago, but for who we are today. I can forgive you, Dani, *if* you can forgive me."

Her lips slacked before she managed speech. "Mac, I ___"

“Can you forgive me for the pain I’ve caused you?” I asked. “It’s an honest question. I was oblivious when we were younger, too caught up in myself to see to your needs. I’ve been harsh. Angry. I lashed out. I know I scalded you with my fury. Can you forgive me? Can you truly let go of the past?”

“Oh, Mac.” A new batch of tears escaped the corners of her eyes. “It’s not fair. I can’t believe that you’re asking *me* to forgive *you*.”

“But can you do it?”

She raised her hands in the air, then let them fall on her lap and flashed me a crooked smile. “It’s done.”

“You forgive easy and well.” I took her hand and kissed it. “I, on the other hand, I’m learning as I go. So, I’ve decided that from now on, I want to trust you. I can do this because you’ve laid the groundwork for that.”

“I have?” The little frown on her face deepened.
“How?”

“With your actions,” I said. “I want to carry that trust forward. It won’t be a castle on a cloud. The old wounds are bound to flare from time to time, for you and me. I turn into an insecure son of a bitch when I’m out of my comfort zone, so

I'll have to work at not doing that. When things get iffy, we'll have to work like hell to repair the damage, but it's all new construction ahead. Are you interested?"

"I'm interested." She smiled through a veil of tears.

"Very interested."

"We do this for Kenzie," I said. "We owe her the best of us. But we also do it for ourselves. I don't know exactly how to do this, but I know I want to do it with you. Only with you."

She heaved. "I want the same."

I reached out and traced the side of her face, enjoying the feel of her soft skin sliding beneath my fingertips. "Do you think we can do it?"

"You are a brave and generous spirit and I've learned from my mistakes." She sobbed, but this time around, there was no pain to her tears. "I believe we can do it."

"I won't lie," I confessed. "I'm a little scared."

"Mighty Blaze? Scared?" She cupped my jaw. "Of what?"

"I'm afraid I won't be enough," I pushed the words out. "That I won't be good enough for Kenzie and you."

I had no record of success at being with someone for longer than a few weeks and exactly one week's experience being Kenzie's dad. Not a lot to go on. Prague was beginning to look like a walk in the park compared to the emotional reconstruction that awaited me on the other side of the ocean.

"You're more than enough, for me *and* Kenzie."

Danika's eyes lightened to the color of the sky on a bluebird day. "You are everything I want and everything we need."

"What if Kenzie decides she doesn't want me as a dad?" My gut got cold just thinking about that. "What if she decides she doesn't want me in her life?"

"I can't imagine that." Danika took my hand and squeezed it. "You and her. You're so alike. You're gonna have a blast together. But I can't promise easy. Parenting is an unpredictable adventure. If she's not on board, we'll work at it."

"I won't force her to accept me if she doesn't want me."

"She'll want you, you'll see, as I want you." She flashed me a dazzling smile. "But if you wish, we'll go slow. We'll wait to make our plans until things settle down."

“Yes, that’s it.” It all clicked in my head. “My application to join your family is on hold pending Kenzie’s approval.”

“*Your application?*” She laughed. “That’s not what this is. I understand you want Kenzie to be a part of this process, but I need to warn you. You can’t be a pushover to be a good dad.” She planted a smooch on my chin. “I won’t promise you smooth or easy, but I’ll be right there, learning with you. Is that enough for now?”

“It’s more than enough.” I lowered my face and kissed her. “It’s everything to me.”

Danika

The joy in my heart threatened to overwhelm me, but the kiss got hot, too hot for thinking. I couldn’t believe it. He’d forgiven me. He’d given us another chance!

Shivering in his arms, desire raged over me. It was as if I needed his body to believe that we were possible again.

He broke the kiss and studied my face, his eyes full of concern. “You’re cold.”

“You’re mistaken.” I grinned up at him. “I’m cozy, warm, and steamy... inside.”

“Gotta do something about that.” He helped me to my feet, removed the towel, and caressed my naked body with his gaze. “How about we finish your shower?”

“We could both use a good scrubbing.” I unzipped his pants and slid them down his legs.

The mere sight of his erection scattered my wits. His dick was already hoisted to full mast. And suddenly, I was living my dream.

He shed his shirt and turned on the shower. The water flowed over us, warm and healing, cleansing the grunge of the fight and the hardships of the day. I could’ve used a washcloth, but I refused to give up the pleasure of touching him, of claiming every aspect of his body for myself. I poured shower gel directly on my palm and got busy lathering his thick neck, his hard pecs, and the defined muscles that corded his arms.

I washed him slowly, thoroughly, making my way around the waterproof bandage covering the knife wound, lingering to rinse the nicks and scratches that littered his battle-weary body, easing my way around the bruises that marred his skin.

He'd fought hard for us. It was only because of him I was alive. He'd given me more than my life back. He'd offered me my ideal future, the dream I'd given up long ago.

Working up the suds, I slid my hand over the grid of his stomach and down to his groin. His sex filled my grip. I kissed him while pumping his cock in my fist, slowly, so slowly.

His lips replied in kind, ravenous and possessive, but his eyes glazed over as I continued the sensual work until a bubble of his own making topped his slit and he could no longer stand it.

"Your turn now." He pulled away from me and slid his sex out of my grip.

I stuck out my lower lip and pouted. "I want my big boy."

He laughed the sexy cackles that stiffened my already puckered nipples. "More from him in a few."

He selected a packaged loofah, ripped open the plastic, and squeezed an entire tube of shower gel on the sponge.

"Turn around."

“Bossy Delta,” I mumbled, but I smiled and did as he asked.

He settled the sponge on my back and worked up the suds. He took care to spread the fragrant foam down the base of my neck, along my spine, and over my glutes. He lingered there before he bent over and worked his way down my legs to my heels. Then he set the loofah aside, poured shampoo on his hand, and washed my hair.

It was heavenly. He took his time, planting small kisses on my shoulder as he massaged my scalp. His strong fingers slid between my tresses when he applied the conditioner. Chaste as it was, his touch stoked my flame into a bonfire.

“Turn around,” he murmured in my ear.

The water rained down my front, washing away the last traces of conditioner, flowing over my breasts, and leaping from the tip of my nipples in twin cascades. He lathered the loofah again and set out to paint the front of my body with suds, brushing the sponge in small circles around my breasts, taking his time to tease my nipples with the mesh, icing the erected buds with peaks of white foam.

I let out a soft groan. “You’re torturing me and you know it.”

He grinned. “Is it working?”

“See for yourself.” I braced my legs apart, shivering with need.

