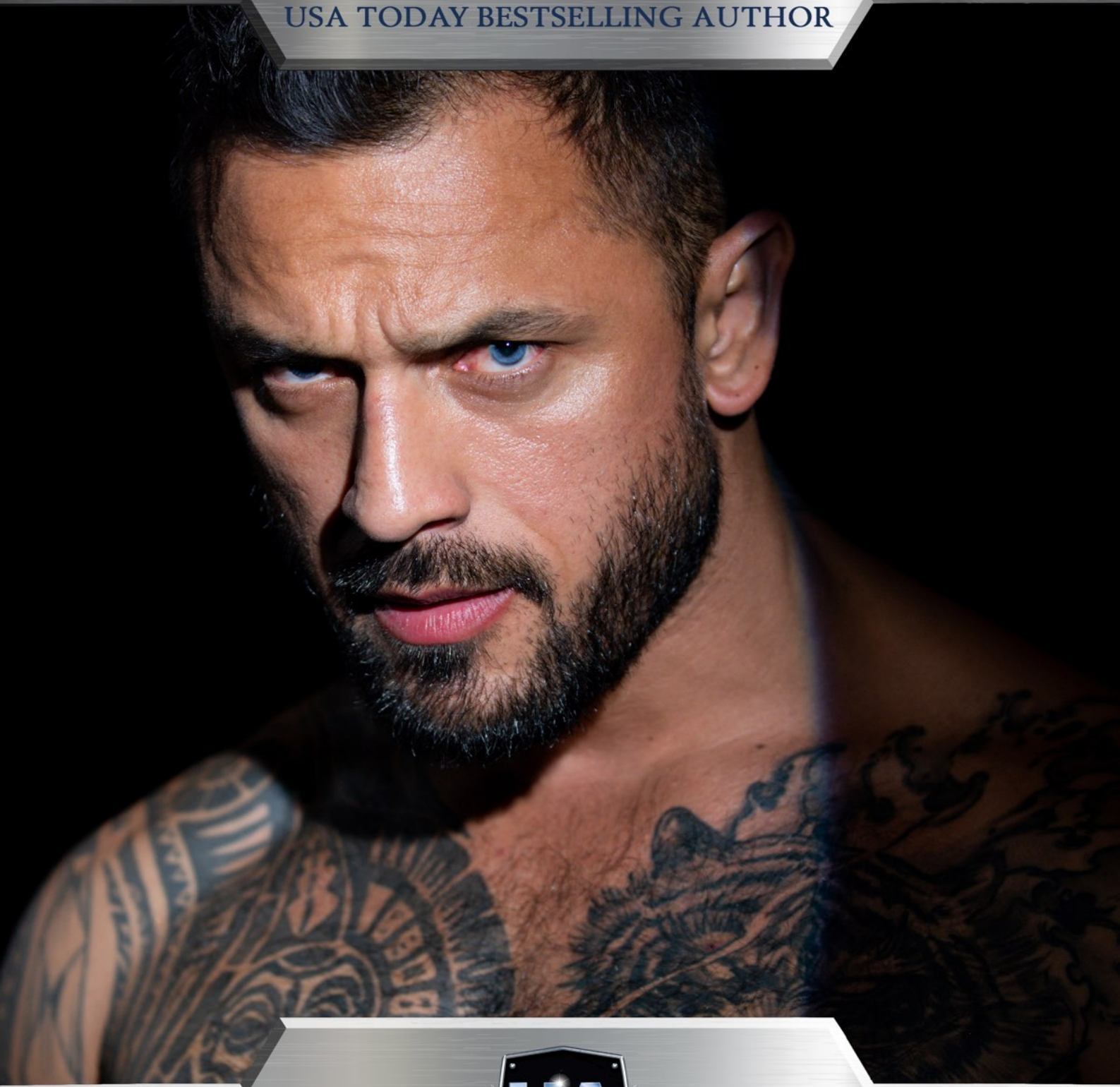


# BECCA JAMESON

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



# PROTECTED

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PROTECTED

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HOLT AGENCY, BOOK THREE



BECCA JAMESON



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## ABOUT THE BOOK

It's been over two years since Melanie's life was forever changed. Over two years since she met Holden on a Panama Canal cruise that went awry. Over two years since she had the best sex of her life for ten amazing days before returning to the real world and tucking that vacation adventure away forever.

After walking away from Melanie, Holden worked several long-term assignments for the Holt Agency, keeping himself busy, keeping his mind off the woman who had seemed so perfect for him in every way. Their lives weren't compatible. She was a professor at Georgetown. He thrived on dangerous rescues and protection details.

Time has not changed how either of them feels for each other, nor has it changed their circumstances. But Melanie's apartment has been ransacked and another professor has been found dead. Someone is after her. She might not like it, but she needs Holden's protection.

The two of them can try to keep their feelings for each other at bay, but for how long?

## LETTER TO THE READER

Dear readers,

KaLyn Cooper and I are very excited to bring you this collaborative series, the Holt Agency. If you're a fan of the Shadow SEALs books, you might remember us introducing this agency in each of our first two releases. The men who open the Holt Agency were all rescued SEALs who appeared in *Shadow in the Desert* and *Shadow in the Mountain*. The following year, several characters were once again featured in *Shadow in the Darkness* and *Shadow in the Daylight*.

So, welcome to the Holt Agency! The headquarters is located at a farm in Indiana. The former SEALs who have joined forces and opened the agency will each get their own happily ever afters in the coming books.

### **Holt Agency:**

Rescued by Becca Jameson

Unchained by KaLyn Cooper

Protected by Becca Jameson

Liberated by KaLyn Cooper

Defended by Becca Jameson



Unrestrained by KaLyn Cooper

## PROLOGUE



*Two and a half years ago...*

“What time is it?” Melanie murmured against the pillow as Holden slid his strong hand up over her naked ass and then her back. *Please tell me it’s not morning yet.* She wasn’t ready for this time with Holden to end. In fact, she was surprised she’d fallen asleep at all, but judging from how groggy she felt, she suspected she’d succumbed for a few hours.

He kissed her shoulder as his hand continued around until he skimmed the side of her breast. “Six,” he whispered, his voice filled with regret.

She groaned. “Are we docked?” She extended her senses to discern if the cruise ship was moving and how loud the engines were, but she was too tired to be certain.

“Not yet, babe. Soon.” His lips... God, his lips. They trailed across her shoulder blade toward her neck, which he then nuzzled, inhaling deeply.

She hadn’t moved from her position on her stomach yet, hugging the pillow, but she managed to smile. “Are you sniffing me?”

“Mmm hmm. Memorizing your scent.” Suddenly, he flipped her over, unceremoniously.

She gasped as she landed on her back, blinking up at him in the dim light. Under normal circumstances, she would complain about the hour and demand more sleep, but nothing about the past week had been normal, and she was going to have to catch up on her sleep *after* her “vacation” ended and she returned to Georgetown.

When Mel had embarked on this Panama Canal cruise with her best friend, Callie, she’d pictured eleven days of fun in the sun, relaxing and enjoying a much-needed vacation. Instead, all hell had broken loose when the Chinese had blown up a container ship on the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal, trapping the cruise liner in Lake Gatún.

Callie, who was a Mandarin translator for the CIA, had been airlifted away to help the government, leaving Melanie to finish off the strangest cruise of her life. It had been stressful, but as Holden lowered his face to flick his tongue over one of her nipples, she reminded herself the last eleven days had also been filled with the best sex of her life.

“God, I love it when you arch like that,” Holden murmured against her breast as he cupped the full globe and gave it a slight squeeze just the way she liked it.

She grabbed the tangle of sheets at her sides and moaned. It had only been a few hours since the last time he’d ravaged her, but the clock was ticking, so she didn’t complain. She needed this. Needed to milk the last few hours on this ship for all they were worth.

Before this cruise, Melanie had never dreamed sex could be this good. She’d had a few scattered boyfriends in her

thirty-two years, but not a single one of them had made her body hum the way Holden did.

He shifted his attention to her other breast, flicking, licking, sucking, driving her mad. When he nudged her thighs apart with one of his knees, she opened for him, arching again as he pressed his muscular thigh against her pussy.

“Fuck, I love watching you come apart,” he whispered as he lifted his gaze. The sun was starting to come up, bathing the room in its faint light through the sliding glass doors. They hadn’t bothered pulling them closed last night.

Holden’s thick erection pressed against her hip as he cupped her breast again and pinched her nipple. “Come for me, babe. I want to hear you before I enter you.”

She’d learned something about herself this past eleven days that she hadn’t known before. She could be noisy in bed when she came. Holden did that to her. He made her lose her mind.

He pinched her nipple again and then smoothed his hand down her belly as he eased his thigh back enough to create space for his fingers. And then he was stroking her clit. Circling, flicking, pinching... God, he played her well.

“Melanie... Come for me, babe.” He usually called her Mel, but her full name coming from his demanding lips was hot. It worked too.

Melanie’s body stiffened as she arched her hips off the bed, hovering for a few seconds in that perfect state of bliss that came right before an orgasm. If she could bottle up that fleeting sensation so she could relive it over and over, she would.

As she succumbed to her release, crying out his name, her body shaking, her hands fisted tighter. It surprised her that she could come so hard, pulsing against his fingers so violently, considering how many orgasms she'd had since she met him.

She was panting as she dropped her ass back onto the bed, un-fisting her hands and reaching for him. "Need you..."

He obliged, climbing between her legs and thrusting into her so hard she slid back a few inches. His mouth crashed over hers too, delving into her. Without moving his body, he devoured her, licking and sucking her lips. They would be swollen and tingly later today after she parted ways with him.

Her entire body would remember his for days. Her pelvis was bruised from having sex so many times. Her wrists ached from him holding her down. In fact, while he kissed her senseless, he found her hands, dragged them above her head, and gripped her wrists in the way she'd learned he often preferred when he fucked her.

He didn't just thread their fingers together. No. Holden Billings gripped her wrists and restrained her completely. As usual, her arousal shot back up to an eleven when he did so, and she moaned into his mouth as he finally eased out and thrust back into her.

He could be bossy and rough and demanding in bed, and she loved every moment of it. She'd never experienced anything like what she'd had with Holden. She'd never even dreamed of sex like this. She doubted she'd ever find another man who could make her blood pump like he did again in three lifetimes.

She was going to have to find a way to move on though. This was likely the last time she would have sex with Holden.

Shaking thoughts of the future from her head, she fully engaged in the present. Every groan coming from his mouth. Every second of friction inside her. Every squeeze of his hands around her wrists. Every press of his hips against her pelvis. The pressure. The dominance. The mind-blowing force of the experience.

Holden's breath hitched a moment before he came. He released her lips, met her gaze, and stared at her as he held still deep inside her, his release so violent she swore she could feel the pulses of his come.

When he was done, he didn't move for a long time, holding her gaze, his brow furrowed, his face tense. "Melanie..."

She swallowed back the tears that threatened to fall and shook her head. "Don't."

He nodded and dropped his forehead against hers. They'd had this discussion. There was nothing left to say. She was a professor at Georgetown; he had a dangerous job with the Holt Agency. He would be sent all over the world, rescuing people, hunting down criminals, saving the day.

Holden's job was important, not just to him but to countless others who needed help around the world. At thirty-two, Melanie was living her dream, teaching International Affairs and Mandarin. She wouldn't be quitting so she could move to rural Indiana and spend her days waiting around for the crumbs Holden could offer in between his assignments.

They'd agreed. This was it. A fucking amazing eleven days together. Unplanned. Unexpected. But so very cherished.

*Don't cry. Don't cry.*

Melanie sucked back her emotions. She could let herself fall apart later tonight when she got home. She could take tomorrow to wallow in self-pity and regroup. On Monday, she intended to return to classes, having put this unlikely adventure behind her.

It would hurt. She knew in her heart she'd never find a more suited man. But there were no other options. Life was taking them in two different directions. Better to have lived and loved and all that. Or perhaps, lived and fucked hard.

She could put this behind her and return to her regularly scheduled life. She had to. There were no other options.

## CHAPTER 1



*Present day...*

*“I’ve got what you need.”*

*“Good. I’ll be at the café on First Street at noon. I’ll sit outside. Bring it to me, but you don’t fucking know me. Trip near my table and drop it in my satchel.”*

*“This is it, right? You’re fucking done with me after this.”*

*“If you really have what I’ve asked for, I’m done with you.”*

*“You better be. I’m done doing your dirty work.”*



“Please tell me you have amazing fabulous plans lined up for this summer that involve beaches and bikinis and hot men.”

Melanie laughed as she juggled her phone and her book bag, switching arms before she could respond properly to Callie, her best friend. “Uh, sorry.”

Callie groaned. “Come on. You’re a professor. I need you to have amazing summers so I can live vicariously through



you.”

“I’m afraid my summer is going to be spent working on a research paper for publication. I’m woefully behind on the research part of the job. As a matter of fact, I’m meeting with a visiting professor for lunch. I’m hoping he has some tips for me.”

“A lunch date! Is he hot? Is he single?”

Mel laughed. “He’s about seventy, so I’m not sure it matters if he’d be considered hot in his age bracket, nor do I care if he’s single.”

Callie sighed. “You need to make lunch dates with men closer to your own age, Mel. When was the last time you had a date?”

“I don’t know. Do you need me to pull out my calendar? My hands are kind of full right now. And I’m running late. Can we discuss my exciting social life later?” *Or never.*

“Fine. But at least try to flirt with the waiter and report back to me,” Callie insisted.

“Sure,” Mel agreed just to get out of this conversation. “Later.” She ended the call and glanced at the time. She had ten minutes to get to the café. At least she wouldn’t be late. She hated being late. She’d meant to get out of her office at the university earlier, but wrapping up the semester had taken her more time than expected, mostly because a few graduate students were hanging around making small talk with her.

She shouldn’t have even answered Callie’s call, but she knew her best friend would keep calling her until she answered. She was pushy that way. She was also pushy about who Mel was dating and how often.

Since the answer would cause Callie to drop everything, drive to Georgetown, and drag Melanie to a club on the spot, Mel avoided the questions.

“At least I really do have a lunch date today,” she muttered as she hurried toward her destination.

## CHAPTER 2



*“Why are you still calling me?”*

*“Because you failed in your task, asshole.”*

*“What are you talking about? I did exactly what you said. You fucking watched me stumble next to your table. Why would I go to that trouble and not do the job?”*

*“Yes, but when I got home, I didn’t have it because you put it in the wrong fucking satchel.”*

*“How was that possible? You said the brown satchel. I dropped it into the brown satchel right under your table.”*

*“Yeah, well, it turns out my colleague had a similar case. You dropped it in his.”*

*“It’s not my fault your fucking lunch partner had the same bag. Why can’t you just get it from him?”*

*“I tried that. I went to his hotel room. He doesn’t fucking have it anymore. He gave it to some professor at Georgetown.”*

*“Why the hell would he do that?”*

*“It was an accident. I need you to get it from her.”*

*“No. I’m done. This was my last job for you. You get it from her.”*

*“You’re not done until I fucking say you are, asshole. Get it from the woman and meet me at the gas station on the west side of campus at midnight.”*

*“How the fuck am I supposed to get it from her by then?”*

*“That’s your fucking problem.”*



Mel was shaking as she paced outside her townhome, waiting for Callie to pick up the phone. “Come on. Come on. I need you,” she muttered.

“Hey, Mel. How’s it going?” Callie answered.

Mel let out a long breath. “Not well, actually. Someone broke into my townhome and trashed the place while I was at work today.”

“What?” Callie screamed. She must have covered the receiver a bit because her next words were muffled. “Grant, we have to go to Melanie’s.”

Melanie breathed out a sigh of relief. She’d known Callie would come. She’d hoped Grant would be home and accompany his wife too.

“What’s wrong?” Melanie could hear Grant through the phone. He’d obviously run to Callie’s side.

“Her place was ransacked.”

“Shit. Let’s go,” he responded. He must have also grabbed the phone from his wife because his next words were more audible. “Where are you, Mel?”

“Out front. The police are still here, but they’re leaving soon.”

“We’ll be there in ten minutes. Hold tight.”

Mel nodded needlessly as the call ended. She ran a hand through her tangled curls and stared at the front of her townhome in disbelief. This was a very safe neighborhood. Nothing like this ever happened around here. She was stunned and frustrated and God, the mess. Damn, the mess. She couldn’t fathom how long it would take to clean up. Everything she owned was upside down. Every drawer emptied. Every breakable thing broken. Why?

The police were finishing up, and she crossed her arms as they exited her townhouse and approached her. The female agent spoke, her brow furrowed. “I’m sorry. I know this is unfortunate. If you can, try to inventory everything and see if anything is missing.”

Mel gave a sharp, sardonic chuckle. This wasn’t funny. “It would take a year to know if anything was missing.”

The officer nodded sympathetically. “I know.”

All Mel had been able to do so far was check that her safe was still in the closet and untouched. Her jewelry box was still in the bedroom, flipped over, the contents all over the floor, but at a glance, nothing appeared to be missing.

She didn’t have thousands of dollars’ worth of jewelry by any stretch of the imagination, but her diamond earrings and the pearls her aunt had given her when she’d graduated from high school were both on the floor.

Why would someone break in, turn the place into a tornado, and not steal anything?

The officer handed Mel a card. “Please call if you think of anything at all. Any reason someone might be angry with you. A disgruntled student? Maybe a student’s parents who didn’t

like a grade their kid earned? An ex who wasn't fond of a breakup?"

They'd been through this list already. Mel didn't have enemies. She didn't have angry students or parents. She didn't have ex-boyfriends either. None who were recent anyway, and certainly none who had walked away less than amicably.

"Do you have someplace you can stay?" the officer asked.

"Yeah. I'll stay with friends." She rubbed her temples and sighed. The last thing she needed was a giant mess to deal with. The semester had just ended. She meant to spend every moment of the next two months during her break finishing a research paper for publication. It needed to be done by the end of the summer.

She glanced at the front of her townhouse again. *Fuck*. It would take weeks to clean up the mess. Weeks she did not have.

"We'll be in touch," the officer said as her partner joined her.

Mel stood on the sidewalk, too stunned to move as the police climbed into their vehicle. Callie and Grant pulled up at the same moment, and seconds later, Callie was running toward Mel.

"My God, Mel. What happened?"

Grant joined her. He was frowning. Not surprising. "I see the police are pulling away. I guess they've already taken a statement and assessed the situation."

"Yeah."

Grant moved toward the townhouse. "Let's go inside."

Mel followed him, Callie at her side, her arm wrapped around her friend.

“Holy shit,” Callie muttered as they entered. “What the hell?”

Grant said nothing as he moved around the space. He worked for the Holt Agency, so his job was solving mysteries. Mel had no doubt he was going to analyze this break-in to death.

Truth be told, she was kind of freaked out, so she didn’t care if he did overanalyze it. She was shaking.

Grant’s face remained fierce as he asked her all the same questions she’d answered for the cops and then some. He was more thorough. It was the nature of his job. Solve crimes. Solve mysteries. Find people. Rescue them.

“You’re sure no one is mad at you about anything?” Grant asked as she followed him into her bedroom. He bent down to pick up the jewelry and finger through it. “Are these diamonds?” he asked without waiting for an answer to her previous question.

She shook her head and pointed at the dresser where she’d set the real diamonds a few minutes ago. “No. Fake. But whoever it was didn’t take the real ones either. Or the pearls.” She crossed her arms and rubbed her biceps.

Callie was at her side, an arm wrapped around her. “She should come stay with us,” Callie declared.

“That goes without saying,” Grant responded without looking toward the women. He continued to tiptoe around the mess, examining everything. Finally he stopped and rubbed a hand down his face. “I don’t like it.”

Mel shuddered. “Maybe the robber was looking for something more lucrative?” she suggested.

He inhaled deeply. “It doesn’t add up. Pack some things.” He pulled out his cell phone. “I’ll have some guys come secure the place within the hour. You’ll stay with us until we can figure out what to do next.”

Mel winced. “I have a lot of work to do. Research. I have to turn in a paper by the end of the summer. I don’t have time to deal with this mess or the possible ramifications.”

Grant met her gaze. “How important is the paper you’re writing? Any chance someone is hoping to sabotage it? Slow you down? Keep you from finishing it?”

She shook her head. “God, no. That’s ludicrous. My work isn’t interesting to more than a handful of people. It’s about the current Chinese influence on American culture and how it affects purchasing habits. Who’d want to thwart that kind of research?”

His expression didn’t change. “Have you spoken to anyone about it?”

Mel sighed. “The visiting professor from China. He’s a kind older man who went out of his way to answer my questions and provide me with suggestions and data.”

“You’re certain he doesn’t want to publish the work himself?” Grant asked.

Mel shook her head. “Not a chance. He’s not publishing anything right now. He was grateful I was interested. Besides, he’s close to seventy and not spry. There’s no way he could have turned my place upside down.”

“He could have hired other people to do it,” Callie suggested.



Mel glanced at her. “You’re starting to sound like your husband. There isn’t a chance in hell Professor Yang was involved in this.”

“Okay.” Callie hugged her. “I just know how Grant’s mind works. He’s thinking of every angle.”

“Well, that one would be a waste of time.” Mel eased out of Callie’s embrace and started picking up clothes and tossing them on the bed. She was exhausted. It was late. She couldn’t even contemplate the size of this mess and the time it would take to clean it up. She needed to stuff a suitcase, grab her toiletries, and sleep in Callie and Grant’s guest room.

## CHAPTER 3



*“Where the fuck are you?”*

*“I don’t have it yet.”*

*“Why not?”*

*“I hired someone to flip her townhome. She wasn’t there. They didn’t find it. She must have it on her person.”*

*“Listen, asshole, the clock is ticking. If I don’t have that in my fucking hands soon, we’re both dead.”*

*“Look. I’m trying. I need more time. I’m sitting outside her house now. As soon as she returns, I’ll get it.”*



It took Melanie over an hour to fall asleep and it felt like it had been minutes before someone knocked on the door to the bedroom she was using at Callie’s place. “Come in,” she managed.