Setting the sponge aside, he glided his fingers between my folds. Beneath the cropped curls that topped my mons, my folds swelled, pink and full. When he slowly pushed a finger in me, I discovered that I was as drenched inside as I was outside, and just as steamy.

“Oh, Mac,” I groaned. “It feels so good.”

“It does.” His tongue dipped into my mouth, a penetration almost as delicious as that of his fingers. His face dripped with diamond-like drops that perched on his lashes and ran down his bristled chin. His mouth wreaked havoc on my body.

“We got a lot to hash out,” he murmured, “but right now, I gotta get me some of you.”

“We got a lot to hash out,” I agreed between kisses. “But if you don’t get inside of me right now, I might die.”

He turned me around and I braced my hands on the warm tiles. Prompted by a tap of his foot, I separated my legs.

His hands landed on my hips with a firm grip that spoke of his need and passion. He perched his cock against my opening.

“Don’t make me wait.” I rolled my hips in an erotic dance that brushed over his cockhead and brought me close to madness. “Please?”

“Nothing’s been settled.” He stood very still. “We’ve got a lot of decisions to make.”

“We do.” I rose to my toes and engulfed the tip of him, unleashing the exquisite sensations that rewarded my daring. “Should I stop?” I leaned the back of my head on his shoulder, and looking up at him, flashed him my wickedest grin. “You wanna talk or what?”

He tightened his hold on my hips, glided in with a primal thrust that sent the beginnings of a powerful orgasm pulsing through me, and whispered against my captured mouth. “Or what.”

Chapter Thirty-one

Danika

The moment we stepped out of the car, Kenzie ran to me, a pink tornado of flailing arms and wild curls. As I went to my knees, she enveloped me in the hug of my dreams.

“Mama!” She kissed my face all over.

“Kenzie, my love, I’m so happy to see you.” I returned her kisses a million times, hugging her to my chest with all I had.

Keeping ahold of her, I drew back and examined my little girl. Under the light of a full moon, she looked good, happy, and tanned. She wore a flowery tank top and her favorite pink shorts, and I swear she’d grown a whole half an inch since I’d last seen her.

I wanted to tell her so many things, but I ended up dipping my face in her hair, inhaling the coconut and chamomile scent of her shampoo, and tearing up instead.

So many weeks had passed since I’d last seen her. So many things had happened. There had been times I didn’t think I’d ever see her again, and yet, here we were, at the

famous Crescent Beach, reunited against the gorgeous background of the velvet sky.

The moon reflected on the water, painting a silver portrait of itself on the black canvas. Small waves swooshed over the sand, singing the sea's quiet lullaby, soothing my ears and calming my mind. The scent of salt, sun, and sand enveloped me. It rose from Kenzie as well, as though the landscape had adopted my city girl and transformed her into a coastal creature that thrived beneath the sand pines, along the tidal flats, and among the nearby mangroves.

I didn't want to let go of Kenzie, but even as we clung to each other, she tilted her face over my shoulder and flashed a smile that wasn't for me.

I knew it was time to give Mac a turn. Reluctantly, I released her from my embrace, straightened on my feet, and stood aside.

"Hey, Big Guy." Rolling up and down on the balls of her bare feet, Kenzie waved at Mac and flashed him her gapped smile. "You brought Mama home."

"Hey, *corazón*." Mac waved back, rooted to the spot where he stood, holding on to my suitcase and his duffel as if

his life depended on it. “I promised I’d bring your mama back, and here she is, duly delivered.”

I could tell he was dying to take Kenzie in his arms and give her a big Cienfuegos squeeze. I had a vision of him, bending toward our daughter like a palm tree in the breeze and yet resisting the wind. I realized he was being cautious, trying not to overwhelm Kenzie, who didn’t seem overwhelmed at all.

Poor Mac. He was about to face parenthood’s frontal assault. Knowing Kenzie, he’d have to sink or swim in the tides of her formidable little mind.

“Trev!” Kenzie cried out when she spotted Druid wheeling himself down the concrete path. She launched herself in his direction, landed on his lap, and gave him a big hug. Mac witnessed the scene with a faltering smile. He wanted that so badly.

“How’s my best girl?” Trev hugged her back and then ruffled her curls.

“Tutti Frutti awesome, now that we are all here. Guess what, Druid?” She wiggled her eyebrows. “I cracked the code.”

“You did?” He drew back and stared at Kenzie with a measure of respect. “How long did it take you?”

“One hour, twelve minutes, and eleven seconds.”

“That’s impressive, princess.”

“Will you give me another assignment?”

“You bet your pretty little curls I will.”

“What’s this about cracking a code?” Mac asked.

“You’re not teaching her to hack, are you?”

“Nah.” Trev waved a hand in the air. “She already knew the basics of that. So, we moved on to study security protocols. She’s a natural.”

Mac lunged a questioning look in my direction.

“She’s good at tech,” I muttered as if in apology, knowing that it was better to have Trev teach Kenzie than to have her go out into the cyber world without a mentor by her side.

“Come on, Mama.” Kenzie jumped down from Trev’s wheelchair and gave me an adoring look. “It’s late and we have much to do.”

She took my hand and tugged me toward the small group of people lounging around the pylons of a yellow bungalow. It was weird seeing the men and women I'd met under operational circumstances looking relaxed, unarmed, and wearing shorts and T-shirts. A couple of women whom I hadn't met personally eyed me with wide smiles.

Kenzie skipped by my side. Mac and Trev followed in our wake. I couldn't help but feel a little bad for Mac. He wasn't getting as much attention as he deserved.

One heartbeat at a time, Kos.

"This is where we'll be staying, Mama, and these are my best friends forever. You know some of them." Kenzie pointed as fast as she spoke. "Sebastian goes with Gracie, Knox and Karma tell me that they've already met you, and Alix is Kane's wife."

"Hi." I felt suddenly shy.

These were the people who'd helped rescue me and taken care of Kenzie when I couldn't. I didn't know all of them, but I already loved them.

I settled my hand on my chest and tried very hard not to sob. "I want to thank all of you for taking such great care of

my daughter. I'm in your debt forever.”

“Nonsense.” Short-haired, dark-eyed Gracie grinned, rubbing her baby bump. “Kenzie is an amazing girl.”

“She’s a big event around here.” Karma flipped her blonde ponytail over her shoulder. “We call her Mini Mac.”

I met Mac’s gaze over my shoulder and burst out laughing. Mini Mac indeed.

“Oh, and see that spot over there?” Kenzie pointed to the fence at the end of the walkway. “That’s where the Big Guy hit the sand when I told him I was his kid.”

Mac groaned and his face turned bright red.

“You passed out?” I gawked, fighting the grin trying to kidnap my lips. “Big, badass Blaze fainted?”

“He wilted like a dainty, delicate flower,” Karma deadpanned and everyone hooted, including Kenzie, who seemed to be especially fond of the memory.

Picturing the scene in my head, I couldn’t stop giggling.

Mac glared at Karma. “You didn’t have to confirm or deny.”

“Yeah, I did.” The blonde flashed her diabolical dimples. “I love embarrassing you,”

Mac groused, but he wasn't truly mad, and I loved the easy way in which these people laughed together. Like friends. Like family.

“Your daughter has been a joy to all of us,” Alix said when the group's hilarity began to subside. Holding on to Kane's hand, she flashed me a radiant smile that lit up her amazing green eyes. “We're glad you're here.”

“And now, we're gonna do the disappearing act,” Gracie announced. “I'm sure that you, Mac, and Kenzie have a lot of catching up to do.” Gracie's kindness almost had me crying again. “Kenzie worked hard to get the beach bungalow ready for you guys. I hope you like it.”

“Everyone helped,” Kenzie announced.

Rats. Here came the tears again.

“The welcome reception is over.” Seb motioned for everyone to follow him. With Trev rolling beside them, the little group walked away and got lost in the night.

I looked from Kenzie to Mac. He shifted on his feet. I'd never seen him this uncertain before. This was the same

fearless warrior who'd won the battle for our lives. He already had my love and my uncompromising devotion, but now he faced his worst enemy: the misgivings he harbored about himself.

Could he shed his self-doubts and win his daughter's affection once and for all?

Chapter Thirty-two

Danika

“Would you ladies like some private time?” Mac asked, but the smile on his face was fake. “I can come back later if you’d like. Or tomorrow if you prefer.”

“Oh, come on, Big Guy.” Kenzie raced up the stairs, threw open the doors, and motioned for us to follow. “We gotta talk.”

His eyes rounded to the size of saucers. Now he looked utterly terrified.

Inside, the beach house was bigger than it looked from the outside. It smelled of new paint and cleaning supplies. The open plan held a kitchen, a living room, and a dining room that opened to a deck overlooking the ocean. It wasn’t grand like my flat in Prague, but it was cute, and it felt homey.

“Have a seat, everybody.” Kenzie took a spot at one end of the couch and, looking at me, patted the cushion next to her.

I sat, hugged her to my side, and tickled her with my kisses until she giggled. Her little cackles chimed in my heart.

Mac chose the chair to the right of Kenzie and eased down like a man not wanting to frighten a kitten. Little did Mac know that Kenzie was more like a small lioness.

“Mama, here’s your wine.” Kenzie reached the coffee table and handed me a bottle and a glass. She pushed a can of beer in Mac’s direction. “Here’s some beer for you. Kane said you liked that stuff. I’ll stick with coconut water.” She poured herself a glass and chucked it in one gulp. “Ah.” She smacked her lips. “It powers the brain.”

I suspected Mac would’ve loved to down three or four beers just about now, but he passed. Instead, he reached for the coconut water.

“Do you mind?” he asked Kenzie.

“Go for it.”

Mac tilted his head back and gulped down what remained in the carton. My heart ached for him. I knew he felt he was in over his head. If only he realized his own worth, to me, to Kenzie. Perhaps he wouldn’t be so nervous then. I couldn’t help him with this. By definition, he was the only person who could discover his self-worth.

“I drew up an agenda.” Kenzie perched a notebook on her lap, opened it, and unzipped her pencil bag. Ruffling through her sticker collection, she picked up a perfectly sharpened number two pencil.

“*An agenda?*” Mac looked at me.

I shrugged. *Shoot*. This was gonna be an on-the-nose family meeting.

Kenzie’s enthusiasm brightened her face. “I figure it would make things easy for everyone.”

“You know, sweetheart, we don’t have to hash out everything right away,” I offered, mostly for Mac’s benefit.

“We have time.”

“If you’re hungry, I put out snacks.” She motioned her hand over the dishes lined up on the coffee table. “I even got you mini cupcakes.” She turned to Mac and explained me as if I were a lesson. “Mama eats cupcakes when she’s stressed.”

Mac exchanged a glance with me. “You do?”

“Yep.” I grabbed one of the small treats and popped it into my mouth.

He followed suit and swallowed one as well.

“Okay.” Kenzie tapped her pencil on the page and looked at Mac. “Sitrep?”

“*Sitrep?*” I eyed my daughter closely. “Where did you learn that word?”

“Duh.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s like Da Word around here. I looked it up in the dictionary. I know what it means. So?” She returned her questioning stare to Mac.

“Um... err...” Mac’s Adam’s apple betrayed a gulp. “Mission completed?” he offered tentatively.

“Yay.” Kenzie clapped her little hands together. “Looks like it was hard. You’ve got a bruise.” She pointed at her jaw. “Right there.”

“I’m all right.” Mac leaned back in his chair and tried to look relaxed. “Comes with the territory.”

“So, what’s the story?” Her gaze shifted between us. “Are you guys on or off?”

I choked on my wine and ended up snorting it through my nose. Mac’s jaw dropped. He looked like he wanted to go for a fifty-mile run right now.

“*Uh-oh.*” Kenzie cocked an eyebrow. “Too much, too soon?”

“A little.” I wiped my mouth with a napkin and, after giving Mac a reassuring look, faced my daughter. “Mac here... I mean... *your dad*.” There, I’d said it. “He’s never been to a family meeting. He’s not used to how you and I do stuff.”

Kenzie aimed a knowing nod at Mac. “I totally get it, Big Guy, but here’s my rationale.”

“Your *rationale*?” Mac croaked.

“Yeah. *Rationale*. The reason for what I’m doing. Remember?” She lifted a finger in the air. “I read the dictionary.”

“Yeah, I remember.” Mac’s lips turned up in a proud smile. “Christ, but you’re smart.”

“People keep telling me that.” She pushed her glasses up her nose. “Here’s the scoop. You’re a strong guy. Mama is a champ. I can handle stuff, no sweat. We’ve been on ice for... what? Seven years?”

Mac inclined his head wordlessly.

“That’s like, a long time. My whole life, really. So, I figured, let’s get the awkward stuff out of the way so we ride the choo-choo train forward. What do you think?”

Mac opened his mouth, closed it, and then succeeded at putting out words. “I think you are a very special little girl, *mi reina*. I also think that yours is a fantastic idea.” His chair creaked as he leaned forward and propped his elbows on his thighs. “By all means, let’s get the awkward out of the way.”

“Cool.” Kenzie carefully drew a checkmark next to the first item on her list, then met Mac’s gaze and lifted her pointy chin in the air. “Do you love Mama?”