Callie eased the door open. Sunlight from the hallway bathed the room, letting in enough light for Mel to see Callie’s concerned expression. “I’m so sorry. I figured you were still sleeping. I hated to wake you.” She came all the way in and sat on the edge of the bed.

Mel pushed to sitting. “What’s wrong?”

Callie winced. “I hate to tell you this, but it’s all over the news.”

Mel widened her gaze. “My break-in?”

Callie shook her head. “No. Worse. That professor you interviewed, Yang. He was found dead in his hotel room this morning.”

Mel gasped, now fully awake. “What?” she shouted.

Callie reached for her hand and squeezed. “I’m sorry. I know you liked him.”

Mel’s head was spinning. “That’s crazy. Do they know how he died? Please tell me he had a heart attack or a stroke or something.” *Please tell me he wasn’t murdered.* Mel had no idea why that possibility even entered her mind.

Callie shook her head. “They haven’t released that information yet.”

Mel groaned and dropped onto her back, unable to continue sitting upright. “I can’t believe it.”

A male voice she knew well spoke from the doorway. “Mel?”

She tossed her forearm over her eyes. The room was spinning as if she were drunk or hung over. She couldn’t process this information. It was worse than finding her home ransacked.

“I’m sorry, hon,” Grant said, his voice coming closer. “But more importantly, I’m worried about your safety.”

Melanie flinched as she lowered her arm and met Grant’s gaze as he looked down at her. “I’m just a professor. I don’t

know anything interesting about anything. I'm not hiding anything. Surely it's a coincidence."

"Maybe, but I don't like it, and we're not taking any chances. I want you to go someplace safe for a while. I'm going to look into this. I've called my boss and brought him up to speed on this situation."

Mel couldn't believe this was happening. "Your boss? At the Holt Agency? Surely the ransacking of my townhouse isn't interesting enough to bring the Holt Agency into it."

He shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. I don't want to take chances."

"What if you didn't know me and I was a stranger?" She narrowed her gaze at him. "Would you be interested in my home burglary then?"

"Nope. I *do* know you. You're *not* a stranger. You're my wife's best friend. You're my friend too. So, humor me."

Mel sighed. "I have so much work to do. I need to go home. Clean up the damn mess, get my head on straight, and get my paper started." *Professor Yang is dead?* Maybe she should slow down and take a breath. Was there any chance there was a connection?

He glanced at Callie and then back at Mel as if he and Callie had discussed something he was about to share. "There's a cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains. We often go there to get away. It's safe and unknown. I'd like you to go stay there for a while. You can work on your paper from there. It will be safer."

"Or, I could stay here a few days, work on my mess during the day, and sleep here at night." That idea seemed far more

plausible. She couldn't just leave town and ignore the giant damn tornado that was her townhouse.

Grant frowned and shook his head. "I don't like the idea of you going over there, especially alone. No way in hell do I want Callie over there either. I'd rather leave the mess for now. The townhouse is secure. No one is getting into it for any reason without my knowledge. Humor me. Leave everything where it is in case there's a clue in the mess that might help us. Just for a few days. I'll hire someone to go in and put everything to rights when I'm confident we don't need any sort of evidence anymore."

Mel blew out a deflating breath. "I can't believe this is happening. I'm a damn professor. Why would someone be harassing me?"

"That's what I want to find out. Meanwhile, please go to the cabin. I've already spoken to one of our drivers. He's going to take you there and make sure you're totally safe."

"Take me? I need my car."

Grant nodded. "Someone else will follow in your car, Mel. The two men will ensure you understand how the alarm system works and that you have all the provisions you need."

Mel stared at him before shifting her gaze to Callie who looked as though she totally agreed with her husband on this.

"Trust me," Grant continued. "No one knows about the cabin. It's sort of a safehouse."

Mel glanced back and forth between her friends. "I didn't even know you guys owned a cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains."

"It's not ours," Callie murmured.

“It belongs to a friend,” Grant added.

Mel didn’t ask any more questions about the cabin. It undoubtedly belonged to the Holt Agency. They had safehouses all over the place, including other countries. She exhaled slowly. There was no way Grant was going to let up on this issue. He was stubborn when it came to safety. “Fine.”

Grant nodded. “Good. My guys will be here in an hour. Can you be ready by then? I assume you brought enough clothes with you last night to head for the cabin without going home?”

“I guess.” Lordy. This was drastic and happening so fast. She couldn’t keep up.

Grant headed for the door. Before leaving entirely, he turned around. “Have you spoken to Holden?” he asked cautiously.

Mel shook her head. “No. Not for a few months. He’s been on an assignment in some foreign country. But you don’t need me to tell you that. I’m sure you know exactly where he is.”

She hated to sound snarky. She hated to *feel* snarky. She tried not to think about Holden most of the time. *Tried* being the operative word. Most days she thought about him at least a few times, and she never went to bed without tossing around for a while, remembering what it had been like to sleep with him by her side.

It was ridiculous. She’d had him for eleven days. Two and a half years ago. They’d stayed in touch over the months and years, but not frequently. Lately that contact had dwindled. She’d seen him only twice since the cruise that changed their lives. Both times they’d been cordial. Neither time had they slept together.

That amazing vacation had been a one-off. She reminded herself often that the sex surely hadn't been as amazing as she remembered it. Her brain embellished how damn fantastic he'd been. To believe otherwise was foolish.

Grant hesitated and then nodded and left the room.

"I'm sorry," Callie whispered. "For everything. I know this is a disaster. I promise I'll make sure Grant hires good people to clean up your townhouse. I'll supervise it myself when I can. I'll make a list of what needs to be replaced."

"It's just stuff," Mel muttered. "I'm not very materialistic. It's just that I don't have time to deal with this. And my God, Professor Yang is dead..." she reminded herself yet again. "I can't believe it."

"I know. It's shocking. I don't want something to happen to make you dead too." Callie narrowed her gaze. "Please take this seriously. I'm worried someone wants something from you."

Mel took a slow breath. "It's hard to imagine. Hopefully it's a coincidence. I've never even pissed off a fly."

Callie smiled. "I know. You'd probably stop your car and move a turtle out of the road to make sure no one hit it."

Mel gasped. "Of course I would. I *have* done that. More than once. Don't you?"

Callie chuckled. "Don't panic. I definitely would, but I've never come across a turtle stuck in the road. It's people like you who are aware of things like that."

Mel narrowed her gaze. "What kind of person am I?"

Callie squeezed her hand again. "Kind. Caring. Loving. And you need to start dating again."

Mel groaned. “We aren’t seriously going to have this chat again this morning, are we? My plate is a bit full to add dating today.”

Callie shrugged. “Not today, but soon. When this is over, please let me set you up with someone. I know at least two guys at work who—”

Mel moaned as she shoved her friend a few inches over so she could swing her legs around and slide out of bed. “You’re not setting me up, especially not with people who work for the CIA. If and when I decide to date, I’ll pick someone boring. Another professor or an accountant or something.”

Mel headed for her open suitcase and tugged a pair of jeans and a sweater out, as well as panties and a bra. She needed a shower and to spend some time alone, processing what she’d learned so far today.

“There’s no way you’re going to settle for a boring man, Mel. I know you better than that. You need excitement.”

Mel shook her head. “I need stability. I need someone I can count on. Someone who lives with me and comes home every night. Someone with a steady job that won’t get him killed.”

“Someone who doesn’t make your heart pound?” Callie stood and shuffled toward Mel. “You can’t settle, Mel.”

They’d had this conversation too many times to count. “Drop it, Callie. Today is a bad day to badger me about dating. I’m fine. I’m happy.” She pasted on a very fake exaggerated grin. “See?”

Callie chuckled. “Go shower. We’ll talk again later.”

Mel spun around and headed for the guest bathroom. She was shaking as she shut and locked the door. Professor Yang



was dead? Was there any chance in hell his death had something to do with her townhouse break-in?

She shuddered. It certainly seemed possible. But why?

At least Mel had her head on straight enough to realize leaving town was probably a good idea. She could catch her breath at the cabin. Work without being disturbed. She'd be safe there for a few weeks or even a few months.

If Callie and Grant went there to get away, it must be gorgeous. Mel would bet it was far more luxurious than the average cabin in the woods. It probably had every modern convenience known to man and then some.

Maybe it would be fun. An adventure. Like a working vacation. She might as well think of it in a positive light, especially since she didn't have any other options.

## CHAPTER 4



Ten hours later Melanie wandered around the cabin, double-checking every lock and window just like Jerad and Robert had instructed her before they left. The men had also gone to the grocery store in the town twenty minutes down the mountain and picked up enough supplies to last her for weeks. She was just one woman. How much food did they think she could eat?

As suspected, this cabin was definitely more like a luxurious vacation home with every modern convenience. It was certainly nicer than her townhouse. It was also larger.

The downstairs was a spacious great room with a wall of windows along the back, overlooking the most amazing view she'd ever seen. The colors were all warm burnt oranges, burgundies, and browns. She wasn't usually much of a cook, but the kitchen was so damn fantastic that she might actually decide to spend more time trying out new recipes.

The upstairs had three bedrooms: two guest rooms and the master. There was also a guest bath and an office with a desk where she intended to work on her paper.

The best feature of all, however, was the master bathroom. It had a huge whirlpool tub with a giant picture window that overlooked the mountains. Melanie had spent the entire

afternoon thinking about climbing into that tub with a glass of red wine and a book.

It was time. Maybe she was being frivolous, ignoring the real world, but in her defense, Callie and Grant had both encouraged her to escape reality and relax and enjoy this working vacation.

In the real world, her townhouse was upside down, a colleague was dead, and the work she needed to spend the summer doing hadn't been started.

Tomorrow, she told herself. She needed a good night's rest. She needed the glass of wine she poured after double-checking that the alarm was set. She needed the swirling warm water the bathtub promised.

The only way she was staying sane was to keep telling herself the break-in had been random and unimportant. She felt horrible for the kind older man who'd died, but she'd only met with him a few times. It wasn't as though he were her long-time mentor whom she would mourn for months.

She took a sip of the wine as she moved through the luxurious cabin and spent yet another minute thinking about Professor Yang, his work in foreign studies, and how much his expertise would be missed. She wondered if he had a wife or adult kids in China.

She forced herself to shake the maudlin thoughts after she climbed the stairs and entered the master bedroom and then bathroom.

It only took a few minutes to get the water temperature right, strip out of her clothes, pin her wild curls up on top of her head, and lower into the swirling water.

With a heavy sigh, she sipped her wine.

Her entire life had taken an abrupt turn in the past day. Twenty-four hours ago, she'd arrived at her apartment, intent on climbing into bed, sleeping like the dead, and starting her research this morning.

Now, she was transported to a cabin in the mountains where it was likely she would accomplish more than she might have if she'd spent the summer at home. Too many distractions. It would have been too easy to make lunch plans with friends and go out at night.

Ha. Who was she kidding? She hadn't been out on the town for an evening in forever. She winced as she took another sip of wine. When had she last gone out and really let go? Relaxed. Enjoyed the company of friends or co-workers.

She knew the answer, but it was too embarrassing to contemplate. If Callie knew... Well, Callie would strangle her. Mel had started lying to her best friend months ago. Perhaps more like two years ago. Telling her everything was fine. She was busy. Sure, she went out with friends. Sure, she had lunch dates.

Mel never went so far as to imply she'd been on an actual date with a man, but she also didn't let her best friend believe she was holed up in her townhouse watching old movies and reading romance novels that made her tear up.

Why couldn't real life end like a romance novel? Mel wouldn't even think it was possible at all if she hadn't had firsthand evidence that some people did live in a world filled with happily-ever-afters.

Callie and Grant did. They'd met on the same cruise as Melanie and Holden. Somehow they'd found a way to mesh their busy lives and sleep in the same bed most nights.

Mel had never seen Callie as happy as she'd been the past two years since she'd pulled her head out of her ass and let Grant permanently into her life. She'd insisted it wouldn't work, but it had.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said of Mel's relationship with Holden. They'd had too many obstacles and had agreed to go their separate ways.

The cruise had been the best eleven days of her life, even though it had been interrupted by a bombing in the Panama Canal and a long day of insanity that followed. Eventually, the ship had sailed out the Pacific side of the lake and detoured to San Diego instead of its original intention of returning to Florida.

Even though Callie had needed to return to D.C. early to deal with the fallout of the Chinese invasion, Mel had stayed on board and finished the trip mostly peacefully. And she'd done so in Holden's bed.

After another sip of wine, she leaned back and closed her eyes, letting her mind go "there" but only for a few minutes. There was no sense repeating this pity party for more than short periods of time.

Mel was certain her brain had embellished how amazing the trip had been over time. Surely Holden hadn't been *that* fantastic. Surely he hadn't been *that* good in bed.

Pretending was fun though, and it didn't hurt anyone. Plus, it meant a lifetime of fodder for amazing masturbation sessions. Now was a good time for such a session.

Mel let her hands skim over her breasts, flicking her nipples under the water before pinching them with just the

right amount of pressure. Imitating Holden. Pretending her hands were his.

She let one hand slide down between her legs next and touched the smooth skin of her pussy. Two and a half years ago she'd gotten her first Brazilian wax before the cruise. She'd done so on a whim so there would be no fear of anyone seeing a stray hair around the edge of her bikini.

It had felt amazing, and Holden had loved her smooth skin. For whatever reason, Mel had continued to keep herself fully bare ever since. Every time she touched herself, she pretended her fingers were his. She'd perfected the art of make believe, putting Holden in the room with her each time she masturbated.

What she didn't do was mention a word of her ridiculous obsession to Callie or any other human. She couldn't. Callie would have a fit and insist Mel contact Holden if she knew how obsessed her best friend was.

Mel knew better. Life wasn't a fairy tale for most people. The risk to her heart and her sanity if she contacted Holden casually would be more than she could handle.

Sure, it would probably be possible to hook up with him from time to time, invite him to visit between jobs, maybe even go on another vacation with him. But was it wise? No. If she slept with him again, it would destroy her. If she even spoke to him for any length of time, it would cause her pain and send her into a more reclusive life than the one she already lived.

No one needed to know, least of all Holden. So, their contact had been sparse, decreasing over time. A text now and then. A card at her birthday and Christmas between friends. Any time she was with Grant and Callie and they brought him

up, she changed the subject. Dwelling on Holden wasn't good for her sanity.

And yet... Here she was using her memory of him to get herself off. It was her one vice. She let herself have this, telling herself it would be no different from spotting a sexy man in the grocery store and using him to fuel her arousal. The only difference was she'd had Holden inside her body more times than she could count.

Melanie had perfected the art of teasing herself, making it last, dragging out her orgasm. She spread her legs wider, eased a finger into herself, and held her breath, taking it slow, riding the edge.

When she got too close, she backed off for a moment, postponing the bliss in the same way Holden had forced her to do on many occasions. Maddening. Frustrating. Delicious.

She circled her clit over and over before finally thrusting inside again. Two fingers. She didn't need more. It was tight. No one had been inside her in... She wasn't going to go there.

"Oh, God..." she moaned. Loudly. Who cared? No one was going to hear her. She could be as loud as she wanted in this cabin in the middle of nowhere. Another bonus. It wasn't like her townhouse with a shared wall that always made her wonder.

Finally, she couldn't wait another second. She let her head fall back, mouth open, and released the most primal sound as she crested, held the feeling a few seconds, and crashed into that amazing state of bliss.

Panting and shivering, she realized the water had chilled, but she had to wait a few moments to get her bearings before

she turned off the jets, pulled the plug, and let the water run out.

She waited a few more seconds before hauling herself to her feet and stepping onto the bath mat. After snagging one of the giant fluffy towels, she dried off, wrapped it around her, and stared into the mirror.

Her hair was a wild mass of curls. Who cared? No one was going to see her. Not a living soul. She wouldn't even descend the mountain until she was in desperate need of provisions.

She should feel calm and relaxed. This cabin was the most amazing vacation spot on earth. Secluded and serene. The perfect place to do her research and write her paper. She'd even opened her computer and checked to make sure she had internet access.

She felt uneasy though. Most of her believed there was no real threat. Just because her townhouse was broken into and Professor Yang was dead didn't mean anyone was after her.

A part of her wondered though. But then she dismissed any fleeting concerns because there was no way Grant would set her up alone in a cabin if he truly thought someone was after her.

To be honest, nothing really added up. Maybe Grant and Callie had sent her out of the city for some other reason. They wanted to be alone? This hadn't been a good week for a houseguest? Except Callie would never do such a thing. Not for any reason.

With a sigh, Mel removed the towel, hung it on a rack, and snagged her glass of wine. She took the last few sips, brushed her teeth, and headed for bed.



Another thing she'd started doing two and a half years ago was sleeping naked. She'd never done so before Holden, but she found she enjoyed the feel of the sheets against her. Or maybe sleeping naked somehow tricked her body into thinking Holden was next to her, allowing her to rest deeper.

There was no denying she'd felt safer in his arms. The man was a former SEAL, for God's sake. He was armed and dangerous at all times, even when asleep. She could use a dose of safety right about now.

Damn, these sheets were nice. High thread count. Soft and smooth. They felt like extra-fine linens against her skin. Who kept such expensive sheets in a cabin in the woods? She had to assume this was a shared cabin owned by the Holt Agency. A vacation spot where employees could go to regroup and relax between assignments.

Had Holden ever been here? As she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, she imagined she could smell him as if he were in the room now. That was absurd. Even if he'd ever been here, the place wouldn't smell like him. A cleaning service probably maintained the cabin when no one was using it. The sheets would have been laundered and changed.

There was something oddly unnerving about the idea that perhaps Holden had been here, maybe even slept in this bed in the master bedroom. When might he have last been in the country? Had he taken a small vacation and come to this cabin?

She needed to stop mulling over the possibilities. Why was she torturing herself? Ordinarily she permitted herself to think about Holden for only a few moments a day. Today, he'd occupied far too much space in her brain. Probably because

she was unsettled from the break-in and then the death of the professor.

She needed sleep. She needed to stop dwelling on what-ifs. She and Holden had agreed to go their separate ways. It had been for the best. The fact that she hadn't been on a single date since she'd walked away from him was just a coincidence. She'd been busy. Life had gotten in the way.

*Sure... Keep telling yourself that.*

The bed was amazing, the mattress obviously expensive to go with the sheets. Nevertheless, she couldn't get comfortable. Her brain wouldn't slow down. Every movement caused the sheet to rub against her nipples and made her aware she was still horny.

All this damn thinking about Holden had her edgy. The orgasm in the bathtub wasn't enough. It never was, but today was worse. Maybe if she let herself come again, she could relax.

Taking a deep breath, she slid out of bed, padded to the bathroom, and grabbed the one toiletry bag she hadn't opened yet. The one with her vibrators in it. Fifteen seconds later, she was back under the sheets, but this time she held the hot-pink clitoral stimulator. It was powerful and would do the job in no time.

Closing her eyes, she spread her legs and turned the battery-operated boyfriend to medium, applying it next to her clit. She circled the swollen nub several times, her entire body instantly wide awake and primed.

In her head, Holden was holding the vibrator, though he hadn't ever used toys on her before. He hadn't needed any help getting her off on the cruise. He did now though.

What a joke. He only needed the vibrator because he wasn't in the room, and what the fuck was she thinking? Her thoughts were out of control tonight.

Needing the quick release, she slid the rounded tip of the stimulator directly over her sensitive nub and arched off the bed as she came. Hard. Fast. Deliciously.

As she floated back from the clouds, she set the vibrator on the bedside table and curled onto her side, breathing heavily, praying for sleep, willing errant thoughts of a past relationship from over two years ago to get out of her head.

## CHAPTER 5



*“You fucking killed Yang?”*

*“Didn’t have a choice. How’d you find out about it?”*

*“Are you kidding?”*

*“I guess you have connections.”*

*“Ya think?”*

*“Has Hurn returned to the townhouse?”*

*“No. Doubt she will. Not anytime soon. It’s trashed.”*

*“Guess you better use some of your connections to fucking find her.”*

*“I don’t see how this is my problem, asshole.”*

*“Whoa, watch how you speak to me. I have the power to end you, your career, and your family.”*

*“Don’t you fucking threaten my family.”*

*“I guess you better get me what I need then, huh?”*



Holden was exhausted. He’d been in Europe for four months, trailing a rock star who had received multiple threatening

messages from a crazed fan. That sort of job wasn't the kind of thing Holden preferred to do. He wasn't a babysitter. He was a fucking Navy SEAL. Or he had been.

The point was, he was trained to do all sorts of missions, but he preferred the adrenaline rush of sneaking up on a known sniper or tracking down a child-trafficking ring. Bodyguard wasn't something he enjoyed.

However, in this case, he was glad he'd been there because the fan in question had actually been an extremely disgruntled ex-boyfriend who'd meant business and probably would have killed his estranged ex-girlfriend if Holden hadn't been there to track him down and stop him.

It had taken far longer than Holden had bargained for, but the singer was now safe, and the ex was behind bars.

And Holden was fucking exhausted. He probably should have taken a day in France to sleep and recover in the hotel, but he'd wanted to get home. He wanted to sleep in his own bed. For a week.

After tipping the driver heftily for bringing him home in the middle of the night, he lugged his suitcase to the side entrance, unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

He didn't need lights. He knew how to disarm and rearm the alarm without seeing a thing. He'd done so many times. Lights would just cause him to be more awake, and awake wasn't the goal. The goal was to aim straight for his bed, drop his clothes, slide under the covers, and sleep like the dead.

Leaving his suitcase and computer bag in the kitchen, he pulled his shirt over his head as he made his way up the stairs and into the bedroom. It wasn't until he was halfway to the bed that he froze.

Goosebumps rose up his arms. Several thoughts went through his head all at once.