“Oh, God.” I croaked and covered my mouth. “You don’t have to answer that, Mac. That *is* too much, too soon, Kenzie. Maybe we can talk about this later?”

“But Mama—”

“Kenzie is right.” Mac cleared his throat and smiled at our daughter. “We might as well get the hard questions answered. I don’t love your mother, Kenzie.”

For a moment there, I figured I’d imagined the conversation we’d had about forgiving each other and starting anew in the plane. Perhaps he’d changed his mind. My heart went into a free fall, plummeting toward the floor right along with my stomach.

“I don’t love your mama,” Mac repeated before he shifted his gaze to me. “I *adore* her.”

Gravity brought the free fall to a screeching stop. I swear, my stomach bounced like a basketball on its way up.

Mac *adored* me?

Why are you so relieved, Kos? You know this. Your heart already knows this.

But it was so good to hear it out loud. I bit down on my tears and hid the swell of emotions by taking another sip of my wine.

“I fell in love with your mama almost eight years ago when we worked together,” Mac explained to Kenzie. “She’s a classy lady and back then I knew she was way above my pay grade. There hasn’t been a day since we parted when I didn’t think of her.” His gaze caressed my face. “That’s God’s honest truth.”

My heart melted like ice cream in July.

“That’s a very good answer, Big Guy. Five stars.”

Kenzie shifted her shrewd little eyes to me.

Oh, no. Don’t do it. I peeled my eyelids at her. *Not now. Don’t do it, child—*

“What about you, Mama?” Ignoring my warning look, she forged on. “Do you love him?”

Well, she did it.

My breath got stuck in my throat and my cheeks burned. I set my glass on the coffee table and collected my thoughts. I knew I’d have to find a way to talk to Kenzie about this, but I’d hope to ease her into it.

Wishful thinking, Kos. This is your daughter we’re talking about.

“Kenzie, my love,” I started, improvising the little speech I’d begun to compose in my head. “I want you to know that nobody can replace my affection for you. You are my—”

“Your sun, your moon, and your stars, I get that, but that’s not my question, Mama.” She bounced the end of her pencil over the notebook. “Do you love this man?”

Tap, tap, tap. She waited impatiently for my answer. *Tap, tap, tap.* Mac waited, too, his gaze glued to me, sitting so still that he could’ve been a statue.

“Yes, Kenzie.” I looked Mac in the eye. “I love him. I’ve loved him for a long time.”

“Is that why you always carried a picture of him in your wallet?”

I gawked at my daughter. “You... you knew about that?”

“Of course.” She waved her pencil in the air. “Since I was, like, three. People don’t hide pictures of strangers in their wallets for nothing.”

Mac choked out the words. “May I see it?”

“This is so embarrassing,” I murmured, my face burning as hot as a furnace as I fished my wallet out of my purse.

He took the worn picture from me and studied it closely.

It showed the two of us posing in front of the Eiffel Tower, the most cliché photo ever. In the pic, Mac looked straight at the camera, smiling his boisterous grin, his curly hair blowing in the wind, his arm hooked over my shoulder. Head tilted, I looked up at him. A small smile curved my lips, but my expression was thoughtful.

This had been *the* moment I’d made my fateful choice, *the* day I’d decided he would be the father of my child.

“I remember this.” He eased the picture down on the table, slid his wallet out of his back pocket, and unfolded a lined, worn copy of the same photograph before he plunked it next to mine. “I remember thinking that the day felt very special.”

Oh. My. God. I smothered a gasp. He’d kept the photograph, too!

“Aw.” Kenzie gave sound to the warmth expanding in my chest. “That’s like, really sweet. You two are sooo cute. But I have another thing to ask. Big Guy, why didn’t you stick around? Why did you leave us? Did you not want me?”

And there it was. The question I feared the most. My heart went into a painful spasm.

“*Leave you?*” Mac stammered. “No, no, I... I didn’t leave you. I... I wanted... I would never...” The words died on his lips. He sucked in a deep breath and fastened his stare on our inquisitive kid. “Kenzie, *mi vida*, I’m sorry. I should’ve been there. All I can say is that I’m here now.”

He didn’t tell her. He didn’t even try to explain what had happened. I was stunned. Hands shaking, I leaned back, and stared with liquid eyes at the magnificent human being this man was.

The grief darkening his deep-set eyes was more than I could take, but it was the profound resignation I spotted in his gaze that shocked me the most, the firm set of his mouth as he pressed his lips together and refused to say another word.

He was not going to tell Kenzie about my decisions, even if telling her the truth was the only way he could redeem himself in the eyes of our daughter. He refused to blame me for his absence, or to jeopardize my relationship with Kenzie. He was not going to throw me under the bus even if I deserved it. This meant he had no explanations for Kenzie, no defense against a question that was also an accusation.

My hero.

My alpha hero.

Respect, admiration, and gratitude elevated my love for him and flared into something fierce, immense, and infinite. This is how Mac loved. Completely. Loyal. Heroically. It also made me realize that even the greatest heroes needed saving... from their noble selves.

“He didn’t know,” I mumbled.

Kenzie’s frown was a perfect match to her father’s.

“What do you mean, Mama?”

“I didn’t tell him.”

“Dani, *mi amor*,” Mac ventured. “You don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do,” I stated, committed to the truth. “She needs to know that *I* didn’t tell *you*.”

The furrows on Kenzie’s forehead deepened. “You didn’t tell him what?”

“That I was pregnant,” I said. “That you were born. That you were perfect and that he was the father of the most amazing little girl in the world.”

“I don’t get it.” Kenzie scratched her head with her pencil. “Why didn’t you tell him?”

“Because I was selfish and arrogant, and—”

“That’s not true,” Mac cut me off. “Your mother was afraid I wasn’t ready to be a dad. And maybe she was right back then. Who knows?”

I started. “That’s not what I was going to say—”

“My point is,” Mac spoke over me, “that your mama is the best mom ever. She loved you so much that she wanted to give you the best life possible. At the same time, she loved me, too, and she didn’t want to change my life or interrupt my career.”

“So, wait.” Kenzie narrowed her eyes on Mac, and I could see her gifted brain cranking to full speed. “Mama thought that if she told you about me, *you* would want to be with *me all* the time? And then, if you stayed with me, you’d have to stop being a secret soldier?”

“You’re brilliant.” Mac flashed Kenzie his most dazzling smile. “That’s exactly what happened. See? Your mama meant to do well by both of us. Sure, I would’ve liked to be there with you *all* the time, but your mom did what she thought was best for you, and for me, too. That’s all we can ask of those who love us.”

Heroes came in all forms, but mine? He was the all-around, everyday hero, the one who stepped up when it mattered the most. Defending me before my daughter, protecting my relationship with Kenzie was by far his greatest deed ever.

“Phew.” Kenzie pretended to wipe the sweat off her forehead. “I’m glad you told me. I feel soooo much better. I kind of thought that maybe you took a look at me and said, ‘Wowzers, that’s one hairy baby.’”

“Oh, my gosh, no, honey, no.” I hugged her tightly to my side, cursing myself for making my daughter feel

inadequate. “This was never about you being anything other than totally loved.”

“Your mama is one hundred percent right.” Mac backed me up. “You are perfect, intelligent, beautiful. And by the way, your hair is gorgeous. You’ve got the Cienfuegos coolness factor, multiplied by your mom’s looks and smarts.” He took off his ponytail, shook out his unruly mane, and, looking like a mighty lion, grinned and pointed at his head. “These curls? They’re the envy of the world. They make us look hot, baby.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Oh, yeah, kiddo.” Mac shook his curls with his nod. “You can be sure of that.”

Kenzie’s grin split her face in half. She pumped her little fists in the air and began to sing and dance on her seat. “Oh, yeah. We’re hot. Oh, yeah. We’re cool.”

Mac took up the jig and went along with the chorus, until they were both in stitches, bonded together in their shared amusement.

I smiled and almost cried at the same time. They were so alike. So fun-loving. So perfect together. I grieved my

decision once again, then set the sorrow aside and, basking in the joy of this moment, exchanged a grateful look with Mac.

He winked at me. He'd turned a treacherous conversation into a success. The anxiety drained out of me, replaced by a tide of relief.

We were going to be okay. All of us.

“Okey dokey,” Kenzie announced when she and her dad finally stopped laughing and settled down a bit. “Now that’s all cleared up, I wanna know what happens next.”

“Um...”

“Well...”

Neither Mac nor I managed an answer. She'd put us on the spot, but then again, that was one of Kenzie's specialties. He looked flabbergasted so I had to get my “mom's act” together.

“Kenzie, honey, we haven't had time to talk about that yet—”

“No time like the present.” She flashed her adorable grin.

I looked to Mac for help.

“Kenzie’s right.” He returned his attention to our daughter. “What do you need to know?”

“Are we gonna stay together?” she asked. “Will I get to see both of you every day?”

“Would you like that?” Mac ventured, his deep voice a little hoarse.

“You bet.” She nodded forcefully. “It would make this whole having a father *and* a mama easier, you know?”

“Yeah, sure, I get that.” Mac looked at me.

“So?” Kenzie sat very straight on the sofa. “What is it gonna be?”

I admitted to being a total coward. With my silence, I forced Mac to go first.

“I... I want to.” Mac’s gaze pleaded with me.

Kenzie turned to me. “And you, Mama?”

“I...” I paused to force a gulp. “I’d like that.”

“Awesome.” Kenzie drew a check on her page and shone her best smile on us. “You guys are doing great. Almost done. Hang in there, Big Guy.”

She reached out and patted Mac's hand. When Kenzie withdrew her touch, he held up his fingers as if they'd been covered with gold.

"Will we live in Crescent Beach?" Kenzie asked.

Mac cleared his throat. "How do you feel about that?"

"I would love to live here, at least until I go to college, but I also see the problems."

"What problems?" I asked.

"Mostly you, Mama. If we lived here, Blaze could do his secret stuff, but you... what would you do?"

"I... um.... I..."

Both Mac and Kenzie sat forward in their seats, hanging on to my every word. I felt the pressure, but I was determined to make this work, for everyone involved.

"I wouldn't mind taking a break from embassy work." I checked with Mac and saw he was on board. "I'll find something related to my field, maybe something I could do remote. I could join a think tank, or perhaps teach at a university."

"There are two universities nearby," Kenzie offered. "I know. I Google them. You see, Big Guy. Mama needs work,

culture, art, that kind of stuff.”

“I know.” Mac’s eyes were alight. “We’ll make it work, Kenzie. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“But I do,” my stubborn, determined little girl insisted. “It would make it sooo much better if we all lived here. I wouldn’t have to go back and forth between two houses like Mila Polansky.”

Mac frowned. “Who?”

“Mila,” Kenzie said. “My BF back in Prague. Her parents lived in different cities. Talk about a hassle.” She shook her head as if annoyed. “If we stuck together, I wouldn’t have to worry about one of you when I’m with the other. I could take care of both of you at the same time.”

“I see.” Mac nodded again. “But I think you may have things backward.”

“What do you mean?”

“Kenzie, *corazón*. It’s our job as your parents to take care of you. From now on, your mom and I are gonna do that together. Here’s what you really need to know.” Mac took his daughter’s hand and kissed it. “You mother and I want to do what’s best for you. We want *you* to be happy. We may not

have the plan down pat yet, but we're working on it. You are a kid. You've got us. You don't have to worry about adult stuff. We won't get it right every single time and we might mess up at times, but I promise, you come first, you've got us, and we're always gonna watch your back."

My eyes misted all over again. This was exactly what Kenzie needed to hear. The man was brilliant. He was a natural-born dad. He'd gotten this parenting thing down fast.

"You are acing this conversation, Big Guy." Kenzie drew another checkmark on her notebook. "I'm liking what you're saying."

"Kenzie, honey, you heard Mac," I put in. "We'll get everything figured out, but it's getting late. It's time for you to go to bed."

"One last question, pleeeeeease?" She pushed her palms together as if in prayer.

"Okay," Mac conceded, confirming he was gonna be a softie. "Shoot."

"Will you marry Mama?"

"Kenzie!" I gasped. "You can't put Mac on the spot just like that."

What woman on earth wanted a forced marriage proposal even if it was agented by a prodigy?

“It’s okay.” Mac gestured with his hands, an attempt to calm me down, or at least reduce the heat burning on my face. “It’s a fair question. Tell me, Kenzie. How do you feel about that?”

“I feel great about that.” She leaned toward Mac and lowered her voice. “Everyone needs a Best Friend Forever, and Mama really needs a husband.”

Mac flashed me a wolfish smirk. “Does she now?”

“Uh-huh.” Kenzie nudged her head toward me. “Are you gonna ask her or what?”

Mac traded a conspiratorial grin with Kenzie, and I saw the alliance that would define my future.

“Yeah,” he rumbled. “I’m gonna ask her.”

“*Now?*” I squeaked, afraid that my heart was going to pound its way out of my chest. “You want to ask right now?”

He lifted his big shoulders. “Why not?”

“Yeah, Mama, why not?” Kenzie imitated her dad, shrugging her little shoulders.