He could see the indentation of a person in his bed. Someone was sleeping there. This didn't fill him with panic. The guys he worked with often used his cabin. Frank and Nancy Holt had several sets of keys and all the codes. Anytime someone needed downtime away from the homebase in Indiana, they could be sent here to relax.

Grant had keys. He and Callie came here too. There was no way they had come this week though because Grant had known Holden had been wrapping up his mission and would be home soon. Plus, there was only one body in the bed. Not two.

The next thought, one that overlapped the first, was that the person in the bed was a woman. The form was too small and slight to be one of his co-workers.

Thought number three, perhaps a quarter of a second behind the first two was why anyone had sent a woman to the cabin. That wasn't the norm. Especially not alone.

Thought number four, lapping over the top of number three, why hadn't anyone told him? A simple phone call... And then, *fuck*. When was the last time he'd checked his messages? Not in over a day. Not since he'd wrapped up his job and headed for the airport. Not even in the car on the way here. He wasn't even sure where his cell phone was. Buried in his computer bag, probably.

*Fuck fuck fuck*. Holden was fucking tired. He needed sleep. He was in no mood to entertain. He wanted to be right where this woman was, sleeping in his own fucking bed.

He could slip back out of the room and take over one of the guest rooms, but whoever was in his bed would die of fright when she found him in the morning. Or hell, if she was military or in some way involved with the Holt Agency, she might shoot him first and ask questions after. To her, he would be an intruder.

Nope. He was going to have to wake her now. Confront her now. Figure out who she was and why she was in his bed. Afterward, he could negotiate with her and convince her to move to a guest room so he could have his own damn bed. He hadn't slept on his fucking expensive mattress for months. He fully intended to tonight.

Taking a deep breath as he faced the inevitable confrontation, he dropped his shirt on the floor and ran a hand over his hair.

That's when another thought slipped into his brain unbidden and made him stop breathing. Or moving. He wasn't sure he was even standing any longer. His legs were jelly.

Surely he was imagining things. No way in hell was the woman in his bed Melanie Hurn. The fact that he would never forget her scent in a million years just meant his brain was playing tricks on him.

He took another slow deep breath. *Fuck*. Closed his eyes. Breathed again. *Fuck*. It wasn't logical. He hadn't seen her in over a year. Hadn't touched her in over two years. Hadn't held her in all that time. But damn, her scent permeated the room.

He would know it anywhere. His room smelled like sex. That scent he liked to bury his nose in after he had her. After he made her come. He'd dreamed about it a thousand times since he'd last experienced it.

What were the chances? Surely his mind was playing tricks on him. Why would Melanie be in his cabin, in his bed? He'd like to go back about an hour, find his phone, check his messages.

He was breathing heavily now, and he needed to turn the lights on, confront this woman, and prove to himself she was not Melanie. It could be anyone. It wasn't her.

His eyes were adjusted enough to glance around as he stepped closer. If the person in the bed was armed, she was likely to kill him. He was about to scare her to death.

She was curled on her side, facing away from him. She also had Melanie's curls. Jesus. It really was likely her.

He turned toward the bathroom, deciding to flip on the lights in there instead of blinding both of them with the sudden overhead lights in the bedroom.

With one last deep breath, he flipped the switch, his gaze on the woman. "Melanie?" he called out. His gut told him he was right. Every sense in his body told him he was right. Melanie was in his bed, between his sheets.

Suddenly, the sleeping form bolted upright, a scream coming from her lips as she twisted toward him, eyes wide with fear.

Holden stopped breathing. She was even more gorgeous than he remembered. Her hair was a wild mass of curls. Her chest was heaving. But more importantly, she was naked. The sheets had fallen to her waist, and she was in too much shock to realize he was staring at her breasts.

His cock was hard in a second. She was here. Either that or he'd fallen asleep on the way up the mountain and was having the best dream of his life behind the driver.



Seconds passed in limbo before Melanie found enough brain cells to grab the sheet and pull it up over her chest. “Holden?” Her voice squeaked. “What are you doing here?”

“I was about to ask you the same question,” he responded.

“I, uh, it’s a long story. You go first. I thought you were in Europe or something.”

“I was. My assignment ended.” He took a step closer to her, half afraid she wasn’t real. He didn’t want to wake up if this was a dream. He wanted to hold on to it. *Keep talking to her.* He hadn’t heard her voice in a long time. He wanted to absorb every syllable.

God, he was a mess.

“Okay. Why did you come here?”

He frowned. “It’s my house. I live here.” Did she not know that?

Her eyes widened again. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

“Why would I lie about that? This is my cabin.”

She held the sheet tight above her chest with one hand and rubbed her face with the other. “I’m going to kill Grant and Callie.”

He nodded. If this was a setup... If Grant and Callie had sent her here under false pretenses to force the two of them to face each other... Well, it was an ingenious idea, but he would still kill them himself. Mel would never get the chance.

“Surely they left you messages. Don’t you check your phone?” she accused.

He winced. “I didn’t. No. I’ve been exhausted and traveling for over twenty-four hours. My phone is buried

somewhere in my bag.” He changed subjects. “Did they set us up?”

She sighed. “No idea. It’s more complicated than that.”

He stepped even closer. He shouldn’t. He should leave the room and let her get dressed so they could talk with clothes on, but he couldn’t stop himself. He was drawn to her like a magnet.

Something bright pink caught his attention, and he glanced to the nightstand. Smirking, he looked back at her. “You had sex in my bed.”

She gasped as she reached out a hand, snagged the vibrator, and pulled it under the covers as if she could erase the last ten seconds by making the device invisible.

“No wonder it smells like sex in here. Sex and you.” He took a step back. His cock was harder now, and he didn’t have permission to approach any closer. He’d love to close the distance, flatten her to the bed, toss that vibrator to the floor, and show her she didn’t need it.

But they had an agreement. It didn’t include him fucking her even if she was naked in his damn bed. She obviously hadn’t known it was his cabin.

“I should put some clothes on,” she murmured. She was embarrassed. Good. He liked her a little off kilter. He always had. It was one of the things that endeared her to him in the first place. She was kind of nerdy. A book girl. She knew things. Lots of things. She even spoke Mandarin as if it were her native language. It was hot.

Yes, she could get all fixed up and go out dancing with her hair and makeup just right, a slinky dress making her sexy as hell, heels that caused her legs to go on for miles. At a glance,

no one would know underneath all of that was a bookworm who had a PhD and preferred to read about ancient Chinese culture than watch television.

He cleared his throat. “You seriously had no idea this was my place and that I would show up?”

“No. I swear.” She wasn’t lying.

“You’re not only in my bed, but you were sleeping on my side. You had sex on my side.” He was tormenting her, and he couldn’t stop. He loved how flustered she was.

She drew in a breath. “I didn’t technically have sex, you know. I was alone.”

He smiled. “It smells like you. I could smell your come as soon as I entered the room,” he exaggerated.

She rolled her eyes. “You could not.”

He chuckled. Ten minutes ago, he’d been too tired to stand upright. Now, he was wide awake, though he’d still like to climb under the covers. He wouldn’t, but he’d like to.

“I’m going to need you to explain how and why you’re here. But first, I need you to scoot over. I mean it. You’re on my side. I’m exhausted. I want to lie down.” He was being a bit of an ass, pushing her. He felt like he had a right to though. After all, there was one undeniable fact. This was his fucking house, and she was in his bed.

The part about him preferring this side was an embellishment. If he were sleeping with her, he would never have a side. She could have any side she wanted. Top. Bottom. Left. Right. It wouldn’t matter.

“I’m not going to sleep with you, Holden.”

He flinched. *Damn. Okay.* And what was he thinking? Of course she wasn't. She hadn't expected him. That much was clear.

“Would you at least give me a shirt?”

He glanced behind him before bending down to snag the shirt he'd just removed off the floor and handing it to her.

She stared at him, holding it in her hand.

“It's not too dirty. I changed in the last airport. Used deodorant too.”

“So, it wasn't in my imagination when I thought this place smelled like you...” she said, ignoring the shirt.

She might as well have sucker punched him. Did the place smell like him? He shook his head. “No. It's my cabin. I'm not kidding.”

“You live here?”

“Usually. When I'm not on an assignment. When I am, I let the other guys use it to get away. Grant and Callie come here.”

“They failed to mention it was yours.”

“Apparently.” He pointed at the shirt. “You going to put that on?”

She glanced down, hedging. “Seems like a bad idea.”

He gave her a slow smile. “It wasn't my idea at all. It was yours. You asked for a shirt. Being the gentleman I am, I handed you one. I'm accommodating like that. For all I care, you can stay naked. It won't bother me.”

She groaned. “Maybe you could leave the room and let me put on a bit more than a shirt. Perhaps not one you just took

off your body.”

“Why? Will it bother you?” He had no idea why he was tormenting her. Probably because it was too damn fun watching her fidget.

“Yes, Holden. It will bother me. It will smell like you and drive me bonkers. Happy?”

“Very.” *Extremely*. Cocky too. Chest-pumpingly cocky.

She pointed at the door. “Please step out. Let me get something more appropriate out of my suitcase. I’m not sleeping with you. I’ll move to one of the guest rooms. If someone would have mentioned the small detail that this house was yours, I never would have slept in your bed.”

“Why not?” He put a hand over his chest as if he were wounded.

She groaned. “Holden...”

“I’m sorry. I can’t resist teasing you. I forgot how flustered you get. It was always so much fun.” He pointed at the T-shirt. “Put my shirt on. Scoot over. You’re not going to another room. I want to know how you ended up here. I’ll use that information to decide what method I’m going to use to kill one of my best friends for meddling in our lives.”

“I don’t think you’re going to want to kill him. Grant didn’t send me here for vacation. I might be in a spot of trouble.”

Holden flinched. She could have knocked him over with a feather. He closed the distance between them, reached for the bedside lamp, and turned it on.

She squinted in the brighter light.

He snatched the shirt from her, shook it out, opened it, and held it over her head. He needed her slightly more covered now too. Especially if she was in trouble. He wanted to hear every word. His cock needed to simmer down and take a seat. Her safety was paramount.

“Arms up.”

She sighed as she released the sheet, letting it fall to her waist. In record time, she let the cotton material slide down her body. Afterward, she tugged it under her fantastic ass and scooted over a few feet.

Holden kicked out of his shoes, unbuttoned his jeans, and shrugged out of everything but his tight boxers. He would leave them on for her, mostly because she looked a bit horrified, but also because something serious was happening to her. This wasn't a time to be naked.

Moments later, he climbed into the bed, propped himself on one elbow, and met her gaze, looking up at her. “Talk. What happened?”

She sighed, her gaze going to her lap where she fiddled with the sheets. “Mostly Grant was just being overprotective. I think.”

“Good. I'm sure he knows what's best.”

“Someone broke into my townhouse and trashed it.”

Holden winced. “When?”

“Last night. I mean like thirty hours ago.”

Holden nodded, realizing by then he had been on his first flight. “Go on.”

“The police came. Nothing obvious was missing though. I called Callie and Grant. They came over. There was no way I

could sleep there. I would have been scared, but also the door was kicked in, the locks were destroyed, and the entire inside was a hurricane.”

Holden reached out and set his hand over both of hers in her lap. “I’m so sorry.” There was more. He was sure of it. He waited.

She stiffened, probably because he was touching her, but he wasn’t about to let go. He needed the contact. She surprised him by flipping her hands over and grasping his.

“What else happened?” He wasn’t sure Grant would have told her, but he did know his teammate well enough to be certain Grant didn’t send Mel into hiding over a home invasion.

She drew in a breath. “We had a visiting professor at Georgetown. I met with him yesterday. He was helping me gather my research for a paper I’m writing. He was found dead the morning after my townhouse was ransacked.”

Holden bolted to sitting. “Are you serious?”

Mel nodded, and she was shaking.

“Fuck.” He scrambled out of the bed. This was worse than he expected. “Be right back. Don’t move.” He rushed out of the room and down the stairs. He really needed to check his messages. Whatever was happening had undoubtedly been left in his damn phone he foolishly hadn’t checked in far too long.

After racing into the kitchen, he fished around in his computer bag and found his phone. As he headed back upstairs, he let the first message play. He didn’t put the messages in speaker just in case Grant hadn’t sugarcoated anything. Mel didn’t necessarily need to know every single detail.

Holden set his eyes on Mel who hadn't moved as he continued to listen to one message after another. He paced the room. The last one gave him a detail he was glad to hear and fairly certain Mel was unaware of.

She hadn't been left up here totally alone. A man was stationed nearby, keeping an eye on all traffic that led up to the house. He'd known to expect Holden but no one else. That's why he hadn't shown himself when Holden passed him with his driver.

Grant had known Holden would be returning at any hour, but for some reason he hadn't informed Melanie, nor had he told her who this cabin belonged to.

After Holden finished listening, he set the phone on the nightstand, still processing. He paced again. Grant hadn't sent Mel up here specifically to force the two of them to talk or try to get them together. He'd done so because this was the safest place to send her. Bless him.

He hadn't really done anything nefarious either. He'd left Holden plenty of messages. It wasn't Grant's fault Holden hadn't listened to them.

Why hadn't he told Mel where she was staying? Probably because if he had, she wouldn't have agreed to come here. She was stubborn. She had intentionally not gone anywhere Holden had been in over a year.

"I'm sure I can find somewhere else to stay," she whispered.

He flinched and turned to fully face her. "Fuck, no, you won't. You're safe here. No one can find you here."

She gave a slow nod. "I'm in your way. This is your house."



“You could never be in my way, Mel. Drop it.” He wasn’t interested in listening to her arguments about why they shouldn’t be near each other. He understood. He didn’t even have a right to be angry.

When it came down to it, Holden was a dude. He could have easily hooked up with Melanie every once in a while and had amazing sex. But she didn’t want that nor did she deserve that.

Mel was a bit too prim and proper for the occasional liaison with no commitment. She deserved to find a man who didn’t spend most of the year doing an extremely dangerous job that might get him killed. She deserved someone who came home every night, made sweet love to her, and held her in his arms.

Holden winced inwardly. The thought of any other man doing those things had never set well with him. He hated to think about it at all. So he hadn’t. But that didn’t mean he was fool enough to think he could have her.

There was also the possibility he was lying to himself. She’d given him the best eleven days of his life. If he continued to hook up with her every few months, he might grow attached, which would become a distraction when he was on an assignment.

Their mutual agreement to walk away after the cruise had been sound. It had remained sound for all this time. But now she was nearly naked in his bed, holding a fucking vibrator between her legs as if she thought he might forget about its existence.

“Surely everyone is overreacting,” she suggested.

“Maybe. Maybe not. We’re not taking chances though. For now, you’re staying here.” Holden knew from Grant’s messages that their bosses, Ajax and Ryker, were involved and calling some of the shots. Even though Melanie was someone Grant and Holden knew, Callie’s best friend, a woman who meant something to more than one of them, that didn’t mean she wasn’t also involved in something worthy of the Holt Agency’s attention.

Holden didn’t like this situation. It didn’t sit right with him. There wasn’t much else he could do in the middle of the night, but first thing tomorrow, he intended to be on the phone with about a half a dozen people, getting more details, especially concerning the dead professor.

For now, they both needed sleep. And there was no way he was going to let her out of his sight and set her up in another room. Fuck that.

He returned to the bed and reached out a hand, palm up.

“What?” she asked, eyes wide as she blinked up at him.

“Give me the vibrator. We’re not sleeping with it.”

Her cheeks turned bright red as she reached under the covers and pulled it out. She was shaking with embarrassment as she set it in his palm.

Holden returned it to the nightstand and climbed back into the bed. “Lie down, babe,” he suggested softly. “We need sleep.”

“How about if I go to another room?”

He reached for her hand and gave a tug. “How about if you lie down and stop arguing with me. You’re not going to another room. I promise to stay on my side of the bed.” The side where she’d recently masturbated. The pillow was going

to smell like her, but her scent had permeated the entire room, so what did that matter now?

She sighed as she tugged her hand out of his grip and shifted down under the covers, leaving a huge gap between them. “I’m slightly mortified.”

“I know. It’s kind of adorable.”

“Can you at least put the thing in the drawer of the nightstand or something?”

“The thing?” He chuckled. “You mean the hot-pink vibrator you used to get yourself off right where I’m lying before I arrived?”

“Holden...” she groaned.

He couldn’t help but tease her. She’d been slightly reserved when he’d first met her, but she’d warmed up and become quite the sex kitten as the days had gone by. Now, she was curiously back to being prim and proper. Mortified.

The overall situation—the reason she was here—was serious and not to be taken lightly, but that didn’t mean Holden was dead. He was alive and well, and his cock was too. The thought of her moaning as she writhed in this very spot not long ago made his dick throw a tantrum.

It wasn’t going to win tonight though. Not a chance. If she weren’t watching and well aware of his movements, he would reach down and squeeze the thick shaft to get it to stop pulsing.

She was watching though. She was staring at him. “Are you going to turn the lights off?”

He twisted around and turned off the lamp on the nightstand. “Let’s leave the bathroom light on, okay?” If there

was even the slightest hint of trouble, he wanted to have some light. It wasn't likely. Not with his alarm system and the man stationed down the road, but still...

Melanie sighed deeply. She lay on her side, facing him. "This is surreal."

"Yeah."

"I can't stay here with you."

"Let's talk about it tomorrow." Like hell was he going to let her leave. But he really did need to think this through and discuss it more after some sleep. Now wasn't the time.

"K." Her voice was soft. Her eyes remained open.

As tired as he was, his adrenaline was pumping now. He had a hundred questions running through his head. He was concerned about her. He couldn't stop staring at her.

What he wanted to do was close the distance, haul her into his arms, and kiss her until she grew soft and pliant in his embrace. He'd done it before. He knew what it felt like when Melanie let herself go. He craved that feeling again. But not tonight.

Her eyes drooped. Finally they closed. Her breathing evened out. It wasn't until he was certain she was asleep that he let himself succumb.

## CHAPTER 6



*“Clock’s ticking, man.”*

*“What the fuck do you want from me? I’ve been watching this bitch’s townhouse for thirty hours. I’m fucking tired. She hasn’t been here. I’m not sure why she would come back. The place is trashed.”*

*“That’s on you. You’re the one who hired whoever went in. Fucking find her.”*

*“All I have from you is the address. Who is this bitch anyway? Is she someone important? The place is fucking crawling with plainclothes. Combing it as if they know it wasn’t just a robbery.”*

*“Some professor from Georgetown. That’s all I know. You better not get fucking caught watching the place.”*

*“Don’t insult me. I’m not one of your flunkies.”*

*“You sure? We wouldn’t be in this mess if you’d done the job right in the first place.”*

*“Fuck you. I’ll find her.”*

*“Sooner rather than later would be good, like before she knows what she has.”*



Mel awoke to the scent of coffee. For a moment she was confused about where she was. She glanced around, taking in her surroundings as the facts rushed into her head, reminding her about last night.

Honestly, if it weren't for the smell of coffee wafting up from downstairs, she would assume she'd dreamed the entire thing from when Holden entered the room to when they went to sleep.

It couldn't have been a dream though because she was tired enough to know she hadn't slept enough.

Rolling to her back, she glanced at the window. She'd left the curtains open, knowing the first thing she would see in the morning would be the amazing view of the mountains.

It was truly spectacular.

She eased from the bed, making sure Holden's T-shirt was long enough to cover her ass, and padded to the window. Her life might be a bit topsy turvy right now, but the expanse of nature outside was enough to calm her soul and help her breathe easier.

"You're up."

She spun around at the sound of his voice.

"I hope I didn't wake you. I tried to be quiet. You were dead to the world." He was holding a cup of coffee, and he held it out as he approached. "I assume you still like one-third cream and plenty of sugar?" He grinned as he handed it to her.

When their fingers touched, she felt electricity between them that made her come alive. She ignored it as she brought

the mug to her lips and took a sip. “Mmm. Perfect. Thank you. I can’t believe you remember how I like my coffee.” Although she remembered exactly how he liked his too. Black. With toast. Half a pat of butter. Strawberry preserves.

She chased the memories from her mind and met his gaze again. “I should get dressed.”

“Not on my account,” he teased. There was a twinkle in his eyes. A twinkle she remembered well. He’d loved to tease her, mostly because she’d made it easy.

She glanced at the bathroom. “I used your amazing tub last night,” she said to change the subject, though her new direction probably wasn’t any better.

“I saw the wineglass. Did you masturbate in there too?” He was grinning now.

Heat rushed up her cheeks. She would never be a good liar. Her face would give her away.

“Fuck me.” He ran a hand through his hair. He was so fucking sexy, all ruffled with morning hair and a two-day-old beard. His hair was a bit longer than it had been the last time she’d seen him. He was wearing a pair of gray sweatpants and nothing else. Bare feet. Bare chest.

Was he bigger? Stronger? He looked broader. Maybe her imagination was running rampant. Then again, the first time she’d met him, he’d recently been held hostage for three months in Ethiopia. He hadn’t returned to his top shape yet. He’d still been working on it.

She rushed past him toward the bathroom and closed the door behind her. As soon as she was alone, she set the coffee on the counter and stared at herself in the mirror. She looked awful, like she’d been either drinking or fucking all night.

Grateful her toiletries were on the counter in his bathroom, she turned on the shower. The only way to tame her curly hair would be to wash it and put product in it. Running a comb through it right now would end in disaster.

If she'd been alone today, as expected, she would have pulled it up in a loose, messy bun, tugged on sweats, and settled down at the kitchen table with her coffee and her laptop to start her summer project.

Instead, there had been a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn. "You're certifiable," she muttered under her breath as she gathered up her shampoo and conditioner and stepped into the shower. It was a giant glass enclosure that was deep enough it didn't have a door. Beautiful. It would be a great place to have sex.

And she needed to wipe thoughts of sex from her mind. This cabin visit needed to come to a halt and fast. She couldn't stay here with Holden. He was too tempting. Too sexy. And still just as unavailable as he'd been when she'd last seen him.