“We already agreed to be together,” Mac pointed out the obvious.

“But we hadn’t agreed on how,” I countered. “We shouldn’t get married just because we both love Kenzie to pieces.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” The intensity that gleamed in his eyes left no doubt in my mind he was serious about this. “Danika Kos, don’t accept my proposal unless you truly love me and you’re willing to spend the rest of your life with me by your side. Because if you marry me, that’s exactly what I’m gonna do.”

“Wow.” Kenzie grinned. “That was really good, Big Guy.”

“Thanks, peewee.” Mac and Mini Mac bumped fists before he got up from his chair and moved toward me. “Here goes nothing.”

I slapped my hand over my mouth. “Oh, God.”

Mac took a knee before me and, clearing the cobwebs from his throat, gently appropriated my hand. “Danika Kos, I love you. I want you to be the rice to my beans, the maracas to

my merengue, the *mami* that goes with my *papi*. Will you please marry me?”

I was speechless. I was also supremely moved.

“Psst.” Kenzie elbowed me in the ribs. “Your turn, Mama.”

“Oh, Mac.” I sobbed, but I was crying from happiness. I squeezed his hand and pushed out the words. “I love you and I’m happy to be your rice, your maracas, and the *mami* to your *papi*. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

His smile rained sunshine on me. “Consider it done, *mi amor*.” He cupped my chin and planted the sweetest kiss on my lips.

“Whoo-hoo!” Kenzie pumped her fists in the air. “You did it. You both did it!”

She jumped from the couch and hugged us before she quickly rummaged through her pencil bag.

“What’s she doing?” Mac mouthed, still kneeling before me.

“I don’t know,” I mouthed back.

“You deserve this.” Kenzie selected two stickers from her collection and pasted one on the middle of my forehead

and then did the same with Mac. “Gold stars for both of you.”

“Thank you.” Mac put out his hand. “May I?”

While I watched, Kenzie handed him her pencil bag. Mac retrieved another golden star sticker and pasted it on her forehead.

“*Mi linda estrella,*” he whispered. “You are the brightest star in my sky.”

“You did good, Mama.” Kenzie grinned from Mac to me. “He’s a keeper.”

“I can’t believe this.” I laughed and cried at the same time. “We’re getting married.”

“Oh, yeah.” He kissed me again. “We’re getting married.”

“Ahem.” Kenzie pretended to clear her throat, then pointed to herself. “Kid in the room.”

“You’re gonna have to get used to seeing your folks kissing,” Mac said. “Cause we’re gonna kiss, like, a lot.”

“Eek. Gross, but if you must...” She grabbed her stuff. “My work here is done. I’m going to bed. Good night, Mama.” She planted a smooch on my face, then sidled over to Mac and landed a kiss on his jaw. “Sweet dreams, *Papi.*”

Clutching her notebook against her chest, she skipped across the house to her bedroom and, flashing us a last, satisfied grin, closed the door behind her.

“Oh. My. God.” I let out a long breath and slumped on the couch. “The little rascal got everything she wanted tonight.”

“Including a wedding.” Mac got up and plopped down on the couch next to me. His hand cradled the spot on his jaw where Kenzie had kissed him, and his voice was so faint I suddenly feared he was sick.

“Mac? You don’t have to—”

“I’m gonna marry you,” he stated with total certainty.

“I want to. Have no doubt of it.”

“Then why do you look so shaken?”

“That kiddo. Wow. She’s—”

“I know, she can be a little much, but—”

“She’s astonishing. Remarkable. Spectacular.” A smile curved his lips. “She kissed me and...”

“And what?”

“She called me *Papi*.”

It struck me then that the gleam in his gaze were tears. They began to spill from his eyes and they wouldn't stop. His big chest heaved. An odd sound drifted from his throat and filtered between his pressed lips.

I put my arms around him, hugged him tightly, and, breathing into his loose curls, kissed his temple. "Are you okay?"

"Okay? Yeah. The same? Never." He pressed his face against my shoulder. "She called me *Papi*. She kissed me. I just met full-on happiness."

Mackenzie Cienfuegos, aka Blaze, Elite's badass, scourge of his foes, decorated Delta Force, the same operator who'd survived four and a half wars, twenty-two murder attempts, a myriad of HAHOs and HALOs, and forty-three infiltrations into hostile territory bawled heartfelt sobs that touched my soul.

I sobbed with him, because with him and Kenzie by my side, my life was now complete.

Epilogue

Mac

The irony of a warrior's life is that the moment you get a good reason to stay out of the fight you've got something precious to protect. This means you've got to stay in the game or get clobbered.

Some call this endless sequence of jumping from one pile of crap to the next the cycle of life. I used to call it the cycle of shit. Now that I have a kid and a wife, I call it the good life. So says Mackenzie Cienfuegos, part-time philosopher, semi-former idiot, devoted full-time father, and adoring husband-in-training.

The good life was hard work. I didn't get it right all the time, but I was learning. Getting hazard pay in the form of smiles, kisses, and hugs was one of the job's best perks. To protect the ones I loved was the best mission of my lifetime.

I'd partied hard in my previous life, but I'd never been to a kid's birthday party, let alone planned one. Danika and I worked our asses off to make Kenzie's special day fun and memorable. We'd invited everyone at the beach. We'd also

invited Kenzie's friends from the public school Danika and I had decided she would attend. We figured she was crazy smart, but she was also a kid. She should be able to hang out with other kids her age.

She'd only been going to the new school for a few days, but in her own words, "she dug it." Her fellow students and their parents showed up to the beach bash en masse. My friends at Elite helped with the party. Knox and Kane volunteered as lifeguards, Sebastian and Karma built the piñata, Gracie and Alix ran the games, and Trev disc-jockeyed the dancing contest.

Kenzie had a blast. Turns out she'd never had a big birthday bash like this one. It was a milestone the three of us achieved together. Now, the orange sun flirted with the horizon and the last of our young guests left, taking with them armfuls of party favors and, most likely, a good amount of sand weighing down the bottom of their cute swimming suits.

My friends at Elite lingered behind, laughing and commenting on the day's highlights. Sebastian, Gracie, Knox, Karma, Kane, and Alix sat at the nearby picnic table, having more cake.

We were a fighting unit, but also a brotherhood of men and women by choice. More than that, my team was now *mi pueblo*—my village. They had welcomed Danika into our ranks and they loved my child as if she belonged to them, too. They supported me in this new life mission with the same steadfast loyalty they showed me on the battlefield.

How much luckier could this grunt get?

From my perch leaning on the gift table, I spotted Danika and I knew.

I wasn't just lucky. As Kenzie would say, I was Da Luckiest grunt on earth.