She groaned softly as the water sluiced over her. Her body came alive in ways it hadn't fully experienced in over two years. Her breasts felt heavy. Her nipples were tight points. Her physical reaction to Holden was impossible to ignore.

She closed her eyes as she lathered her hair, trying to think. The two of them needed to talk, but what was there to say? Nothing. Nothing had changed. The sexual tension between them was exactly the same. Their life circumstances were too.

She worked in D.C. She loved her job. She did important research. He worked all over the world, risking his life probably more often than she cared to think. His work was important. People counted on him. She would never ask him to



quit doing what he loved, and he would be miserable if she did.

She sighed as she rinsed out the shampoo and switched to conditioner. *Don't... Just don't sleep with him. It will ruin you.*

Who was she kidding? She was already ruined.

Fifteen minutes later, she descended the stairs armed with styled hair and layers of clothing. At least she would be able to hold her own better in his presence if she were dressed.

Except the moment she stepped into the kitchen with her empty mug, aiming for the coffeepot to refill, he turned around and froze. Staring at her. He had a plate of food in his hands, but he looked as though he was no longer aware of that fact.

“Hey,” she murmured, hoping to break him from his apparent trance. It was unnerving how he was staring at her as if he'd seen a ghost.

“You showered,” he finally whispered at she reached for the coffeepot. “And dressed.”

“Yeah. Regular morning things.” She gave him a small smile. Would he stop staring?

“You look... Really good, Mel.” He set the heaping platter of pancakes on the island and took a step toward her.

She set her newly filled, undoctored mug on the counter and backed up a pace. “Don't.”

He stopped and took a deep breath. “Sorry.”

“It's okay, but, just... Don't.” It was all she could think to say. Don't what? *Don't touch me? Don't look at me like that? Don't think whatever you're thinking?*

He nodded. “Okay.” Motioning toward the table, he picked up the platter and headed that way. “Come sit. Eat. I know you like a big breakfast. Apparently when Jerad and Robert brought you up here yesterday, they made sure you were well stocked.”

“They did.” She followed him and took a seat across from him. A safe distance. The platter had more than pancakes. There was also bacon and fried eggs. More than the two of them could possibly eat. Then again, she had no idea what his appetite might be or how long he’d gone without eating when he’d arrived in the night.

“I spoke to Grant,” he stated as he filled his plate.

“Not surprising.” She reached for the juice and poured a glass. She knew he would have called Grant and probably several other guys early this morning.

“He ripped me a new one for not checking my messages. I’m really sorry about that. There’s no excuse. I should have checked my phone the moment I touched down. It’s not like me to ignore messages. I was exhausted, and I knew there was no way Ryker and Ajax would have already assigned me to another mission, so I just ignored my phone.”

“It’s okay. I get it.” She’d filled her plate and was reaching for the butter, but he did so at the same time, and their knuckles collided. She drew her hand back as if he’d burned her.

Holden sat up straighter, set his palms on the table, and looked at her. His brows were furrowed. “I don’t want this to be awkward.”

She chuckled with absolutely no humor. “I think that ship sailed. We can’t avoid awkward. You came home to find a

woman you had a fling with over two years ago sleeping naked in your bed. It doesn't get more awkward than that."

He lifted his brows. "I think the addition of the vibrator on the nightstand makes it more awkward." He grinned. Damn him.

She groaned. "How long are you going to continue to bring that up? Should we get a helicopter to fly over with a banner?"

He laughed. "We could do that. I'll see what I can arrange." He took a bite of pancakes.

She rolled her eyes. "How about you don't mention it again, yeah?"

"And miss how red your cheeks get every time I bring it up?" He continued eating as if they were discussing the weather instead of her masturbation habits. Finally, he leaned forward on his elbows. "I'm sorry, babe. You're too damn easy to tease. There's no reason to be embarrassed. People masturbate. Though the thought of you doing so in my bed makes my cock harder than a rock."

She narrowed her gaze at him. "You just can't stop, can you?" Her face was so hot it was on fire.

"Listen, Mel. Let's deal with the elephant in the room so we can move on. We have history. We had a fantastic vacation together. We had chemistry. We fucked like bunnies for eleven days. It was amazing. There's no reason to pretend it didn't happen. We parted amicably. There's no reason we can't be adults about it and move on. You're here indefinitely in my house. I'm not an asshole. I won't take advantage of you. I never did the first time either. I'm not in the habit of sleeping with women who hedge about the idea."

She set her fork down and held his gaze. She could be an adult too. “You should know I’m not ordinarily as...flirty as I was on that cruise. I don’t do things like that. I don’t sleep with men I just met.” She lowered her gaze and added, “Over and over and over for days.”

He reached across the table and grabbed her hand, giving it a squeeze. “I get it. Vacation mode does strange things to people. It’s history. In the past. Let’s leave it there and deal with the present and the possible threat to your life.”

She flinched. “I seriously doubt there’s a threat to my life. No one has any reason to be after me. I’m a professor. I’ve never done a single thing in my life that could be considered interesting enough to warrant ransacking my house.”

“I know at least three people have already asked you a million questions, but be prepared for me to do the same thing. Even the smallest detail can make all the difference.”

She took another drink of juice and set the glass down. “I’ll do my best to answer you.” There was no reason to be antagonistic. Solving mysteries was in Holden’s blood. She had to expect he was going to dissect every aspect of her life this morning.

Holden pointed at her plate. “Eat. I won’t hound you until you’re properly fed.”

“Thank you.” She really did like a good breakfast, and even though this entire scenario was unexpected and awkward, she needed to eat before he started digging into every minute detail about her life.

When they were finished, she helped him clean up and load the dishwasher before he led her to the sectional in the living area of the great room. He even fixed her a glass of ice

water and set it on the end table after she refused a third cup of coffee.

Mel had on comfortable black leggings and an oversized sweater. Most of what she'd packed for this trip had been with comfort in mind. She'd come here to work, not party. She curled up in the corner of the sectional, tucking her legs under her and holding a pillow in her lap for added protection. A flimsy sort of defense between them. It wouldn't protect her from his words, but it would at least make her feel armed.

"Any recent breakups I should know about? Disgruntled boyfriends who might be angry with you?" He went right for the gusto without hesitating.

She shook her head. "No."

"I know it's embarrassing, but I need a list of everyone you've dated lately, Mel. Let me look into them. Make sure no one has a record or had an ulterior motive."

She drew in a breath. "There's no one." *How humiliating.*

He stared at her. "Even a single date could be significant, babe," he said gently.

"Perhaps, but I haven't been on a single date."

"In how long?" he blurted.

She pursed her lips.

"Mel? How long?"

"A long time. Can you please change the subject? You're getting too personal."

He didn't respond for a while. Finally, he drew in another breath. "What about colleagues. Anyone mad that you got a promotion and they didn't?"

“No. I work in a small department. We don’t have that kind of animosity.”

He continued, asking her every question she’d already answered just like he’d told her he would. By the time he was finished, she was antsy and tired of discussing her life so intimately. She’d rather not have shared so much with this particular man.

Holden’s phone rang, and he snagged it from the coffee table, glanced at the screen, and brought it to his ear. He kept his gaze locked on Mel. “Hey.”

She watched him. He watched her. She couldn’t hear what the other person was saying, nor did she know who it was. She figured it had to be Grant, Ajax, or Ryker. He wouldn’t answer the phone in front of her if it were anyone else. He was too polite for that.

His expression shifted slightly. Did he wince? Maybe she was making it up. He didn’t say a single word until he finally ended the call by saying, “Thanks.”

Mel frowned. That was an odd conversation. One-sided. Two words from Holden.

“Professor Yang was murdered.”

Mel nearly jumped off the sofa. Her entire body went stiff. “Are you sure?” she asked before she could stop herself. Of course he was sure. She glanced at the television. Would it be on the news?

“It’s not public information yet. They haven’t contacted everyone in his family.”

She wondered for half a second how the hell someone knew it to tell Holden then but realized who she was dealing

with and didn't bother voicing that question out loud. Anyone at the Holt Agency would know.

"I'm sorry." He leaned forward, setting his elbows on his knees. Several feet separated them, but she suddenly felt chilled and unnerved. She kind of wished he were next to her.

She lowered her face. "Jesus." What did that mean for her? "I should call my supervisor."

"Grant has already spoken to the head of your department. You shouldn't call anyone. It's not safe."

She flinched. "To make a phone call?"

He shook his head. "Have you spoken to anyone since you arrived here? Or even before you came?"

"No. Grant told me not to, but I can't just ignore the death of a visiting faculty member like I don't care."

"Your department head understands, babe. This is serious. Someone trashed your townhouse and murdered one of the last people you saw."

She tried to process his words. She was in shock. "It would be insensitive of me not to call. It's a small department."

Holden held her gaze. "You're in danger, Mel."

She blinked. Surely not. Was she? That was still hard to imagine.

"Your department head knows. Everyone in your department knows. They've all been questioned. You can't contact anyone for any reason. In fact, turn off your phone. Are you in any groups that can trace you?"

She shook her head, unable to speak.

“You sure? No social media apps with friends or anyone in your department that can pinpoint your location?”

She sighed. “No, Holden. No one is tracking me.”

“Where’s your phone?”

She glanced over at the counter in his kitchen and pointed. “In my purse over by the door.”

He rose and took long strides toward her purse. A second later, he had her phone in his hand and was powering it down.

“What if Callie tries to call me? She’ll freak out if I don’t answer.”

Holden shook his head as he returned. “She can call through me on my phone. It’s secure. Grant will know I turned your phone off. You can use my phone to text her in a bit.”

Mel took a deep breath. She had another argument. “I can’t stay here.”

Holden’s brow was furrowed as he came to her. He didn’t return to the other end of the couch. He sat on the damn coffee table, his knees inches from the edge of the couch. He could reach out and touch her if he wanted. “Why not?”

“Let’s see...” She tapped her lips in exaggeration, feeling like he was daft or pretending to be daft by even asking. “For one thing, if I’m truly in some kind of danger, I wouldn’t want to subject anyone else to that danger. For another thing, it’s a horrible idea for me to stay in the same house with you.”

“Okay, your first argument is insulting. My life’s work is protecting people from danger. I protect strangers on every assignment. Do you think I would hesitate to protect someone I care about? Do you think I would drop you off at a motel and come back here and ignore you?”



“You should,” she mumbled.

“Well, it won’t happen. Ever.”

“Fine. Of course you wouldn’t. But the rest of my argument is legit. We have history.”

“So?”

“So, it’s better left in the past. If I stayed here, I’d eventually succumb to your manly wiles and end up under you. Horrible idea.”

He chuckled. “My manly wiles?”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever.” She waved her hand through the air between them in a zigzag. “You’re fucking sexy, possibly more than you were two and a half years ago. I can’t resist you. And you don’t do anything to make it easy either. It would be too easy to just say fuck it and let you into my body.”

He gave her a wry smile. “I’m sexier?”

She groaned. “And conceited.”

“But what you’re saying is you can’t keep your panties on around me.”

She rolled her head back and stared at the ceiling. That was basically what she had said, yes. “I’m weak when I’m with you,” she muttered.

“That’s flattering. I think. But if you tell me you don’t want me to touch you, I won’t. I’m not an asshole,” he informed her.

She lowered her head to look at him. “I know you’re not. I didn’t say you were.”

“Then we don’t have a problem. You’re staying here. End of story. I’m an adult. I can keep my dick in my pants. You’ve made it clear you don’t want to have sex with me. I heard you. End of subject.”

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head. “That’s not it at all.” Why was she elaborating? She should have simply nodded, end of subject. But her lips kept moving. For some reason it was important that she set him straight. “I never said I didn’t want to have sex with you. I do. That’s why I should leave. You’re distracting. You’re a temptation. I need to work on my research paper. I can’t do that with you hovering with your damn six-pack abs and pecs that could cut steel.”

He chuckled. “How about if I put a shirt on and don’t hover?” He was teasing her.

She scowled, or tried to. “Holden...”

“First of all, this subject is closed. I would never take you somewhere else and leave you, nor would I trust anyone else with your life. End of discussion. As for sleeping with me, we did it before and you had no complaints. Would it be so bad to spend time together naked again?”

“Yes.” She really didn’t want to elaborate further.

He held her gaze for a long time before swiping a hand down his face and sighing. “Okay. Let’s table that discussion.”

“Permanently, Holden.” Couldn’t he see reason? Maybe fucking her wouldn’t mess with his head. Maybe he would simply be scratching an itch. But it would destroy her. She was certain. She hadn’t recovered from the last time she’d had sex with him. Adding to it would only make things worse.

She needed to be sure he understood. “Nothing has changed between us,” she pointed out. “It doesn’t matter that

we're compatible in bed. Good sex isn't the only important thing in life."

"It ranks pretty high," he argued.

She shook her head. "It can't. We have careers that aren't compatible. It was true two years ago and it's still true today. I need you to honor my wishes on this issue. Please."

He hesitated and then nodded. "Of course. I said I would. My pants stay on."

"Good. Which guest room should I move into?"

He rose, shaking his head. "Neither. I'm not going to agree to that."

She jumped to her feet and followed him into the kitchen area. "Holden, are you listening to me?"

He spun around so fast she nearly ran smack into him. "I'm listening, babe. I heard every word. I won't ask you to have sex with me. But I will do everything in my power to figure out why your house was ransacked and your colleague was murdered. Don't ask me to ignore those facts. And while I'm working on that, you're sticking close to me at all times. Got it?"

He was serious. "Surely being in the house with me is sufficient. I don't need to sleep in your bed with you."

"Yes. You do. I wouldn't be able to rest with you in another room. I'd worry. I really love my bed. It has a new mattress that's like a cloud. And it's king-sized. But, if you'd rather move to a queen bed in one of the guest rooms, we can do that. I won't argue."

She put her hands on her hips, exasperated with his jokes. "Ha ha. Nothing is going to happen to me in the middle of the

night.”

“Nope. You’re right.” He crossed his arms, his feet planted wide. This subject was closed.

She sighed. She could make this argument again later tonight. For now, she needed to get her computer out and try to focus on her research. She spun around to walk away. “I’m going to start on my work.”

“Good idea. I need to make calls.”

## CHAPTER 7



Ten minutes later, they were both at the kitchen table opening laptops. Holden still couldn't believe this was happening. He kept glancing at Mel, verifying she was in his house, sitting next to him, looking fucking amazing.

She'd tucked her curls up in a messy bun that begged him to get his fingers caught in it. She'd kicked off her shoes and sat with one leg curled under her. She had the cutest fucking reading glasses on. Hot pink. The entire package gave off the sexy librarian look, especially with her cable-knit sweater over her leggings.

This was a side of Melanie that Holden had known existed but hadn't seen so starkly before. After all, the eleven days they'd spent together had been in vacation mode. Melanie hadn't been the studious professor that week.

Holden had met her the first night of the cruise in one of the ship's night clubs. She'd been wearing a mouthwateringly sexy dress and heels. Her hair and makeup had been intentional and perfect. They'd gotten to know each other over drinks and on the dance floor without mentioning a word about where they were from or what they did for a living.

In fact, they'd kept those details to themselves for several days. She'd been traveling with her best friend, Callie. Holden

had been with Grant and several other guys from his SEAL days. He would later realize the reason for all the secrecy had been mostly because Callie hadn't wanted to disclose she worked for the CIA.

That cat got out of the bag fast when the Chinese bombed the Panama Canal and tried to take over the cruise ship. After all, Mel wasn't the only one of them who spoke Mandarin. It was Callie's specialty too.

This woman sitting across from Holden this morning was the same woman and yet different. He could still see all of the passion and life in her. She was sexier than ever. His cock had been hard since he'd first recognized her in his bed.

But she had this other fascinating facet about her as she bent over the computer, set her chin on her palm, and rested her teeth on one of her nails. She was intent. Studious. Smoking hot.

Why the fuck had someone broken into her house and killed her colleague? He intended to find out. He needed to reach out to Ajax and Ryker, find out what they knew, and make sure they understood he wouldn't be taking another job until this was resolved.

Holden tried to focus on checking his emails, but his gaze kept wandering toward Mel. She was right. It was going to be awkward and difficult to keep his hands to himself, especially because he doubted she could do it either. And since she'd been the one to make it abundantly clear she didn't want to have sex with him, he was the one who needed to stop her when she started to cave.

When she reached for her computer bag and pulled out a jump drive, he focused on her fingers, her perfectly trimmed nails, the three rings she wore on that hand. The jewelry

looked at home on her fingers as if those were three pieces she absently wore every day.

She fiddled with getting the jump drive into the side of her laptop before grabbing her mouse and returning her attention to the screen. A moment later, she frowned. She pushed the mouse around, clicking on several things before she stopped. “What the hell?” She sat back, lifted her hands behind her head, and stretched out, frowning.

“What’s wrong, babe?” He couldn’t stop himself from using that term of endearment. It kept slipping out.

“Something’s wrong with this jump drive. It’s supposed to have links on it for my research. I don’t know what the hell I’m looking at.”

“May I look?” he asked, reaching for the laptop while waiting for her to give him permission to turn it around.

She sighed. “Sure.”

Holden spun the laptop to face him and blinked. The screen was filled with encrypted data. He stiffened as he watched it load. If it was a bug, he hoped she had malware protection, but judging by the amount of data loading, whatever firewalls she had probably weren’t going to combat this mess.

He grabbed the edges of the computer and pulled it closer. “Where did you get this jump drive?”

“Professor Yang gave it to me. It’s supposed to be the links for my research.”

Holden flinched, eyes going wide. “When?” He snagged his phone from the table and tapped the screen to call Grant.

“Two days ago when I met with him. Holden? What’s wrong?”

Holden put the phone on speaker as Grant answered. “You gonna call every hour? I don’t know more than I did earlier this morning,” Grant said without a greeting.

“We have a problem,” Holden informed him.

“What?” Grant’s voice was schooled now.

“I just figured out why Melanie’s townhouse was flipped upside down.”

“Shit.”

“Yes. Shit. Professor Yang gave her an encrypted jump drive.”

Melanie jumped in her seat. “Surely it’s just got a bug or something.”

“Shit,” Grant repeated. “Can you break into it?”

“I probably could, but I’m not sure it’s wise. I’m not a computer genius. It would be better if Keebler looked at it.”

“I agree.”

“I’ll call him now.” Holden hung up without another word and tapped the screen to make his next call.

Before he was able to hit send, Melanie stood and rounded the table to his side. “What’s going on? You can’t think Professor Yang gave me something that would put me in danger. I don’t believe that for a moment.”

Holden wrapped an arm around her hips and pulled her into his side. Fuck keeping his distance. He needed her flat against him.



She let him, but she was stiff and her brow was furrowed. “Professor Yang was a sweet older man. He spent the afternoon with me helping me organize my research. He was an expert in what I’m studying. He did not endanger my life. There’s no way,” she defended.

“Maybe it was an accident. It’s possible he got the jump drive mixed up with another when he gave it to you. Or, perhaps he never knew he was carrying this one. There are a lot of possibilities, Mel. The important thing is that you have something someone wants, and now we know what it is.”

She was trembling. “Jesus. I’m a damn professor. I’m not some kind of spy or CIA or FBI agent. These kinds of things don’t happen in my world.”

Holden slid his hand up her back as he lifted her palm to his mouth and pressed a kiss against it. “Hopefully your involvement was coincidental and random. An accident. Let me call Keebler and get the ball rolling.”

“Who’s Keebler?”

“Larson Aldrich. Computer genius. I was with him in Ethiopia. Keebler’s his nickname.”

“He eat a lot of cookies?” she muttered with no humor.

“That’s exactly where the nickname came from. Yes.”

“Oh. I was kidding.”

Holden tapped the screen on his phone and waited. Keebler picked up on the first ring. “Aldrich here. Holden?”

“Yep. It’s me.”

“I heard you were getting back today. Can’t you take one day off before you start working again?” His voice was light. He wasn’t informed on the current situation.

“You stateside, Larson?” Holden asked with no humor.

“Yes. Virginia. Why?”

“Perfect. Gonna need to bring you in on a situation. How soon can you get to my place?”

“In the mountains?”

“That’s the only home I own.”

“Three hours if I leave now. I was on my way back to Indiana today. Headed to the airport now. I’ll keep my rental and head your direction instead. You talked to Ajax or Ryker about this?”

“Calling them next.”

“You want me to wait for confirmation on the change in plans?” Larson asked.

“No. We won’t need confirmation. Ajax and Ryker will understand. They’re aware of what’s happening. I’ll call them with an update on this latest development.”

“Okay. See you in about three then.” Larson ended the call.

Holden kept his arm firmly around Melanie, well aware she was in a panic, but he needed to place another call before he could give her his undivided attention.

He dialed the office next.

“Hey, Holden,” Serena answered in her usual friendly voice. “Let me get Ajax for you.”

Holden was glad Ajax had met and married Serena. She was good for him. Amazing, really. And the fact that she worked for the Holt Agency was a tremendous help to all of them.

Ajax spoke next. “I figured I’d be hearing from you sooner than later. Guess you made it back, caught up on all the messages you were ignoring, and found your woman in your home.”

Holden winced. “Yeah. You’re on speaker, and Melanie is with me.”

“Shit. Sorry, Melanie. That was unprofessional and uncalled for.”

Holden was afraid to look at Melanie for fear she’d shoot daggers at him from her eyes.

Ajax continued speaking, digging a deeper hole. “I didn’t mean to imply anything by that. I know the two of you aren’t together. I just—”

Holden cut him off. “You can stop talking now.”

“Sorry. How are you, Melanie? I know you’re confused and probably nervous.”

Melanie cleared her throat. “Fine.”

“Listen,” Holden said, taking control of this conversation. “There’s been a development. Apparently Professor Yang... You know who that is, right?” Holden assumed Ajax had been kept completely in the loop from Grant.

“Yes. I’m informed. I’ve spoken to Grant. I know it’s been released that he was murdered.”

“Good. He gave Mel a jump drive when she met with him. It supposedly contained links for the research Mel is doing. She just popped it into the computer to find instead it’s filled with encrypted data.”