Danika finished refilling everyone's glasses with the champagne she'd brought out for the adults at the post-party. Wearing a yellow sundress that flapped gently in the breeze, she set the bottle aside and came to stand by me.

"You had the best idea when you suggested that we should get Kenzie a puppy for her birthday."

"What can I say?" I shrugged and smirked at the same time. "A girl needs her puppy and *you* already have me."

Danika's laughter echoed in the late afternoon, filling my heart to the rim. The setting sun outlined Kenzie's reedy

figure as she frolicked with her new puppy by the water. Tiny barks joined with the girly cackles that had redefined my concept of joy.

On impulse, I took Danika in my arms and kissed her with all the passion that ran through my veins. This day couldn't get any better. I had my woman, my kid, my team, and plenty of *fuego*, *fuerza*, and *suerte* to go around.

Life was good.

"I've never seen Kenzie so happy." Danika leaned against me as we watched our kid being, well, a kid. "I can't believe you found a white Maltese puppy."

"I'm Delta and I belong with Elite Team. If I set out to do something, it will happen." I wrapped my arms around her waist and hugged her to me. "This puppy was perfect for Kenzie. It looked so much like the one in the painting. I always envied that picture a little."

"I know." She turned and planted another sweet kiss on my lips. "Now you're living it."

"I am." I drew back, almost surprised. "Dammit, I really am."

The smile on my face hurt.

“And, so that you always remember...” She reached over to the gift table and selected a box that had my name written on it in big block letters.

“It’s Kenzie’s birthday.” I studied the package in my hands. “Why do I get a gift?”

“It’s *your* first birthday with *your* daughter.” The wind rippled through Danika’s hair and gave flight to her tresses, exposing her luminous smile. “So, in a way, it’s also your birthday as a dad. That’s something to celebrate. Open it.”

I tore away the shiny paper, opened the box, and, nestled in a bed of colorful tissue paper, found a picture printed on canvas. The photo had been taken this morning before the party started, after we’d surprised Kenzie with her new puppy. Danika had insisted we take it, and Trev had obliged. Now I knew why.

In the photo, Dani and I sat on the sand with Kenzie between us. The clear waters of a green sea and the glorious blues of a cloudless sky framed us. Kenzie grinned, wearing a pink bathing suit and holding the new puppy in her lap. Danika looked beautiful in her yellow dress, and I didn’t look too shabby wearing my best Hawaiian shirt. Hell, even the pooch seemed to be smiling.

“It’s like the one of the two of you in Prague,” I mumbled.

“My intention exactly.” Danika cupped my cheek and met my gaze. “This new one will go on the mantel.”

“You’re gonna make me ugly cry again.” I wiped a tear from the corner of my eye and looked down at the beautiful picture.

It wasn’t only the ginormous grin that split Kenzie’s face that reached into my chest and inflated my heart. It was the smile on Danika’s face, too, the peace that relaxed her features, and the twinkle that sparkled in her eyes.

The sun shone down on the three of us, buttering our skin, brightening our faces, and encasing us in a glow. Four of us, counting the puppy. We looked like a family. We *were* a family. And *I* was in the picture.

The joy inside of me expanded to occupy every part of my being.

“This is…” I choked and Danika wrapped her arms around me and held me until I got my act together and could speak again. “This is amazing. Thank you.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I love it.” I stared at it some more. “How did you get it mounted so quickly?”

“Trev,” Danika said, and I should’ve known. “I told him what I wanted to do and he got all the stuff and was ready with his digital camera to get it all printed and done.”

“He’s an asset.” It was the greatest compliment one operator could give another. “By the way, where the hell is he?”

“I don’t know.” Danika’s frown etched deeper on her forehead as she looked around.

“That’s odd.” My gut did that yanking thing I hated. “He was here for the party in the morning, but I don’t remember seeing him after that. When was the last time you saw him?”

“Before we served lunch,” Danika said. “After you guys did your little five-man dance show. By the way, that was hilarious.”

It had been fun. Kenzie had loved it and so had her friends, but now, looking at my watch, I frowned. “That was hours ago. It’s not like Druid to disappear like this. I’m gonna check on him.”

“I’ll come with you.” Danika turned to the others.

“Gracie, would you mind watching Kenzie for a moment?”

“Not at all,” she said. “Where are you guys going?”

“To Druid’s place,” I said as I walked by them. “We haven’t seen him all afternoon.”

“Are you worried?” Two lines appeared between Sebastian’s thick eyebrows.

“It’s probably nothing.” I hesitated. “I just got a weird feeling in my gut.”

“Too much cake?” Knox quipped.

“Maybe,” I admitted, “but I wanna make sure he’s all right.”

“If Blaze’s guts are yanking, then mine are too.” Kane stood up. “I’m coming with you.”

As one, Seb, Knox, and Karma got up.

“You all go, now, quickly,” Alix waved us on, unable to keep the worry from her face. “I’ll keep Gracie and Kenzie company.”

Druid’s place was nearby. It looked like all the other bungalows and was equipped with an elevator, like ours. A

huge custom RV was parked on the lower level.

“His van is gone,” I muttered as we approached.

I took the stairs in twos and knocked on the door. When nobody answered, I turned the knob. The door opened easily. It was as if Druid had left it unlocked for my benefit.

Yeah, no, my gut was not good with that, either.

As usual, his place was in perfect order. It took me a couple of minutes to clear the entire house. Nothing was missing. Except for Trev.

“He’s not here,” I called out from the deck.

While the others filed up the stairs, I returned to the study. All of the screens in his bank of computers were dark. The guys split up and checked the house again. Danika joined me.

“This is so weird.” Her gaze roamed the space. “He would tell you, right? If he was going somewhere?”

“I would think so.” My recollections of how serious he’d looked after he read Mariska’s report did nothing to alleviate the churn in my stomach. “Hey, guys?” I called out. “Check his safe, will you?”

“Maybe he left us a note.” Danika rummaged through his desk.

“His favorite tablet is missing,” Karma announced from the bedroom. “But he takes it everywhere he goes, even if it’s just to the coffee shop.”

“Update on the safe?” I called out.

“Hang on,” Knox’s voice drifted from somewhere. “We don’t need to blow it up or anything. Sebastian is retrieving his code.”

“No note.” Danika sighed, but we both continued searching the room.

After a few minutes, Kane marched into the study, his jaw clenched. “His go-bag is gone.”

Knox followed, turning his Stetson between his fingers. “His cash stash is not there.”

“His weapons are missing,” Karma reported, her eyes somber.

Sebastian’s face looked like a red brick. “His passports are gone.”

“Which ones?” I demanded, hoping to figure out his destination.