“Fuck. Did you leave it in the computer?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll call Keebler. See if I can catch him before he gets on a plane. He’s in Virginia.”

“Already talked to him. Called him before you. He’s on his way here.”

“Oh, good. I’ll talk to Ryker and we’ll get back to you soon. I’m also going to send Jerad and Robert back in your direction.”

“Thanks.” Holden hung up.

He immediately turned his entire body toward Melanie, shifting his legs so she stood between them. He kept his hands on her hips and met her gaze. She was pale. “Sorry, babe. I know this is way out of your league.”

“You think?” Her voice was shrill. “I’m a fucking *professor*.”

“I know.” He rubbed her hips. He felt horrible for her. She was a regular citizen who somehow had gotten dragged into what looked like might be an international event. Though he wouldn’t tell her that right now.

“Why would Professor Yang give me some classified flash drive? Why would he even have it? He’s also a professor. He’s not some government agent, Holden. Or wasn’t. He wasn’t.”

“Wasn’t” was the operative word. The fact that the guy had been murdered didn’t look good for anyone. Not for him or for Melanie. Someone apparently knew she had the USB and they wanted it. When they couldn’t find it, they went after the professor. Why?

“I can’t answer your questions, babe. I’m sorry. I know you’re freaking out.”

“Ya think?” She was shaking.

Holden pulled her closer and turned her sideways to settle her on his thigh before her legs could give out. She was stiff though, and she fidgeted her hands in front of her. “You think I’m in danger,” she murmured.

“Yes. I know it’s not your fault, but someone wants this drive. They might be willing to kill for it.”

“Can they find me here?”

“No, Mel. Not a chance. Grant was careful when he had Jerad and Robert bring you up here. That’s why those two were sent with you. They’re good. They would have made sure no one followed them.”

“What if they find me?” she asked in a small voice.

“They won’t. We don’t even know who we’re dealing with yet. But we’ll find out and put a stop to it,” he reassured her. “Right now, I need you to tell me every detail about your lunch with Yang.”

“Why? That would be boring as fuck to you. We discussed my research. How much do you want to know about China’s influence on American consumerism?”

“Okay, you can skip that part. Did anything else happen? Did he seem nervous or upset? Did he talk about anyone else?”

Mel started to shake her head and then hesitated. “He was meeting with another man before I arrived. They were just finishing up.”

“Did you catch his name?”

“No. Professor Yang was about to introduce us, but another guy was walking by and he tripped and stumbled and

nearly knocked our table over. After he apologized and disappeared, the man Professor Yang met with before me left.”

Holden stared at her. “Wait. Back up. So, there were three men?”

Melanie frowned. “I guess. I mean Professor Yang, the other guy sitting at the table, and the man who tripped. I’m not sure how any of that is interesting.”

“Could you identify the guy who tripped if you saw him again?”

Melanie sighed. “I doubt it. He was wearing a ball cap. Why the hell would anyone care?”

“Because he planted that jump drive in the professor’s bag, Mel,” he told her bluntly.

Melanie gasped before she slid off Holden’s lap and stood on her own in front of him. “That’s a stretch.”

“Not at all. It’s a fact. You said yourself Professor Yang would never hurt anyone. He didn’t mean to. Whoever he was meeting with should have left with that jump drive, not Yang.”

Mel rubbed her temples. “Yeah, okay. That might have happened. Yang did reach into his case to retrieve the drive he gave me. It’s a generic black USB. If there were two of them in his bag, he wouldn’t have known. He just handed me the wrong one.”

“Exactly.” Holden was relieved Mel was catching on.

Mel stared at him. “Then what happened, smartie pants?”

He gave her a playful glare. “Then the other man left, realized he didn’t have what he came for, determined Yang had it instead, went to the man’s hotel to get it, found out you had it, and killed him because he knew too much.”

Mel looked like she might faint. “Professor Yang told him I had it, so his next stop was to ransack my apartment looking for it.”

“You should get a job with the Holt Agency,” Holden praised.

“Hardly.” She smirked. “Now what?”

“Now we hope the café had video surveillance and we can get the footage.”

“What about the hotel?”

“Grant’s already working on that angle.”

“Of course he is,” Mel muttered.

She turned away from Holden and started pacing. After a few seconds, she spun his direction and started rambling. “You know why I became a professor, Holden?”

He shook his head. She needed to speak. Get shit off her chest. He needed to listen.

Her voice was elevated. She was in a panic. Understandably. “Callie has thicker skin than me. When we met in grad school and she told me she wanted to work for the CIA, I thought she was crazy. No way. Never. I’m not cut out for that kind of thing. I like my quaint townhome, my university office, students coming and going who’re interested in international studies or just Mandarin.”

She sucked in a deep breath and continued, talking faster. “I’m not cut out to work for the government. That’s the kind of thing Callie wanted, but not me. Do you have any idea how fucking nervous I was that day I found out you fucking worked for the Holt Agency and were a former SEAL?” Her pitch was higher.

Holden wanted to wrap her in his arms and tell her how sorry he was. He hadn't caused any of this. It was a coincidence. It had nothing to do with her knowing him or Callie or Grant. She'd simply been a pawn in a game none of them understood yet.

Melanie was a civilian. A regular person. Someone who didn't invite or want this kind of drama.

"This is why I didn't want you to contact me after we parted ways." She pointed at the floor as if it specifically represented everything she hated. "I don't like this kind of drama. I can't be with someone who thrives on it either. It's too much for me. I'd worry all the time if you were coming back to me or if I'd get a fucking call in the night that you were dead somewhere on the other side of the world. Even after we split up I had fucking nightmares where your boss called me to tell me they wouldn't be able to retrieve your body."

Holden held his breath. He hadn't known it was this bad, but he understood. Hell, this was why he hadn't pursued her and had readily agreed to them going their separate ways. He didn't interrupt her. What could he say anyway? She was right.

"I don't know how Callie does it. She knows stuff I would never want to know. Government secrets and shit. So does Grant. His life is in danger every time he leaves the house. She doesn't know if he will come back. How does she do that?" Melanie lifted both hands into her messy bun in exasperation.

"Mel..."

She shook her head. "I know I'm acting like a lunatic. Too fucking bad. How did this happen to me? I was just living my life. I've had no contact with crazy. I avoid it like the plague. And it fucking falls into my lap out of nowhere?"



Holden rose and shuffled toward her, grateful she didn't retreat. In fact, her shoulders relaxed in defeat as he got closer, and she let him pull her into his arms. All he could do was hug her tight, kiss the top of her head, and tell her he was sorry.

## CHAPTER 8



Melanie was curled up in the corner of the couch when Larson arrived. She couldn't fathom a man going by the nickname of Keebler, so she refused to think of him by that name.

She was biting her nail. She felt drained. It was impossible to focus. This entire situation was unimaginable.

She also felt idiotic for the rant she'd had in front of Holden. On top of that, she'd been marginally polite to Larson, shaking his hand but not standing when he'd introduced himself.

She sat with her chin on her knees, watching the men as they leaned over what used to be an ordinary laptop. *Her* ordinary laptop. She didn't focus on their words. Most of them made no sense to her anyway.

The world felt like it was completely upside down. How was this happening to her? She was trapped in a nightmare. She kept replaying her meeting with Professor Yang over in her head, but nothing made sense. He'd been an ordinary man with knowledge about a subject she loved. It was impossible to imagine a world in which he had actually been involved in some nefarious activity.

Mel wished she could call her department head, but Holden insisted that was out of the question. He'd done more

than turn her phone off. He'd gone back and disabled it just to be absolutely sure no one could use any kind of device to track her.

After he'd done that, he'd spent about a half an hour scouring her car to make sure it wasn't bugged or had any tracking devices on it. Jerad had joined him when he was almost done, and he'd repeated all the same steps. At some point, Mel had gone back inside and curled up on the couch.

Her head hurt. Her *brain* hurt.

Now, Jerad and Robert were there. Not inside. Outside. Pacing. Their presence made her even more nervous.

When she glanced toward the kitchen table, she wondered if her laptop was about to be confiscated and taken into evidence by the government or some shit. Madness.

Finally, they were done. Both men stood. They shut the laptop and left it on the table. Larson put the flash drive in a special case he had with him. Probably kept the damn thing in the trunk of his car in case he ever needed to travel with state secrets.

*Jesus.*

"I'm sorry about all this," Larson said as he hitched his backpack up on his shoulder. "I know you didn't sign up for this shitshow."

She nodded. "Thank you." What else was there to say.

"We'll do everything we can to make sure you're safe." Larson glanced at Holden. "I'll be in touch."

Melanie stared at the door as Larson left and Holden shut and locked it, leaving just the two of them alone once again.

Well, sort of alone. She could probably see Jerad and Robert out the window if she watched for the two sentries on guard.

Or perhaps the two of them were too stealthy for that and she wouldn't see them at all.

"You haven't eaten all day," Holden commented as he came to her side. "I'm going to fix you something."

"I ate breakfast." She still wasn't sure she was going to keep *that* meal down. There was no way she could have eaten lunch when the rest of the men made sandwiches. She'd had bile in her throat at the time.

"That was a long time ago. It's almost five." He reached for her hand that was wrapped around her knees and covered it with his. His voice was softer when he spoke again. "I'm sorry, Mel."

"I know. It's not your fault, of course. I'm just shocked."

"Understandable. How about we watch a movie? Something to distract you. A comedy."

She shook her head. "I wouldn't be able to focus." She glanced at the table. "Is my laptop okay?"

"Yes. The USB didn't cause any damage. It didn't have a virus. It has information though."

"What information?" She didn't know why she asked. She didn't want the answer.

"No idea. It was too encrypted for Keebler to figure out quickly."

"What's he going to do?"

"He's headed back to Indiana to Holt headquarters. Ajax and Ryker can help decide the next course of action. Grant is

meeting with your department head and everyone else who knew Professor Yang. He's also working on getting the video surveillance from the café and the hotel."

Mel sighed. "I wonder if they think I had anything to do with this."

"They don't, babe. No one does. You were a victim."

"Now what?"

"Now we wait. Several people from my agency are working on it. They will solve this, Mel. I promise. You will get your life back."

She tipped her head against the back of the sofa.

"I know this isn't a high priority, but how important was the data you don't have because you had the wrong jump drive?"

She shrugged. "I'll find it all on my own. We discussed it out loud. His suggestions would have saved me some time, but they weren't key to my research."

"That's good."

There was no way she could get any work done tonight. "Maybe we should watch a movie. I'm useless anyway."

"Good plan." He grabbed her hand, flipped it palm up, and set his cell phone in it. "Call Callie. I'm sure she's pacing. I'll fix you something to eat."

She had to hand it to him. Holden was thoughtful and kind and generous and so many other things. As he walked toward the kitchen area, she stared at his ass. Sexy too. And he could fill out a pair of jeans like no one. And his shoulders...

She jerked her gaze toward the phone. *Stop staring at the man.* No matter how nice he was or how much she wished she could have him, the facts remained. She was about two seconds from losing it after just one day of crisis. She couldn't handle hundreds of days like today. And this was Holden's life.

Her conversation with Callie was brief. She recapped what Callie mostly already knew from Grant, insisted she was fine, and ended the call claiming exhaustion.

"How's Callie?" Holden asked as he returned to sit next to her, holding out a plate.

Damn, the man knew how to cook for someone under duress too. Tomato soup and grilled cheese. "Shit." She took it from him. Her stomach growled. It looked and smelled divine. "You fucking cook too?"

"Too? In addition to what?" he teased.

She spun herself around a bit, crossed her legs in front of her, and set the plate in her lap. "Solving world crises, harboring women on the run, hacking computers, filling out a pair of jeans. Everything."

He chuckled and twisted around to look at his ass. "You like my jeans?"

She rolled her eyes. "I should have left that off."

He sat back and extended his arm behind her on the back of the sofa.

She dipped the corner of the grilled cheese into the soup, took a bite, and groaned. "Did you make this soup from scratch?" She hadn't noticed canned tomato soup in the cabinet.

He shrugged. “Sort of. I mean I didn’t chop up tomatoes or anything, but it’s my grandma’s recipe.”

She realized she was actually ravenous as she continued eating.

“You didn’t answer my question. Is Callie okay?”

She nodded and swallowed her bite. “She was pacing. I could hear her. She knows this isn’t my thing. If you’ll recall, while the three of you were running around that cruise ship killing bad guys and saving the day, I was hiding behind the suitcases in the closet of my stateroom.”

He didn’t laugh. His brow was furrowed. “That’s exactly what you were supposed to do, Mel. And I was fucking frantic the entire time worrying about your ability to follow that direction.”

“I’m not stupid. If Callie tells me something is serious, I believe her. I would never doubt her for an instant.”

“What about me?” He was grinning now. “Do you trust me?”

“In theory. But I’ve known her for years. And at the time, I’d known you for only a few days. Most of that time we’d been fucking. I’d had no way to judge your level of exaggeration. But Callie I knew. She would never exaggerate a dangerous situation. She told me to fucking hide and not make a sound, so I did.”

He slid his hand to her hair and played with a strand. “I know that day was hard for you.”

She nodded. “Today comes in a close second.”

“Not first?”

“Nope. You didn’t make me spend the day hiding in the back of a closet where I could hear gunshots and shouting inside the house while people hunted me down to kill me. So no. Today was second.”

He twisted around to face her more fully. “No one is going to get into my house, Mel. I promise. It’s like a fortress.”

She finished her meal, and he took the plate and set it on the coffee table. When she met his gaze again, she stated the obvious. “I guess you’d have to keep your house as safe as a fortress if you spend all of your life hunting down bad guys and bringing them to justice. You must be constantly looking over your shoulder, wondering if anyone is after you for retribution.”

He winced. “I know it must seem like that, but it’s not really that bad, Mel. Yes, there have been people I pissed off, but most of the time they have no idea who was after them. Sometimes the job I’m on isn’t nearly as dangerous.”

She drew in a breath. “You were in Europe for four months until last night. I assume you weren’t on vacation visiting the Eiffel Tower.”

“Actually, this was a super lowkey job. I was guarding a rock star from her own ex-boyfriend. He was caught, and he’s in custody now. He never even knew who I was.”

“A rock star? Jesus.”

“Yeah. The people who hire the Holt Agency aren’t always involved in government espionage and the like. If people have enough money, they can hire us to do damn near anything. Hell, do you know Tavis Neade?”

“He was on your SEAL team, right? On that same assignment in Ethiopia?”



“Yes. That’s him. He met his wife Colette because her father hired him to be her bodyguard.”

Mel smiled. “And now they’re married with a baby.”

“Yes.”

After a few seconds of silence, Holden gently pulled her into his embrace. “I know I’ve said this several times, but I really am sorry this is happening to you. I’m also glad I’m here. I’d be freaking the fuck out if you were here hiding in my house and I was still in Europe guarding a rock star.”

She let him have her weight and inhaled slowly. He smelled good. He was too fucking kind to be angry with him. Other than teasing her earlier this morning, he hadn’t made a single sexual advance. Not that he’d had a lot of opportunity, but it was endearing.

On impulse, she turned in his embrace, wrapped her arms around his neck, and set her forehead against his. “It feels good to be in your arms.”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his hands up and down her back. “Just so you know, I never took our relationship flippantly. You were important to me. I let you go because you were right. We had separate lives. There was no way I could be the man you deserved. I still can’t. But God, I’ve missed you. It felt like we were together a lot longer than eleven days.”

She smiled. “When you hardly separate from someone in those eleven days and spend most of it naked and fuck more times than you can count, it sort of makes those eleven days more like months.”

“True.” His hands felt so fucking good roaming up and down her back.

“I feel like I’m out of my body,” she admitted. “I’d love nothing more than to escape reality by going to your bedroom and having you ravage me the way you did two years ago. I’ve missed that.”

“But...”

She sighed. “But then what? What happens when this is over and you get sent to some third-world country and I go back to Georgetown? Nothing has changed. We’re still in the same positions as we were then. If anything, today has reinforced what I already knew. I can’t handle this sort of life.”

“I get that.” His hand slid up into her hair, making her shiver. “It hasn’t been easy on me either, Melanie. Those were the best eleven days of my life.”

She held his gaze, wondering if he had any idea how ruined she’d been and still was. How fucking hard it was to resist him right now even knowing he had the power to destroy her.

She leaned back a few inches and played with the collar of his shirt, staring at it absently. “Surely you’ve had other girlfriends. Why haven’t you settled down?” In a way it would be easier for her if he did. It would be more final. But she’d also always worried one day Callie would call and tell her exactly that, and Mel figured she would break down in tears and sit in the corner of her townhouse catatonic for days.

“Mel...”

She pursed her lips and didn’t look at him.

He lifted one hand to her chin and nudged her face back. “This may sound unbelievable, but I haven’t been with another woman since you.”

Her eyes widened. Surely he was kidding. “Come on.”

His brows lifted. “I’m serious. If you tell anyone, I’ll deny it though. The guys may have nicknamed me Loki after the god of mischief, but I lost my mischievousness after eleven days with you.”

“I forgot about that nickname.” No one had called him that today.

He shrugged. “It’s not really as applicable anymore.”

“But Larson still eats fudge stripes?” she teased.

“Every day,” he admitted.

She laughed before taking a long breath and sobering. “I haven’t been on a single date since you. And if you tell Callie, I will also deny it. She thinks I date. I lie to her to keep her off my back.”

His breath hitched. His body stiffened. “Aren’t we a pair.”

“Apparently.”

“Were you thinking about me while you were masturbating in my bed last night?” His voice was hoarse. Low. Gravelly. Filled with sex.

“Yes,” she admitted on a whisper. “If I had known I was in your bed—in your *spot* on your *side* of the bed—I probably would have... Hell, I don’t know what I would have done different. I guess I pretended I was in your bed anyway.”

“Now what do we do?” he asked reverently.

He was sincere. They were in the same boat. They’d just admitted a lot. Too much probably. She chewed on her bottom lip. “Shit.”

He drew in a long breath. “That kind of sums it up. Let’s watch a movie.” He carefully extricated himself from her,

rose, and padded across the room.

She hated him not touching her. After being back with him less than one day, she wanted to climb into his lap and stay there.

They'd been inseparable during their weird eleven-day vacation. She and Grant had even swapped rooms early in the cruise so that Grant could be with Callie and Mel could be with Holden.

Best sex of her life.

She shook the memory away. She was torturing herself. She had to take her gaze off him or she might start drooling. She felt chilly since he'd moved, and she rubbed her arms and hugged herself.

"You cold?"

She lifted her face as he returned to her side. He snagged a throw blanket from the back of the couch, but instead of tucking it around her like she'd expected, he lifted her from the corner of the sectional, scooted her over a foot, and took her spot.

"Hey..."

He smirked as he set his feet on the coffee table, got comfortable, and hauled her into his side. With his arm around her neck, he pulled the throw over the two of them and turned on the TV.

"Are you saying not only was I using your side of the bed last night, but this is your spot on the couch?"

He laughed. "Babe, I was out of my head last night. You may have any spot you want in my bed."

She twisted to look at him. “I should really sleep in a guest room, Holden.”

He squeezed her tighter. “You’re not sleeping in a guest room, babe. Forget it.” He pointed at the television. “Comedy or horror?”

She shuddered. “My life is currently horror. Let’s go with comedy.”

It was early enough that the sun was still up as the movie started, and though it might have been humorous, it was hard for Mel to focus on it. All of her attention was centered on the fingers dangling over her shoulder that absently grazed her arm, the feel of his heartbeat against her, the way he kept nuzzling the top of her head...

If anyone walked into the house right now, they would assume the two of them were a married couple who’d been together a while. Instead, they’d known each other eleven days over two years ago. It was surreal. It felt good.

It scared the fuck out of her.

## CHAPTER 9



“Do you have men stationed outside all night, Holden?” Mel asked him after she rinsed the toothpaste out of her mouth later that night. She was standing next to him in his bathroom. There were two sinks. Somehow she’d ended up with her toiletries scattered around the left side of the vanity.

Holden finished brushing, rinsed, and snagged the hand towel. After drying his mouth, he reached out and wiped the corner of hers. “You missed a spot. And yes. Jerad and Robert took the day. Two other men are out there now.”

“Four men? That seems excessive. You said this house is a fortress. You have an alarm on every door and window. You’re confident no one knows where I am. And I’d bet money that strange safe beside your bed has a gun in it.”

He pulled her into his arms and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Two guns. Yes. Do you know how to use a gun?”

She shook her head.

“Then don’t touch them.”

“I wouldn’t think of it.” She shuddered though. If he ended up needing one of those guns in the night, she’d die on the spot.

“We’re safe,” he promised her. “If I didn’t think we were safe, I’d have shoes on, and jeans.”

He was wearing flannel sleep pants and nothing else. She was pretty sure he didn’t even have on underwear. Luckily, he’d changed while she’d used the bathroom and vice versa.

Mel hadn’t brought anything reasonable to sleep in. She had planned to be here alone. She usually slept naked. She hadn’t exactly packed lingerie—which would be a horrible idea tonight anyway. Nor had she packed pajamas at all.

“I see you snagged my T-shirt to sleep in,” he commented, his hands trailing leisurely up and down her back. “The one I just took off.”

She shrugged, her cheeks heating. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. But what do you usually sleep in?”

She bit her bottom lip, not answering him.

He groaned. “I guess you were wearing your sleep attire when I walked in last night, huh?”

“Pretty much.”

“I always figured you were probably a bit too much of a prude in your real life to sleep in the nude,” he teased.

“I was.”

His eyes widened slowly. “Until when?”

“Until the cruise.”

“Fuck. Melanie...” His hands slid to her ass and he jerked her so close she could feel his cock against her stomach. He growled and buried his face in her neck before easing back about a millimeter. “I have one more question, and then we’re going to bed.”

She drew in a breath. Her heart was racing. She didn't say a word.

“You told me on the cruise that you'd waxed for the first time that week. Do you still keep your pussy bare and smooth?”

Her breath hitched. Wetness leaked out of her. She wanted to tell him to see for himself. She wanted his mouth on her with a desperation she'd never felt. She wanted him inside her, and when she thought about what it might feel like, she shuddered. It would be tight after her celibacy. So tight she'd probably orgasm as soon as he entered her.

He was staring at her, waiting for an answer.

Should she tell him to check for himself? Show him? Tell him it was none of his business? Or maybe beg him to rub his stubble against her tender, swollen skin?

There were a million ways to answer him. She ended up simply replying, “Yes.”

He groaned again, spun her around, and angled her toward the bedroom. “Pick a side.”

She hurried to put some distance between them. “I'm not sleeping on the side with the weapons.”

“Good point. You take the middle.”

She rounded to the other side. “This is a bad idea.”

“It's a horrible idea. Get in.” He turned off the lights, but there was enough illumination coming from the night light in the bathroom for her to see him as they stood on opposite sides of the bed staring at each other. It was a standoff. She was confident she wasn't the only one of them confused and feeling uneasy.



“If I climb into this bed with you, I’ll end up having sex with you.”

He shook his head. “No, you won’t.” He sounded certain.

She dropped her shoulders. “Seriously.” Sarcasm oozed from her.

“Get in, Mel,” he ordered again as he climbed into his side.

She felt petulant as she slid beneath the covers opposite him as far away as possible.

As soon as she was sort of situated on her back with the covers tucked around her, Holden reached across the bed, wrapped his arms around her, and hauled her clear over past the center until she was practically on his side. He arranged her in his embrace, spooning her.

“Holden,” she argued, breathing heavily as she tried to wiggle free of his grip. His forearm was grazing her nipples. His other arm was draped across her stomach. The T-shirt she was wearing had ridden up her body in the scuffle, exposing her panty-clad butt, which was now pressed against his crotch.

“Stay still,” he ordered.

She gasped and twisted her head around. “Holden, you’re manhandling me.”

Ignoring her statement, he sighed. “Damn, I’m going to miss this bed. I really like this mattress.”

She humphed. “What the hell are you talking about?” She reached over his arms to try to tug the T-shirt under her ass, unsuccessfully.

“If you don’t stop squirming around, rubbing against my cock to get away from me, I’m going to swap this king-sized bed for a twin tomorrow.”

She groaned dramatically. “That’s absurd. Let me go.”

He held her tighter. “I can honor your wish to not have sex, babe, but there’s no way I’m sleeping next to you without touching you. Do you recall me ever doing that before?”

No, she did not. He’d been a snuggler. A characteristic she’d loved about him.

Holden loosened his grip just enough to slide his hands to hers and thread their fingers together, his palms on the backs of her hands. He drew one up between her breasts and held the other lower against her stomach near her pussy.

“Please,” he whispered. “Let me have this with you.”

It felt so good. Too good. Her resolve was evaporating rapidly. She could easily turn over and press her lips to his. She could push him to his back, climb over him, and straddle him, rocking her pussy over his length to pleasure herself.

Speaking of pleasure, this man she’d been half in love with for over two years was putting a cramp in her style. She hadn’t masturbated since this time last night. She had a habit of crawling into bed at night and indulging her fantasies. It was the only sex she ever got, so she deserved it.

Holden Billings, the man she used as fodder for her self-pleasure, was wrapped around her body, breathing against her neck, holding her tight.

“Holden...” she whispered, losing the energy to fight him. She loved lying in his arms. It had been their position of choice after a few rounds of sex on that cruise ship. This felt natural, like old times. Except they’d skipped the sex part, and had that really been a good idea?

“Mmm,” he breathed into her ear.

“We can’t do this,” she whispered, although there was no force behind her words.

“Sleep?” he teased softly.

“There’s no way in hell I’m going to fall asleep with you wrapped all around me and me so fucking horny I’m about to self-combust. Your presence is putting a wrench in my usual nighttime routine too.”

His breath hitched. “Pardon?”

She mentally berated herself for saying that out loud. Why the fuck had she done so?

He started chuckling. “Are you talking about that pink vibrator?” Then he groaned. “You are. Jesus. You’re killing me. Do you use that every night?” His voice was incredulous.

She jerked her head around to face him, forcing him to loosen his grip on her. “No. Only on the nights when I can’t manage to get off with just my fingers in a reasonable amount of time. And don’t you fucking think of judging me. I would never believe in a million years that you don’t jerk off every day. Why shouldn’t I get to have sex with myself too?”

He swallowed, his expression sobering. “You’re right.” He still had his arms around her, their fingers still threaded together. He gave hers a squeeze.

“About which part?”

“All of it.” He tugged her around, manhandling her back into the position he wanted her in—the spooned position that put her ass against his hard cock and his arms too close to her breasts and her pussy.

“Holden... Please let me go sleep in a guest room.”

“You planning to take the pink vibrator?”

“Grrr...” *Yes*. But did they have to talk about it? Or she could leave that one. Let him think it was the only one she had. She had others.

“No.”

“That’s it? Just *no*. End of discussion? The caveman has spoken?” The problem was his caveman routine was only making her hornier.

Holden lifted her lower hand up to meet the one between her breasts and joined them together so he was holding both hands in one of his. Not hard. His hand was much larger.

The effect was to send her arousal through the ceiling though. She held her breath, wondering what the fuck he was plotting.

She didn’t have to wonder long. His top leg nudged her top leg forward, bending it so he could situate his thigh against her pussy. A second later, his free hand slid down the front of her panties, finding her wet folds in a heartbeat.

She moaned so loud it echoed in the room. “Holden...” There was no umph behind her lame protest. She wanted him to touch her. She wanted him to fuck the sense out of her. She struggled, trying to free herself but not succeeding.

“Shh. Let me take the edge off so you can sleep.” He slid a finger into her pussy and groaned. “Fuck me. Mel. You’re so tight.”

She didn’t respond. For one thing, she couldn’t form words. For another thing she’d already told him she hadn’t slept with anyone since him. Yes, she would be tight.

He added a finger, making her arch, and then he used her wetness to circle her clit. His lips came to her ear again. “The waxing is so fucking sexy. I’m glad you kept it up.”

She shuddered. She was going to come any second. He knew how to play her. He knew she loved to be restrained. He knew she loved his lips on her ear whispering sexy things that drove her crazy. He knew exactly how to strum her clit to drive her wild.

“Oh, God.” She came hard, pulsing against his palm and his fingers. Embarrassingly fast.

“That’s it, babe. Milk my fingers.” He slid them back into her as her orgasm continued. “Just like that. So fucking hot.”

When the pulses subsided, she was breathing heavily. The orgasm felt amazing, but she wasn’t fully sated. She wanted that erection at the small of her back inside her. She said nothing though. It was one thing to let him touch her intimately and get her off. It was another thing entirely to let him into her body with his cock.

Wasn’t it? Was she kidding herself? Probably.

He wouldn’t release her when she squirmed. “Are you at least going to let me return the favor?”

He shook his head against her neck. “No. Sleep, Mel.” He eased his hand out of her panties, sucked her arousal from his fingers as if it were the most rational thing in the world to do, and grabbed her hand in his again, resuming the position he loved.

Her heart was racing. Her pussy was still swollen and needy. Her breasts felt heavy. She was trembling. He couldn’t overlook that.

Finally, she drew in a deep breath. “I’m pretty sure if you look up the definition for sex, we just met enough of the requirements. At this point, it hardly matters if we fuck, Holden.”

“We’re not going there tonight, babe. It’s late. You’re exhausted. *I’m* exhausted. We need a lot more discussion before I take my cock out of my pants,” he informed her.

She sighed. There was no sense arguing with him. At least she’d gotten an amazing orgasm out of the deal.

How much damage was already done? Emotionally, she would not survive losing him again, but that had already been true within moments of waking up last night to find him standing over her. She was foolish to think there was some line, and if they just didn’t cross it, she’d be able to walk away unscathed.

The line had been crossed when the sheet fell down to expose her nudity to him last night. It had been crossed when he’d climbed into his bed with her. It had been crossed so damn many times. She was fighting a losing battle.

They’d spent eleven days together two years ago. Eleven days that had altered her life irrevocably. She’d filed every moment with him in tidy folders in her head and pulled them out every day. *Every fucking day.*

Meanwhile she’d lied to Callie and Grant. She’d told them she was fine. Pretended she didn’t think of Holden. And it would seem he’d thought of her a lot too.

That didn’t mean anything. They were like star-crossed lovers. Doomed from the start. They didn’t have compatible lives. That was why they’d gone their separate ways in the first place.

And now this. Fate or some warped misfortune had tossed them together again. Now what? She reminded herself nothing had changed. Not a single damn thing.

“Mel...” His gentle voice made her flinch in his arms. She’d been so deep in her head, she’d separated herself from her current situation.

“Yeah?” she whispered.

He stroked her hands with his fingers. “You’re thinking so hard. I know it’s a lot. You’re overwhelmed. I’m here. I’ve got you.” He emphasized his words with a tight grip around her. “Whatever you need, it’s yours. Do you want to sleep in another room?”

She blew out a breath. “No.”

“Good.”

She let herself relax against him. She really did need him. That part was true. The rest she was going to have to figure out as they went along.

## CHAPTER 10



“What are you *not* telling me?” Callie asked Mel the next morning.

Mel was pacing Holden’s bedroom upstairs. She’d needed some privacy to talk to her best friend on the phone while Holden held a conference call with several members of his team. More than a few of them were involved in this shitshow. She wondered if they would dedicate the same amount of resources to a random person needing similar assistance. Probably not.

Mel wasn’t a random person. She had history with Holden. History that evidently caused his team to refer to her as “his woman.” That hadn’t slipped by her.

Mel ran a hand through her messy curls as she paced. “Probably a dozen things. I can’t keep my lies straight any longer.”

Callie sighed. “I’m sorry you ever felt you had to lie in the first place.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t see another option. If I’d told you I was hung up on Holden after the cruise, you would have pressured me to get together with him.”



“Duh, might I remind you it was *you* who went behind my back to set up a vacation weekend with Grant for the same exact reason. I was too stubborn to admit I was in love with him and needed to figure out a way to work shit out. And look what happened? We made it work, and now we’re married and life is amazing.”

“It’s different.”

“I knew you would say that,” Callie responded. “But it’s not.”

“It is,” Mel insisted. “I’m not like you. I don’t thrive on danger and chaos. I like order in my life. I like being a boring professor.”

“How’s that working for you this week?” Callie tossed back. “Look, that was callous. I’m sorry, but the point is shit happens to good people. You’re lucky you weren’t home when those fuckers broke into your home. You’re lucky you knew people who could get you out of town and protect you.”

“I know.” Mel kept pacing. Everything Callie said was true.

“At the end of the day, Mel, you don’t want to look back on your life with regrets because you were too stubborn to figure out a way to make things work with the man you love. It’s especially depressing because I’m pretty sure he feels the same way about you.”

Mel wandered to the window and stared blankly out at what should have been a breathtaking view if she were in a better frame of mind. “I don’t know how, Callie. I mean I can’t visualize any scenario in which it works for the two of us. I’ve thought about it a million times. I worked hard to get where I am. I’m not going to quit my job at the university and move to

Indiana to live on a farm and wait for my man to stop by every three months after he saves the day. I can't do it. I'd lose my mind."

"I know. I get that. But there has to be a middle ground. Something the two of you can agree on that fulfills both your needs enough to keep you happy. Maybe you can't stay at Georgetown. Maybe you have to move to a different university where he can be close to his job too."

"Sure. Zimbabwe?" Mel joked. "And then the next month perhaps Afghanistan."

"Well, no. You can't go on assignment with him, but please talk to him. Tell him how you feel. Discuss options. Maybe there's an idea out there neither of you have thought about."

Mel wished that were true, but she couldn't imagine it. She needed to change the subject. "How's my townhouse?"

"It's...a mess. I wish I could say something more cheerful. Grant and a few other guys have been through it with a fine-toothed comb. As far as I know, they haven't found any useful information that might help lead them to whoever trashed your place."

"Does that part really matter? I mean whoever ransacked my townhouse was hired by someone else to do so. It's not as if the ambassador to China did it himself."

"True, but finding the guys who did the job would be helpful. I'm pretty sure we don't even want to know the ways Grant and Holden and the rest of the Holt Agency can manage to extract information from someone."

Mel cringed. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. How could she even for one moment contemplate entering into

a relationship with a man who probably tortured people for information?

“Mel...” Callie murmured, interrupting her thoughts. “Whatever you’re thinking, stop it.”

Mel took a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah. I really need to get started on my research. I feel like I’m behind. I should focus on my work instead of getting more and more consumed with this situation I can’t control.”

“That sounds like a good idea. I think Grant is almost done pawing through your belongings. I’ll hire a team to go in and clean up.”

“Thank you.”

“Please think about what I said. I hate to see you unhappy. Two years is a long time to go without dating because you’re hung up on a guy from a cruise.”

Mel finally managed to chuckle. “It sounds ridiculous when you put it that way.”

“It *is* ridiculous. How about if you get back into his bed and remind yourself how good it was with him?” Callie suggested.

“I don’t need to have sex with him to know how amazing he is in bed. Besides, uh...”

“What?” Callie nearly shouted. “Is there something else you’re not telling me?”

“Well... I kind of am sleeping in his bed. He can’t stand the idea of me being in another room. We’re just not having sex.”

“Wait. You’re sleeping with the man who gave you the best sex of your life, and you’re not touching him?”

“Oh, I touch him. Or rather, he touches me. But he has honored my preference that we not fuck so far. I’m scared that if we have sex, I’ll cave because sex with him is that fucking good. I’ll end up barefoot and pregnant in some prefab home on a farm in Indiana eating bonbons and trying to pretend I know how to cook.”

Callie laughed. “That’s a super far stretch, my friend. Jump the guy’s bones. Think about the repercussions later.”

“That’s fucking odd advice, and you know it.”

Callie laughed again. “Probably, but your vagina is going to shrivel up if you wait much longer.”

“Okay, we’re done. Enough about my lack of sex life. I’ll talk to you again in a few days.”

“Love you, Mel.”

“Love you too, Callie.”

Mel ended the call and stared out the window for real now, forcing herself to enjoy the scenery. It was one of the most beautiful places on earth. And Holden owned it. Maybe they could both quit their jobs, move up here off the grid, and live off the land.

*Ha. I can’t even cook. Shall I start setting squirrel traps?*

“Everything okay?”

Mel spun around at the sound of Holden’s voice behind her. “Shit. You scared me.”

“Sorry. I heard the tail end of your conversation with Callie as I was coming up the stairs, so I assume I’m not interrupting more than your amazing view.”

Mel’s breath hitched. “You heard what?” *Shit.*

He frowned quizzically. “I heard, ‘Love you too, Callie.’ Why? Was there more? Did I miss something juicy?”

Mel stared at him. “You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?”

He held up both hands. “Never. But I’m super curious now. What were you talking about?” He smirked.

She shrugged, trying to play it off. “My townhouse, my job... Stuff like that. Hey, do you torture people for information?”

He stopped walking and stared at her. “That’s a lot to dissect, babe. First of all, you’re a shitty liar. You must have said something much juicier than that or your face wouldn’t be so red. As for your question, yes, I have. I was a SEAL before I was a civilian, Mel. I have done a lot of things in war situations. Do I snag people off the streets of Virginia and torture them? Fuck, no.”

She blew out a breath, marginally relieved.

He continued toward her until two inches separated them. She couldn’t even back up because her ass was against the window sill. When he set his hands on the sill on either side of her hips, she sucked in a breath and leaned back. He had a habit of crowding her, which always made her pulse increase and her breath hitch.

“Are you done with your meeting?” she asked.

“Yes. I’ll tell you about it after you tell me what you and Callie talked about.”

She looked away. “You don’t need to know every detail of conversations between women. Trust me. You’d rather not.”

“You’ve told me everything about how you feel about me. I’m just wondering what you’ve told your best friend. Does

she know you've been lying to her and Grant for over two years?"

Mel crossed her arms, feeling defensive. Or maybe to put pressure on her nipples. "You weren't honest with anyone either," she argued.

"This is true, but I had barely met Grant more than a handful of times when we went on that cruise. You and Callie have a long history. She's a very close friend. I'm glad you have her. Does she know your secrets now?"

Mel inhaled deeply. "Yes."

He lifted a hand and stroked her cheek lightly. "What does she say about our dilemma?"

"Our dilemma? You mean the fact that nothing has changed between us and we need to keep our pants on?"

"Nope. I mean the fact that we have so much sexual tension between us that we won't be able to keep our pants on. What does she say about that?"

"What makes you think I mentioned it?" Mel countered.

"Did you?"

She glared at him. "Yes."

He chuckled. "And?"

"What do you want me to say, Holden?"

"I want to know if your best friend is on my side on this issue," he prompted.

"Your side? There aren't sides here. There are just facts. Have any of them changed in the past two and a half years? No. We've discussed this ad nauseam."

“Stop ignoring my question. Does Callie think you should sleep with me?”

Mel winced. “I told her we were.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.” Holden grabbed her hips and pressed his body against hers. “Does Callie think we should have sex?” he pressured again.

“Yes. Happy?”

“Very.” He kissed her neck and then released her and turned to leave the room.

“What the hell was that?” Mel called out as he stepped into the hallway.

He grabbed the doorframe and looked back toward her. “It was a conversation. I asked questions. You asked questions. I answered some. You answered some. I’m going to make dinner now. How do you feel about chicken marsala?”

Mel stared at him, unable to respond. The man was infuriating, and he knew it. He was goading her. She licked her lips. “I love chicken marsala. Do you need any help?”

He shook his head. “I’ve seen you in the kitchen. I’m wondering how you’ve stayed alive living on your own for so many years. Seems like you should probably leave the cooking to me.”

“Hey. That’s mean.”

He laughed as he left the room. She could hear him chuckling all the way down the stairs.

He was right though. Cooking was not her thing. She could make a pretty good sandwich if she remembered to buy all the ingredients, but mostly she survived on healthy frozen meals and health-conscious restaurants.

He didn't need to point that out though.

It was, however, sexy as hell that the man could cook.



## CHAPTER 11



“I’m gonna take this call upstairs, babe,” Holden said as he leaned over Mel and kissed her forehead.

She was working at the kitchen table this morning. She’d finally been able to ignore the world around her and get her research started, so he didn’t want to disturb her.

She did, however, stare at him with wide eyes as he backed out of the room, and he realized his familiar action had been uncharacteristic of their last few days together. It had felt so natural smoothing his hand on her shoulder and kissing her like that. But it shouldn’t have. They weren’t in that kind of relationship.

They were in the kind of painful relationship where they spent the bulk of each day skirting around each other awkwardly before he held her tight in his arms all night. Awkward was a mild word.

Holden turned around as he answered the call. “Billings here.”

“Hey. This is Ajax. I’ve also got Larson and Grant on the line.”

Holden took the stairs two at a time. “Tell me something good.”

“I’ll start with the bad,” Grant said. “There wasn’t a single trace of whoever flipped Mel’s apartment. Not even a fingerprint.”

Holden sighed. “Not shocking. Even if you found them and arrested them, they probably don’t know anything.”

“That’s usually how these things go, yes,” Ajax added. “They were probably hired by an unknown source. They failed. They’re in the wind.”

Grant continued, “The good news is I have a team in there now cleaning the place up. They’ll have it done in about four hours.”

“How’s that possible? From what I hear, the entire place was trashed and everything breakable was broken.”

Grant chuckled. “If you hire enough people for the right price, you can get anything done.”

“What’s the rush?” Holden sure as fuck had no intention of letting Mel return to her townhouse, for fuck’s sake.

“This is where I come in,” Larson interjected.

“Good. I could use some good news,” Holden responded.

“I hacked into the encrypted information. It’s highly classified sound pulse technology.”

“Are you serious?” Holden ran a hand through his hair. It was a wonder he hadn’t pulled most of it out by now. He didn’t usually get so emotionally invested in a case. He never did. But this assignment wasn’t like any other. It involved the woman he...

Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to cut off that thought. He should not be thinking that way. The *L* word had

never been in his vocabulary, and it needed to remain unuttered.

Ajax spoke next. “That means there’s a good chance someone in the U.S. government was selling information to the Chinese.”

Holden cringed. “There are so many possibilities here. Based on Mel’s account of what happened at the café the other day, I’m feeling like Yang was innocent, had no idea he was carrying the jump drive, and accidentally gave it to Melanie.”

“It’s certainly possible,” Grant agreed. “But I’m not ruling out something nefarious.”

“It’s hard to imagine the kind professor Melanie describes as being willing to endanger her life for no good reason. If he needed to get rid of the USB he could have done any number of things with it. Why give it to Melanie?” Holden asked.

“I agree,” Ajax added.

“What next?” Holden asked.

“I’ve left a message for my contact with the FBI,” Larson responded. “He usually gets back to me pretty quick. If they aren’t already on this case, they need to be. I’ll meet with him to pass off the jump drive.”

“You keeping a copy?” Holden asked.

“Yes, but only until I’m certain the information is in the right hands. We don’t need classified government data in our possession,” Larson stated.

That was their protocol, but this was the first time they’d been faced with anything quite like this.

“Let’s reconvene after I speak to the FBI,” Larson suggested.

“Sounds good.” Holden pocketed his phone and headed back downstairs.

He expected to find Mel hard at work at the table. Instead she was standing by the windows staring out from the kitchen at the mountains.

As if she sensed him approaching, she started talking. “I bet it’s beautiful here when the snow falls.”

“It is.” He set his hands on her shoulders and smoothed them down her biceps. She was wearing a thick sweatshirt and leggings. It was weird seeing her in so much clothing. Their previous time together had been all about bikinis, sexy dancing dresses, and...nudity.

“How often have you actually been in this house?” she asked, sounding distant.

He knew what her underlying question was. How often was he on assignment? “Not as often as I’d like to be,” he admitted.