Sebastian growled. “All of them.”

“Fuck.” I dug my nails into my palms. “He’s gone solo. Something felt off about him during the Prague mission, but I chucked it up to all the work we’ve been doing trying to find Kozlov and Oleg Laskin. “Why didn’t he tell me where he was going?”

“Because he didn’t want us to know.” Kane stated the obvious. “Whatever he’s planning on doing, it’s dangerous.”

I threw my hands in the air. “It’s even more dangerous if he’s fucking alone.”

“Is it possible he just needed some time off?” Danika asked.

“You don’t take your go-bag, cash stash, weapons, and twelve fucking passports to go on vacation,” I grumbled.

“I don’t get it.” Karma scratched her head. “Why go at it alone?”

“He thinks Elite is in danger,” Sebastian concluded, and I feared he was right.

“He wants to protect us,” Kane added.

“He’s gonna get killed this way,” I muttered, unable to hide my frustration.

“He’s smart. He’s skilled. He’s got a plan, I’m sure,” Danika said, but her voice held a trace of desperation. “If he thinks we’re in danger, then he must’ve left us a clue, some sort of a message, a general explanation of what’s going on.”

“Makes sense.” I braced on my feet and perched my hands on my waist. “Where the hell is this clue?”

We all searched the study, but Danika’s gaze went to the dark screens. She leaned down and checked the monitors. The on light flickered in only one of them. She pressed a random key on the board and the screen came alive.

A box popped up. *Encrypted message. Self-destruct in sixty seconds.* The countdown began.

“What the hell?” Someone cursed behind me.

“Elite’s critical code.” I bent over the screen and typed like a maniac. My big fingers fumbled on the keyboard as I raced the countdown. It was a hell of a lot of numbers and letters. I made it with three seconds to spare and pressed enter.

A blue box appeared on the screen. *Authenticate. Order of the Day.*

“What the hell does this mean?” Kane asked.

“That Druid is paranoid,” I guessed. “He’s added an extra security layer.”

“Oh, wait. I know this one.” Danika took over the keyboard and punched H-A-P-P-Y-B-I-R-T-H-D-A-Y-K-E-N-Z-I-E.

A new box popped up and Trev’s face came on the screen. He sat on his sports wheelchair, parked in the same spot where I stood, facing the same screen that now featured him. He looked tired, but he smiled.

“Peace, guys,” he said. “Don’t get pissed. It was the only way.”

“Oh, fuck this!” I slammed a fist on the desk. “Druid. What the hell?”

“I’ve got news,” he continued on the video. “Mariska Grigoris is dead. So is Jan Horák. Kozlov has been traded back to Russia in a prisoner exchange. Five hundred Ukrainian warriors for the beast. If that doesn’t shrink your balls, Oleg Laskin knows we’re in the mix.”

Snippets flashed on the screen, a sequence of newspaper clips and photos that included a picture of Mariska’s savaged body, splattered on the street outside her

window under the headline “Cultural attaché commits suicide.”

Then came Horák’s obituary, featured in a different Czech newspaper. It claimed he’d jumped off a hospital’s rooftop after a long battle with some undisclosed terminal illness. It was followed by a grainy, long-distance picture enlarged to show Kozlov strolling across the tarmac, getting hate-filled glares from the emaciated, bruised, and bloodied soldiers staggering in the other direction.

“Oh, my God.” Danika’s terrified stare met mine. “Mariska did not commit suicide. Horák was not terminal when we last saw him.”

“These are printed lies.” I fought the fury burning in my veins.

I hadn’t liked Mariska much when I first met her but I admired her guts, and she’d redeemed herself when she fought for Danika. As to Horák, I didn’t get to know him, but my gut told me he’d been one of the good guys.

“They were both murdered,” I rumbled. “These deaths have the signature of Kremlin-ordered assassinations. They deliver a warning, too. If you disagree or oppose Putin and his gang you will die.”

“Kozlov is free.” The despair that darkened Danika’s voice mirrored my own. “Everything we accomplished has been undone.”

“It looks that way.” I fisted my hands and spoke through my teeth, seething with pent-up rage. “Prison or no prison, I should’ve pulled the damn trigger when I had the chance.”

Danika put a hand on my arm. “You didn’t know—”

“Yeah, I knew. My gut told me and I should’ve listened to it. Monsters like Kozlov justify the death penalty. But I’ll find him. Oh, yeah. I will. And when I do—”

“Correction,” Sebastian interjected. “When *we* find him.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “When *we* find him *and* his boss, Oleg Laskin, then we’ll finish the mission... for good.”

“But first we have to find them sons of bitches.” Kane’s fury almost matched mine.

“Seems to me that Trev is already on that,” Danika muttered.

The wind got taken out of my outrage. She wasn’t wrong.

“Come on, Druid,” I ground out as the images disappeared. “Tell us what you’re doing, where you’re going.”

Trev’s face reappeared on the monitor. We all pressed forward, crowding around the screen.

“I know what you’re thinking.” He flashed a wolfish grin. “Don’t attempt to find me. I repeat. Do *not* come after me. You’ll get yourselves killed for nothing. Where I’m going, you can’t follow. By the time you get this, I may already be on my way to Valhalla.”

The image dissolved and a small blue circle spun on the screen, leaving us staring at each other in complete disbelief. A new sixty-second countdown to message destruction kicked off.

“Holy fucking shit.” I whirled on Sebastian. “Do you copy this?”

“I copy.” I’d never seen his face so grim. “Coming from him, this is some serious shit.”

“You’re not thinking about giving up on him, are you?” I demanded.

“If we track him, we could get him killed,” Knox reminded me of Trev’s warning.

“But if we don’t find him, he’ll also die,” Kane ground out.

“Alone!” I spat. “This is so screwed up. When I see that ape again, I’m gonna pound him to dust.”

“*If* you see that ape again.” The grief that flashed in Karma’s eyes pierced me like a blade.

“He’s alive,” Danika whispered, her eyes liquid. “He’s got to be.”

“He’s been close to Valhalla a few times before,” Knox pointed out somberly. “He’s no drama queen. He wouldn’t bring it up if he didn’t think his chances of not making it this time around were way up there.”

“He’s strong,” I countered. “Mentally. Physically. He’ll survive. I know he will.”

“Wait.” Danika hushed us. “There’s more.”

Trev’s image reappeared on the screen. His go-bag was slung across his chest. His wheelchair saddles were packed. The grim determination I spotted in his eyes would haunt me forever.

“Stay alert,” he cautioned. “Watch your backs. Protect the beach. It’s been an honor.” He pounded his fist over his

heart in a warrior's final salute. "Druid out."

The End