She was silent for a while. “How did your phone call go? I know you’re trying to protect me, but don’t keep something important from me, please.”

“There’s not much news yet. Grant has a team cleaning your house today. It will be done this afternoon.”

She twisted her head to look at him. “Really? Any chance I could go home?”

“No. But when the coast is clear, it will be ready.”

“As long as I don’t mind paper plates,” she joked. “I think they intentionally broke everything they could in the kitchen.”

“That part was certainly malicious.” Perhaps whoever tossed the place didn’t want to make it easy for her to return.

He didn't usually encounter hired thugs who had any sort of conscience, but in this case he wondered if the men who'd come to flip the house had known the owner would be targeted after they didn't find the jump drive. Seemed a bit out of the ordinary, but from what both Grant and Mel had said, whoever broke in had gone out of their way and wasted precious time creating an enormous cleanup job.

There was another possibility. "It could be they wanted to make it difficult for you to know if anything was missing."

"If they wanted it to look like a break-in to cover their asses, why not take the few things I did own of value?"

"Another valid point. I'm not sure we'll ever know."

She sighed. "Now what?"

"Larson is in contact with the FBI. We'll wait to see what they say. They may or may not have this case on their radar yet. After all, as far as the authorities know, a man was killed in a hotel and a woman's house was ransacked. They might not know the two are connected."

"Ajax hasn't been in contact with them?" Mel's brow was furrowed when she glanced at him again.

"Until Larson cracked the encryption on that drive, we hadn't known who the hell we were dealing with. Could have been mafia for all we knew. Could have been a list of drug lords."

"I guess those weren't on the drive."

Holden shook his head. "No."

"Do I want to know?"

"No."

She nodded and turned back to the scenery. “I would hate your life,” she whispered.

A lump formed in Holden’s throat. She meant that to her core. It was the reason they weren’t together and never could be. She hated his world. Truth be told, as he stood there holding her in his arms, staring out at the amazing view, he kind of hated it too. It was standing between him and a woman he adored.

Loved.

Did he love her? Was that a reasonable feeling after being reunited with her for only a few days? Hell, he’d only been with her for eleven days the first time. What did he know about love?

He knew that lump in his throat wasn’t going away. He knew he wanted to throw her over his shoulder, carry her upstairs, and remove the damn clothes covering every inch of her delectable skin. He knew he wanted to blindfold her, press her thighs open, and suck on her pussy until she screamed.

How well did he fucking know her? He knew she loved being blindfolded. It heightened her other senses and made her orgasms stronger. He knew she liked it when he played with her nipples a bit roughly. He knew the exact pitch that came out of her throat when she reached orgasm. He could hear it ringing in his head two and a half years later.

He’d also had a reminder the other night when he’d dared reach into her panties to make her come. He hadn’t done it again yet, though he’d wanted to. He’d even considered letting her have her vibrator and giving her some privacy to take a long bath.

But he was fucking selfish and couldn't stand the idea of her masturbating on the other side of that door. It made his jaw tighten. If she was going to touch herself, he wanted to watch.

"What happened with your research?" he asked to take his mind off his wandering thoughts that often strayed to her naked body.

"Couldn't focus. I think I'm going to have to ask for an extension."

"I'm sure no one would blame you or fault you."

"Yeah. I'm not usually a quitter, but even if this insanity got miraculously fixed tomorrow, I'm still behind. I don't have the jump drive I intended to have, and my head isn't in this."

"I'm sorry. I know it's important to you." He wrapped his arms all the way around her and pulled her against his chest before he kissed the top of her head. He did it because it felt right. It felt natural. He couldn't stop himself. He liked to pretend for a minute every now and then that she was his, that they weren't playing house, that they actually lived here together and would for the rest of their lives.

When Holden's phone vibrated in his pocket, he was almost disappointed. The sweet, perfect, make-believe moment was over. He released her as he extracted it, glancing down to see the call was coming in from Larson.

Mel grabbed his arm. "Don't cut me out. I can handle it. Let me listen."

He hesitated and then nodded as he answered the call, putting it on speaker. "Billings here. Melanie is with me."

"Oh, good. She's going to want to hear this."

"Good news, I hope."

“Feels like it,” Larson said. “My contact with the FBI finally called back. In a shocking twist of events, the FBI was already well aware of everything.”

“That *is* shocking,” Holden agreed, holding the phone between the two of them.

“Wonders never cease. I expected the man to tell me he hadn’t heard of a professor being murdered, let alone a ransacked house, but that wasn’t the case. Not only are they aware, but they’ve already made several arrests, including the men who tossed Mel’s place and the man who hired them.”

Holden frowned. “Are you serious?”

“Yes. He said the only missing piece of this puzzle has been the jump drive. They had known Melanie had it, but they hadn’t known where she’d gone or how to find her. Since we hadn’t called it in, they hadn’t known Melanie was connected to us in any way.”

“And they do now?” Holden asked.

“Yes. They are very much relieved to know she is alive.”

Holden wrapped an arm around Mel as she gave a relieved sigh. “Does this mean I can go home?”

“I don’t see why not. Everyone involved has been apprehended and I’m meeting with the agent to turn over the jump drive later today.”

“Where?” Holden asked. It all felt too tidy. Could it really be this simple?

“D.C. I have a flight out of Indiana at noon.”

“What about the guy who tripped at the restaurant in order to drop the jump drive?”



“They found him on the surveillance cameras from the restaurant. Both he and the man Yang had met with. All parties have been identified and arrested.”

Holden didn't like the way the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up, but he tried not to let on. “There must be several people higher up involved,” Holden pointed out. “Some randos at a café and a couple of hired thugs didn't steal and sell classified government data on their own.”

“Apparently the FBI is aware of that. My contact didn't fill me in on the broader scope of the investigation. The important part is Melanie was an innocent bystander. She has no idea what was on the drive. Now that they will have it back in the right hands, there's no reason why she would still be a threat to anyone. All they wanted was the damn USB.”

Holden drew in a breath and decided to speak his mind. “Larson, I don't like this.”

“I know it seems too tidy, but I can't find a hole in the story.”

“I can,” Holden barked. He didn't mean to take his frustration out on Larson. The guy was just the messenger. “She saw both those men at the café. She can testify against them.”

“I thought of that, Holden. I discussed it with the agent too. He said both men have confessed. They might use her testimony to seal the deal, but they don't need it.”

“Can I go home?” Mel asked again, her voice hopeful as if it had been painful for her to be here with Holden for the last few days. Fuck. Maybe it had.

“I'll let you two discuss that. I need to get to the airport.”

Holden tried to swallow his anxiety. “Thanks for calling. Please let us know when it’s done.”

“Will do.”

It was Mel who took the phone out of Holden’s hand and ended the call. She turned and set it on the kitchen table. “What’s wrong? It sounds like it’s all wrapped up.”

Holden ran a hand over his head. “Yeah. That’s the problem. It’s too fucking tidy.”

“Must everything be difficult, Holden?” she asked, hands on her hips. “Do you trust Larson?”

“With my life. Spent three months in captivity with him. We’re like brothers. It’s everyone else I don’t trust. Not with your life.”

“Look, he said they’ve picked up everyone involved, including the two guys from the café and the men who trashed my apartment.”

“I know, but all of those people are pawns. Someone higher up in the U.S. government paid the man who tripped. Probably someone in the Chinese government paid the man who met with Yang before you arrived. We still don’t know what Yang might have known. There isn’t a snowball’s chance in hell everyone involved in the sale of classified government data has been arrested and removed from society in just six days.”

Holden rubbed his neck.

“I just want my life back, Holden,” she murmured.

He sighed. He knew part of his anxiety stemmed from the fact that he didn’t want her to go. It was probably tainting his

ability to believe the situation could possibly be over. He selfishly didn't really want it to be on some level.

He let his gaze land on Melanie where she stood with her arms crossed and her brow furrowed. She wanted out of here. She'd never wanted to be here in the first place.

It wasn't personal. She cared about him. He knew she did. She lusted after him at least as much as he did her. If either of them were capable of fucking and keeping their sex life separate from their feelings, they'd have spent most of the past four days in his bed.

But they weren't. He was beginning to realize it wasn't just her. He wasn't an insensitive prick either. He was in love with her. The words might never get spoken, but they were there, lodged in his throat, choking him.

What good would it do to tell her how he felt? It changed nothing. It would only make the hurt worse.

"I'm going home, Holden."

## CHAPTER 12



“You don’t have to follow me, Holden,” Melanie said as she followed him to the garage.

She was carrying her toiletry bag. He had her suitcase. He’d spent the last hour hovering while she’d packed. Not just hovering but frowning and growling.

She wasn’t particularly happy to be leaving him either, but she was realistic. She needed to go. She needed space. The longer they were together, the more it hurt.

She’d gotten to know him better in the last four days. A different side of him from the cruise. She hadn’t known the man could cook for one thing. He was a fucking chef. He was also tidy. He hadn’t let her lift a thumb, but he’d wandered around wiping counters and putting stray dishes in the dishwasher. He ran a load of laundry about once a day too.

Holden Billings was oddly domestic. He was like the perfect man. Except for the tiny detail that he did a very dangerous job and spent about two-thirds of his time in foreign countries with no ability to contact anyone at home.

Mel was making the right choice. She needed to get out of his house before she suffocated and did something she’d regret—like have sex with him. God, she’d wanted to. He’d tempted her every day and every night. He’d been true to his word

though. He'd held her in his arms at night, but he hadn't tried to instigate anything sexual other than the night he'd given her a fucking orgasm and taken nothing for himself.

They hadn't discussed that incident a single time since. What was there to say?

Mel hadn't glanced at him even once as she'd retrieved her vibrator from his nightstand and tucked it into her suitcase. She was pretty sure he hadn't moved or breathed while he'd watched.

"You could stay here a few more days," he said, ignoring her comment. He'd made it clear he intended to follow her home. He wanted to see her place with his own eyes and make sure she was safe. He hadn't permitted argument or discussion about that subject.

"Holden..."

He held up both hands. "Okay, okay. I get it. I don't have to like it."

The truth was she was barely holding it together. She was going to end up crying as soon as she got in the car, and she didn't want him to realize it.

She followed him out to the garage where he'd parked her car next to his. It looked so domestic and tidy like everything else in the house. She supposed most of his propensity for being organized came from years in the Navy. It was kind of endearing. Hell, if the man wanted to clean up after her, who was she to complain?

She needed to stop the madness now though before she got used to him taking care of fucking everything. Was it already too late? No. She refused to believe that. Five days. Just five. That didn't make a lifetime.

She was lying to herself about that too though. After all, she already knew that eleven days was more than a lifetime too. If she added it together...

Holden put her suitcase in the back seat of her car and stood next to her as she settled in the front seat and put her seatbelt on. "I'll follow you," he said softly.

She nodded. No sense arguing with him on this. She'd already tried. She would lose. She needed to get this over with. The sooner the better. Like ripping off a Band-Aid.

Mel gripped the steering wheel tight during the entire drive down the mountain and onto the main highway that led back to her real life. The one where she was a professor. The life that didn't include Holden. It couldn't.

"Stop overanalyzing," she murmured out loud. "You can't fix this. It won't work." She'd already wasted enough time trying to think of any plausible way she could be in a relationship with Holden and had come up with nothing.

Yes, Callie was going to lose her mind and lecture Mel endlessly about her happiness and how she couldn't help who she fell in love with and how everyone had to make sacrifices. None of that mattered.

Mel tried to visualize even the most ideal life with Holden. The rosier picture she could conjure included her at home alone for weeks at a time wondering if he was fucking alive. She couldn't deal with that.

Maybe that made her weak. Maybe she was a coward. Maybe another woman in her shoes would suck it up and take the risk. For love. But Mel didn't have it in her. Why couldn't anyone understand?

She drove down the highway on autopilot, hardly noticing anything around her. Occasionally she glanced in the rearview mirror to find Holden still on her tail, but other than that, she paid no attention to the other cars or the scenery.

She was exhausted from stress and shaking when she finally pulled into her garage and shut off the engine. It would be much easier if she didn't have to deal with Holden right now. If he hadn't come with her, she could go inside, crawl into bed, pull the covers over her head, and cry. Maybe for a day. Maybe two.

There was no way she would be able to stop him from going in with her and checking the place out first though.

He parked in her driveway behind her and grabbed the suitcase out of her back seat without a word. Such a gentleman.

As soon as Mel opened the door that led into the kitchen from the garage, a beeping noise reminded her that Grant had put in a new alarm system.

Holden set the suitcase down and faced the panel, disarming it as if he lived here. "Let me take a look around, and then I'll show you how to use the alarm."

Mel pursed her lips and nodded. *Humor him. Let him do his caveman thing.* She stayed in the kitchen while he wandered through every room in her townhouse. He was frowning when he returned. "Whoever Grant hired did a great job cleaning up. There are several open boxes in your office filled with things for you to go through."

She nodded. "I know. Callie told me. It's mostly knickknacks and picture frames and things that were broken but might have sentimental value." She would face all of that

another day. Or week. Or in a month. She was too emotional right now to sit down and go through her life in the form of cracked pottery and memorabilia.

Holden opened every cabinet in the kitchen next.

“What are you looking for?”

“Just seeing what you’re missing.” He pulled out a plate and held it up with a forced smile. “You can eat one meal on a plate, as long as you don’t have any guests.”

“Great.”

“Were they valuable?”

She shook her head.

“You can file with your insurance company,” he suggested. “I’m sure Grant took a million pictures to use as photo evidence of the destruction.”

“It’s fine. Nothing was very valuable.” Her dishes were from a random department store. She’d had them for several years. This would give her a chance to pick something new. If and when she decided she cared about plates and bowls again.

It wasn’t as if she regularly cooked. Most of the items hadn’t ever been used. Her kitchen had been filled with all the things people believed should be found in a kitchen.

At one point, when Mel had first moved into this townhouse, she’d visualized learning to cook and setting the table with matching dishes. Placemats. Flowers in the center.

She stared at the currently vacant table and smirked, mostly to herself. What a pipe dream. She hadn’t learned to cook, nor had she often sat at the table like some kind of domestic homemaker.



“Let me show you the alarm.” Holden stood too close to her while he armed and unarmed it a few times before making her also do it twice. “Keep it armed at all times. When you’re home and when you’re not.”

“Okay, okay.” She was exasperated. “I get it.”

He ignored her tone and continued talking. “Every window and door has a sensor. The glass does too. No one can open a window or break it without triggering the alarm.”

“Isn’t that going a bit overboard?” she asked. Good grief. No one she knew had alarm systems like the one he was describing. She shouldn’t be surprised though. After all, he worked for the Holt Agency. Everything was state of the art.

He pointed at the corner of the room next. “There are motion detectors in all the main rooms. When movement is detected, the cameras kick on.”

She flinched. “Cameras? Seriously?”

He touched her for the first time since they’d arrived, tipping her chin back. “I’m not leaving here until I’m certain you’ll be safe. People have cameras. It’s common.”

“Please tell me there isn’t one in my bedroom or my bathroom.”

“There isn’t.”

*Great. So as long as I keep all nudity and masturbation in the bedroom and bathroom, there won’t be video evidence.* She shuddered and crossed her arms to rub her biceps. She felt like a prisoner.

“Please take this seriously, Melanie.”

She rolled her eyes. “Larson said it’s over. You said you trusted him.”

“I do.” He nodded but there was nothing about his words or his assent that indicated he believed either. He was obviously a worrywart.

“I’m fine, Holden.” She took a step back.

He inhaled slowly, staring at her. He looked like someone who’d just suffered a tragic loss. Maybe he felt the same pain she did. It was reasonable. She knew he cared about her. Deeply. But there wasn’t anything they could do to bridge the gap. Their lives were on very different paths.

She forced herself to walk to the front door and open it. “Thank you. For everything.” The open door would help her hold on to her resolve not to break down and cry or beg him to stay. She was two seconds from saying *fuck it*, putting the townhouse on the market, and quitting her amazing job.

That’s how badly she wanted Holden to wrap his arms around her and hold her tight. She wanted him to tell her they could work it out. Anything. Something. But it wasn’t going to happen. And it would just make it harder if he did.

He shuffled toward the door slowly and took a deep breath. “You have me on speed dial.”

“Yes. And Grant. And Callie. And even Ajax and Ryker.”

He winced, making her feel like a bitch for adding that snarky comment. She knew he would prefer she called him than anyone else. Hopefully she wouldn’t need to call anyone.

“Thank you. For everything. I know I’m not easy.”

“Mel...” He sounded forlorn.

She shrugged. “I mean you just got back in town and had me thrust on you. It wasn’t what you expected to do with your week off.”

“Mel...” he repeated. “Please don’t act like you’re an imposition.”

She drew in a breath, trying to end things on a lighter note. “It was kinda fun having someone cook for me. Now I’m back to frozen dinners.”

He smirked. “How do you stay so fit?”

“I don’t eat many of them?” she joked.

He reached out and grabbed her hand, rubbing her knuckles and staring at her fingers. “I wish things were different.”

“Yeah.” What else was there to say? *I wish you weren’t some kind of bounty hunter? I wish you didn’t travel so much? I wish I didn’t have to worry about you dying at work?*

Maybe bounty hunter was an exaggeration.

“Call me,” he said as he dropped her hand.

“K.”

Several seconds ticked by while he stared into her eyes. Suddenly, he lurched forward and pulled her into his arms. He buried his nose in her neck.

She wrapped her arms around him too. She couldn’t stop herself. He smelled so good and his hands felt so nice on her back. She loved the way his nose rubbed against her neck behind her ear.

After a few moments, she eased out of his embrace. “You should go,” she told the floor.

She could hear him swallow.

Another hesitation, and then he stepped out the door.

She watched him walk toward his car but closed and locked the door before he turned around.

She felt heavy as she headed back toward the kitchen. She should probably eat something, but there was no way she could swallow. She was empty. Bereft. Lost.

It was too quiet in her townhouse. And too clean. Nothing was out of place.

Her phone buzzed somewhere in her purse, and she closed the distance to extricate it. The text was from Holden.

*Set the alarm, babe.*

Oh, shit. Right. She reached for the panel and went through the motions. All the while, she held the phone against her chest as if he were in it. She could hear his voice calling her *babe*.

She padded absently toward the stairs and up to her bedroom. She didn't even glance in her office where she knew the boxes of her broken belongings resided. That project could wait. Indefinitely.

She climbed onto her bed, curled up in a ball, and let the tears fall. She refused to give in to the desire to ugly cry. A loud giant sobbing fest would change nothing. She permitted silent tears and fell asleep.

## CHAPTER 13



*“Time’s up, asshole.”*

*“Don’t be a dick. I’ve got it all arranged. I’ll have the jump drive in my hands by this evening.”*

*“No. You won’t.”*

*“Yes. I will. It’s done. I swear.”*

*“My boss is done waiting. You’ve missed your chance to fix this. It’s over.”*

*“It’s not. It can’t be. If you cut me out now, you’ll never get the information. You don’t have a choice but to wait. Tell your boss I said that.”*



The insistent ringing of the doorbell yanked Melanie from sleep. She recognized the sound, but it took her a moment to pull out of her foggy state and fully process it.

She groaned as she pushed to sitting. Who would be at the door? Not likely anyone she knew since her friends would call or text first. Probably a salesperson.

Just as she flopped onto her back, it rang again. Twice. “Shit,” she muttered. Some people were so persistent. But

what if it were Callie or even Holden returning? Maybe he forgot something.

Melanie didn't know how long she'd been asleep, but as she picked up her phone she noticed there were no new texts or voicemails. In addition, she'd only been resting for less than an hour.

She slid off the side of the bed and rubbed her temples as she headed downstairs. She hadn't even removed her shoes when she'd fallen asleep.

She could see through the tempered glass next to the front door that a man stood there, but it wasn't until she looked through the peephole that she realized she didn't know him.

“Ms. Hurn?”

She sucked in a breath. Should she answer?

“I'm with the FBI, ma'am.”

The FBI? She knew they were involved in her case because Larson was in contact with them. He'd been meeting an agent this afternoon. Maybe they needed some more information.

She stepped closer to the door. “Do you have ID?”

“Of course.” He held out his badge, letting her look at it through the peephole. It looked legit.

She tried to shake off her unease. After everything she'd been through this week, she felt mistrustful.

“My name is Agent Trent Faust. I met with Larson Aldrich earlier. He told me you would be back at home today so I could ask you some questions.”

Melanie blew out a relieved breath, unlocked the door, and opened it. Immediately the alarm started beeping. “Shit. Just a second.” She reached for the panel next to the front door and disarmed it. “Ugh. Sorry. I just got this alarm. I’m not used to disarming it.”

Agent Faust nodded as he stepped inside. “Understandable. You can’t be too careful. From what I’ve heard about your week, an alarm seems like a good idea.”

Mel shut the door and followed him as he entered her living room. “Please, have a seat. I’m not sure how I can help at this point. Surely Larson has told you everything I know, but I’ll try.”

Agent Faust wandered around the room, seeming to take in her home, not yet meeting her gaze.

Mel sat on the sofa, spine rigid. She felt wobbly from not eating enough today and being emotionally drained.

Finally, Agent Faust turned around. He smiled and held her gaze for several moments.

Something felt off. She couldn’t shake it. She felt like she’d seen him before. That wasn’t likely.

“Would you mind if I take a look at your laptop. I understand Larson wiped it clean for you, but I’d like to make sure.”

“Oh. Of course.” She stood, wiping her hands on her thighs. She had no reason to doubt this FBI agent. “It’s in the kitchen.” She nodded in that direction.

The agent followed her and took a seat at her kitchen table as she pulled the laptop out of her backpack and then the case. She hadn’t made it any farther into the house when she’d arrived.

Agent Faust opened the laptop and angled it toward her so she could enter her passcode. As soon as he spun it back in front of him, he started clicking away.

Mel lowered onto one of the other chairs and watched him, sitting stiffly. She wished she'd at least called Holden or Grant before she'd let this man into her home. Maybe she shouldn't be answering questions without a lawyer present or something.

She'd left her cell phone upstairs though. It would be rude to go retrieve it. So she sat still and waited.

His brow was furrowed and his face grew tighter. "Looks like Larson is an expert. Not a single trace of the downloaded information."

"Yeah. That's what I hear. I don't think he'd be working for the Holt Agency as their computer guy if he didn't know what he was doing," she yammered nervously.

"Did you make any copies of the encrypted information?"

She shook her head. "No. As soon as I saw that I'd had the wrong drive, I passed the computer off to the Holt Agency. All I saw were numbers and weird characters."

It occurred to her that the FBI might want to make sure she didn't know anything. Luckily, that was true. The only conversation she'd had with Holden had been when he'd told her she didn't want to know. She was grateful now.

"That's good. What about anyone else? Did your boyfriend make a copy by chance?"

*Boyfriend?* The hair on her neck stood on end. "Holden?" She immediately wished she hadn't supplied his name. This guy was Larson's contact with the FBI. She didn't think Holden knew him. She shouldn't have shared either.



Agent Faust nodded. “Yes.”

There was no reason to argue semantics. She didn’t need to get her feathers in a ruffle just because this man thought Holden and she were a couple. Hell, half of his teammates referred to her as “his woman.” Perhaps Larson had said something to that effect to this agent. “No. He’s uh... He’s not a computer guy. He didn’t touch it either. He called Larson.”

Faust nodded again. “Makes sense.”

“Do you have any questions about the break-in?” *I mean, isn’t that why you’re here?*

He glanced around. “Looks like you got it cleaned up pretty fast.”

“There was a team of people. If you need to see pictures, I’m sure someone has them.”

“Good.” Faust stood.

*Is he done?* What a weird interaction. She figured his main goal had been to make sure there was no chance any information from the secret government file was in her laptop. She was grateful he didn’t confiscate it. She didn’t have another one. Her data was all in a cloud, so she didn’t specifically need this hardware, but she didn’t have the energy to go buy another one this week either. If the FBI took it, she’d likely never see it again.

She started to rise, assuming he was done, and she needed to show him to the door. But suddenly, he set a hand on her shoulder. Not gently. He was preventing her from standing.

Her heart started racing, and she twisted her neck to look back at him. “What’s wrong?” A knot formed in her throat though. Alarm bells went off in her head. Something was very, very wrong.

Agent Faust released her shoulder, but a moment later he had both her wrists in his hands, wrenching them around to the back of her slatted kitchen chair.

“Hey. What’s going on? Are you arresting me or something?” Somehow she knew that wasn’t the case. Instinct told her she was in serious trouble now. But why? Why would the FBI be involved in something so nefarious?

He chuckled sardonically. “Something like that.” He slapped a pair of handcuffs on her, threading them through the rung in the back of the chair first. It all happened so fast, and she was no match for his strength.

“What are you doing?” Her voice was weak. Fear climbed up her spine.

“I need that fucking jump drive, bitch.” His total change in demeanor made her blood run cold.

“I don’t have it.”

“I’m aware of that. But I bet your man will be perfectly willing to trade it for your life.”

She gasped. A million thoughts went through her head. “Didn’t you just meet with Larson before you came here? He was going to give you the drive.”

“Yeah, well, that didn’t happen.”

“Why?” Her ears were ringing now. The cuffs were tight and digging into her wrists too. She was a bit too small to have her arms wrenched behind her on this chair. Her shoulders ached already.

Agent Faust yanked the chair out farther from the table and squatted in front of her. He pulled rope out his jacket pocket, grabbed her ankle, and started to tie it to the leg of the chair.

Her panic grew. She wasn't under arrest. Something was terribly wrong. Clearly this FBI agent had made a deal with the devil and gone rogue. Whatever was on that drive, he apparently sold it to the Chinese. Either that or he was the middleman who needed to accomplish his task.

Mel kicked her feet out, trying to avoid his intent. "You don't need to do that. I'm not going anywhere. I'm certain Larson will bring you the disk. He already said he would. Call him. Tell him to bring it here."

She was trying to remain calm. *Think. Do whatever it takes to get out of this alive.* Professor Yang had not managed to accomplish as much. Melanie didn't intend to end up like him.

Faust grabbed her ankle and yanked it hard. He slammed it painfully into the leg of the chair, making her cry out in pain.

"Sit still, bitch."

She continued to struggle even though she knew she was going to lose this battle. She needed to keep her wits so she didn't also lose the war. Breathing heavily, she stopped fighting him and let him secure her ankles to the chair.

Hopelessness crept into her. Would he let her live? After all, she'd seen his face. And... *Wait.*

All the blood ran from her face when she realized this wasn't the first time she'd seen him. *Fuck.* Suddenly, she remembered. "You were at the café with Professor Yang the other day when I arrived."

He grinned as he finished securing her second ankle and rose. "Man, am I glad you didn't remember that before you let me into the house." He chuckled, sending a chill down her spine.

“What happened to Larson? Why didn’t he meet with you?” She prayed Larson wasn’t dead. But that made no sense. If this guy wanted the jump drive so badly, why not just meet Larson, get it, and take off?

He laughed again. “So smart and yet so dumb.”

Her face heated. “Fuck you.”

He laughed harder. “If you’d like, we could do that too while we wait.”

A new wave of fear consumed her. Would he rape her?

“We’ll see if we have enough time. You’re a feisty one. I wouldn’t mind a romp in the hay with you. I bet you give amazing head. We can ask Holden when we call him. Where’s your phone?”

She swallowed hard. Something still didn’t add up. “Why do you need my phone?” she murmured. “Don’t you have all the numbers you need? Call Larson.”

He rolled his eyes and laughed some more. It was infuriating. He even patted her face a bit too roughly. “You’re so fucking naïve.” He leaned in so close she could smell his breath. The scent of coffee overwhelmed her. Stale as if the only thing he’d had today was six cups of coffee.

“I’m going to ask one more time. Where is your fucking phone?”

## CHAPTER 14



Holden's phone rang through the Bluetooth in his car, and he answered it without looking at the caller ID.

"Holden? You still at Melanie's?" Larson's voice sounded short, harsh, anxious.

"No. Why?"

"Turn around right now. How long ago did you leave?"

"Half an hour. What the fuck is going on?"

"My contact didn't show up."

"Your FBI agent?" he asked, trying to process Larson's words while he put his foot on the gas and swerved to get off the highway at the next exit, barely making it.

"Yes. He didn't show. I have a bad feeling in my gut."

Another call came in.

Holden glanced at his phone on the docking station as he maneuvered through traffic to get back on the highway in the other direction. "Ajax is calling."

"Get it. Call me back. I'm heading to Melanie's, but you'll get there before me."

Holden hit the button on his steering wheel to accept the next incoming call.

Ajax started speaking the moment the connection was made. “Where are you?” he shouted.

“On the highway. Larson just called two seconds ago and told me his contact didn’t show up at the rendezvous point. He was worried. I’m heading back to Melanie’s.”

“How far away are you?”

“Thirty minutes.” Holden gripped the steering wheel tighter and glanced at the phone as if it could provide more information faster than the voice inside it. “What the fuck is going on?”

“They’ve got her, Holden. I’m sorry, man.”

Holden sucked in a breath and held it. He had to focus or he was going to run off the road or hit someone. He had a million questions, but he knew Ajax would answer everything he could. Holden just needed to listen.

“She let a man into her house about five minutes ago. I’m watching him on the surveillance camera as we speak.”

“Who? What man?”

“I don’t know. I backed up the tape to watch her interaction as soon as the alarm was triggered.”

“The alarm went off?”

“Innocent enough. It’s new. She opened the door without disarming it. Happens to everyone when they first get a new alarm. She immediately turned it off though and let the man wander into her home. Whoever he is, he somehow convinced her he was no harm.”

“Why the fuck would she let someone into her house?” Holden shouted. Yeah, maybe he wasn’t going to be able to hold back his questions.

“I don’t know. I’m watching it again now. I don’t have audio, but it looks like she did hesitate for a while. She spoke to him through the door. She used the peephole. Hold on... Okay, he’s too close to the door for the outside camera to pick up the specifics, but I’m betting he held up some sort of credentials.”

“He’s probably the mother-fucking FBI agent.” That was the only explanation Holden could come up with. She wasn’t stupid. She wouldn’t let a stranger in. Not today of all days.

“I don’t know, Holden. I don’t recognize this man. I’m getting word to Larson now to see if he recognizes the guy.”

“Something doesn’t add up. Why would the FBI agent fail to show up to meet with Larson but head to Melanie’s house instead?”

There were a few moments of silence that seemed like an hour. “Ajax, talk to me.”

“Hang on one sec...” Ajax definitely hit the mute button because Holden couldn’t hear anything.

He gritted his teeth and drove faster, praying no cop tried to pull him over. He didn’t have time to stop and explain himself. “Come on. Come on. Come on.” He wasn’t sure who he was talking to, the cars in front of him or the missing Ajax.

“K, I’m back,” Ajax finally said. “Holden, I need you to be safe. Where are you?”

“Still on the fucking highway, man. Where do you think I’d be?”

“I hesitate to talk to you while you’re driving. I know you. You’re probably going eighty. I don’t want you or anyone else on the road to get in an accident.”

“Man, you are one of the best friends I have in life, but if you don’t fucking say what you have to say right now, I’m going to die of a coronary anyway. Spit it out.”

Ajax sighed. He was probably pacing his office back in Indiana. “Larson doesn’t know the man in Melanie’s house. Never seen him before.”

“Okay. So what? Maybe something happened to his contact and this is another FBI agent they sent to talk to Melanie.” Holden didn’t believe a word he was saying. He knew Ajax was leaving something out.

“He’s holding her hostage, Holden.”

Those words were bone chilling. They reached into Holden’s chest and ripped out his heart. He kept his eyes on the road. He knew he needed to focus. He needed to get to her. “Tell me what you’re seeing, Ajax,” he said in the calmest voice he could muster.

“She’s cuffed to a chair in the kitchen. Her ankles are tied to the chair legs.”

Holden drew in a breath and held it, letting it out slowly. “Does he have a weapon?”

“Not visible yet.”

“Does he have a death wish?” Holden snapped.

“If he’s the guy who was supposed to pass the encrypted file off to the Chinese, he’s probably so close to dead that he’s gotten reckless. Right before he tied her up, he went through her computer. I bet he was looking to see if the data was left behind.”

“Fuck. Can’t Larson get ahold of his contact?”



“At this point, I don’t even think that’s a good idea. I have a bad feeling.”

Holden shifted his weight in his seat. “About the FBI agent?” He wasn’t feeling good about the FBI agent either, but he hated Ajax stating it out loud.

“Yes.” Ajax was nothing if not blunt. “Hang on. He left the room. I gotta switch monitors...” Seconds ticked by. “He’s back. He has a phone in his hand. I bet it’s hers.”

“I bet I’m about to get a call from this motherfucker.”

“I have no doubt. Holden...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I need to pretend I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Exactly. I’m not sure how the fuck a man who’s responsible for transporting a file filled with top-secret data doesn’t know how a basic alarm system works, but apparently it has not occurred to him that we’re watching him.”

“Or he doesn’t care.” Holden tapped his leg, glancing every few seconds at his phone for no reason. He wouldn’t be able to miss an incoming call anyway.

“He’s trying to get her to open the phone,” Ajax added. “Hey, does Melanie know we could be watching her?”

“I don’t think so. I didn’t mention that detail. I didn’t think it would ever be necessary.”

“Any way you could let her know you’re on your way without saying so?” Ajax asked.

“Yep.”

Suddenly the phone was ringing. Incoming call from Melanie.

“Call’s coming in now.” He hung up without elaborating, taking a deep breath. He planned on being the first one to speak as soon as the connection was made.

He pushed the button, hesitated a split second, and then started talking. “Hey, babe. I know I’m late. I’m so sorry. Traffic is awful, but I picked up your dry cleaning and I got some of those cookies you love. I should be there in about an hour.”

“This isn’t Melanie, motherfucker. Listen to me, and listen close. I don’t care how you do it, but if I don’t have that fucking jump drive in my hands in less than thirty minutes, your girlfriend is dead, understood?”

“Who the fuck are you?” Holden asked in both real and mock horror. He prayed the phone was on speaker and that Melanie got his message. Surely his absurd, irrational comment alerted her to the fact that he knew she was in trouble and he was on it.

“That’s none of your business. Get ahold of your guy with the file I need and tell him the clock is ticking.” The fucker hung up.

“Shit,” Holden shouted. He was less than ten minutes away. Hopefully he would have the element of surprise after his comments.

He dialed Larson next. “How far out are you?”

“Fifteen. You?”

“Eight. I just got the call. He wants the file of course.”

“Shocker.”

“You should probably ditch that jump drive before you arrive. The last thing we want is for it to get into the wrong

hands.”

“Not a chance. Our only mission right now is getting Melanie the fuck out of there alive.”

Holden appreciated Larson’s thinking but it wasn’t protocol. “Thank you.” Holden knew good and well if the woman they were rescuing was a stranger, they would never hand over the information. But she wasn’t. Larson wasn’t about to risk Melanie’s life, and Holden owed him big time.

Ajax was calling again.

“I gotta answer Ajax.”

“Okay. Holden?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ve got this. We’ve rescued dozens of people on foreign land from far more dire circumstances.”

“Yeah.” Holden switched over to Ajax. “I’m here.” He pulled off the highway and onto a side street.

“ETA?”

“Four minutes.”

“Good. I just hung up with Grant. He’s on his way too. He supervised the instillation of that alarm system. He says to tell you to circle around to the laundry room off the far side of the kitchen next to the garage. The fence to the backyard squeaks. Don’t open it. Jump it. When you get to the window, you’ll be able to see the washer and dryer inside. She doesn’t have blinds on that window.”

“Got it. How is this useful?” He pulled down her street, parked on the next block, snagged his weapon from the glove compartment, and jumped down from the SUV.

“The lock is broken on the window. It wouldn’t latch. Grant was going to go back over and fix it tomorrow. Apparently the thugs who ransacked her place used a crowbar on that window to get in and broke the lock.”

Holden almost smiled. He would have to thank Grant later for his negligence. The broken lock wasn’t really making her unsafe because there was a contact on that window for the alarm anyway. If anyone lifted it, they would be in for a giant surprise.

“I just disabled the entire system. The alarm wasn’t currently set, but now it won’t beep and tip him off when you open the window.”

Holden rubbed his forehead with his free hand. He was definitely too attached to the victim in this crime. He wasn’t thinking as fast as usual. He should have realized Ajax’s plan without needing a play-by-play.

“You got your eyes on her?” Holden asked.

“Yes. Nothing’s changed. The dude is pacing. He looks nervous.”

“Weapon?”

“Gun tucked in the back of his pants.”

“What a moron,” Holden muttered as he reached the fence. He was beyond grateful it didn’t appear any of her neighbors were out for a stroll or sitting on their porches. His movements had to look like a scene from an action movie.

Holden tucked the phone and his weapon in his jeans and used both hands to reach up and grab the fence, hauling himself over. He palmed both items again as he jogged the short distance to the window. Luckily he didn’t have to pass the kitchen to do so.

He pulled the phone back out. "I'm here."

"Leave me live."

Without a word, Holden re-tucked the phone in his pocket, set the gun on the window sill, and lifted the window as slowly as possible. It didn't make a single sound. Blessed angels.

Holden easily hefted himself into the laundry room and landed without making any noise. This wasn't his first rodeo.

Not wasting time, he flattened himself just inside the door, palmed his phone, and used the camera to get a lay of the land.

The fucker was pacing in front of Melanie. He had no idea Holden was in the house. He still didn't even have his gun in his hand.

Holden waited until the fucker was facing away from him. He had to act fast because there would be no way to prevent Melanie from reacting to him as soon as she saw him.

Holden rushed into the kitchen, gun drawn. "On your knees! Hands in the air! Now!" When the guy spun around, his expression was shock, but he wasn't acting fast enough. "*Now*, motherfucker," Holden shouted. "Unless you want me to blow your head off and ask questions after."

The guy dropped to his knees, shaking. "Jesus, fuck. What *are* you?"

Holden rushed forward, shoved the guy onto his face on the floor, and yanked the gun out of the back of his pants. "Navy SEAL, motherfucker. You messed with the wrong guy. If you move an inch, you're dead." He patted him down from head to toe, finding nothing but a wallet and the keys that better be for the handcuffs.

Holden wished he could use the handcuffs on this asshole, but he wasn't about to risk stepping away. He set a knee on the fucker's back and glanced at Mel. "You okay?"

She nodded rapidly, but she looked like she'd watched a murder. *Fuck*. This was exactly the reason they weren't together. She couldn't handle this sort of shit. Except she was handling it. She wasn't hysterical. Her eyes were wide, but she wasn't in a total panic.

Holding the fucker down with one hand and a knee, Holden shook open his wallet and found his ID. "Matthew Han."

Mel gasped. "He told me his name was Trent Faust. He said he was the FBI agent who knows Larson."

Holden grabbed the back of Han's head, lifted him by the hair, and slammed his face into the floor. "Faust didn't show up to meet with Larson. I bet you know something about that, don't you, asshole?"

Han groaned. "Get the fuck off me, dickhead."

"Oh, I will. Just as soon as backup arrives to arrest your scum-sucking ass."

Just then, the front door burst open and Grant came in, gun lifted. "Secure?"

"Yes. I could use a little help though." Holden tossed the keys to Grant. "Mind removing the cuffs from Mel? I need them over here."

"My pleasure." He wasted no time and handed the cuffs to Holden before bending down to untie Melanie's legs. He glanced at Holden. "Does this son of a bitch have a name?"

“Matthew Han. I suspect he’s committed a few murders in the past few days to add to his rap sheet of impersonating an FBI agent and taking a hostage.”

Grant made sure Mel was fully released and looked her over before he came to take Holden’s position. “I don’t think you’ll be seeing the light of day again, asshole.”

Holden rushed over to Melanie.

She was shaking and rubbing her biceps.

He squatted in front of her and set his hands on her knees. “Are you injured?”

“No,” she whispered. Her wrists were red but not bleeding from the cuffs.

Heath Kubiak—another SEAL who’d been held with Larson and Holden in Ethiopia—walked in the open front door next. In a few minutes, this place was going to be crawling with Holt agents, FBI, and police.

Holden wanted to pull Melanie into his arms and never let her go, but that wasn’t going to happen. Dealing with this shitshow was going to take hours.

## CHAPTER 15



“Take another sip of water, babe,” Holden encouraged Mel, holding the glass in front of her.

She’d been sitting in the corner of her couch, her knees pulled up to her chest, rocking her chin on top of them, for hours. Shockingly, she wasn’t out of it. She was alert. She’d given an amazing statement to the cops. But she was exhausted.

Everyone was watching her closely. Grant was still there of course. Callie had joined them. So had Larson. They were hovering. For good reason.

Larson’s brow had been furrowed for hours. He’d apologized several times to both Mel and Holden for assuming this case had been wrapped up and the FBI was handling it. Obviously, that had not been the case at all.

It was becoming increasingly apparent that Faust lied to Larson about everything. The question was *why*? And where the fuck was Faust now? Most likely dead. Han hadn’t said as much, but Holden wasn’t born yesterday.

Mel ignored his offer of water and looked at him over the glass. “I should have recognized him sooner.”



They'd been over the details several times. She had a lot of guilt.

"I mean who opens the door to a stranger anyway? Like five minutes after returning home? What was wrong with me?"

"Mel... Babe... The guy seemed legit. He had an FBI badge. He even gave you the name of the agent Larson was supposed to be meeting. It wasn't weird for the FBI to want to question you. It made sense."

Her voice rose. "The badge could have been from the dollar store, Holden." She slapped her forehead again. "You could have been killed and it would have been my fault."

He set the water on the end table and gripped her chin. "Killed? Me?" he teased. "I'm invincible, Mel. I've been in situations far more dangerous than a crazed madman pacing around paying no attention to his surroundings with his gun tucked in the back of his jeans."

She shook her head. "I still shouldn't have opened the door. He didn't even have on a uniform."

"FBI agents don't wear a uniform, Mel," he informed her as if this might help.

"They don't wear *jeans*," she shouted. "They wear like black suits and black ties and white shirts."

Holden struggled not to laugh. "Not all the time, Mel. This isn't a movie about an alien invasion."

She rolled her eyes. "You think he killed Larson's FBI contact and took his badge, don't you?"

Holden blew out a breath and nodded. "Probably."

"That's so sad. All for some stupid encrypted data."

“I suspect someone paid a lot of money for that data and then they fumbled it. There are still holes in that story though. Since the agent was supposed to meet with Larson earlier today to get the jump drive, why would anyone kill him and ruin the exchange?”

She chewed on her bottom lip, thinking before she released it. “He was very nervous. Agitated. He kept his cool at first, but when he determined my computer was clean and didn’t have the data, he kind of lost it. Like he was counting on that.”

“At least he’s in custody now. Hopefully the FBI will be able to get more information out of him. When middle men are cornered, they sometimes find themselves willing to tell everything they know in exchange for life in prison.”

Mel leaned her body weight into Holden. “I’m sorry I opened the door.”

He rubbed her back. “Stop apologizing. You had no reason to believe that guy meant you harm.”

“I can’t believe you deal with this sort of shit all the time for a living.” She shuddered against him.

At this point, he couldn’t believe it anymore either. There had always been an adrenaline rush and a tremendous sense of satisfaction from apprehending bad guys and saving lives. Today, something had changed. Holden felt like something had snapped inside him.

His adrenaline had definitely been pumping, but in a way that accompanied fear running down his spine. He’d felt like he couldn’t breathe during the drive back to Melanie’s house. If anything had happened to her...

He shook the thought from his head. He’d gotten here on time. She was fine. Wasn’t she? Maybe not. Maybe she

wouldn't be able to sleep at night. Would she have nightmares? That would be the normal response after being held hostage.

She would need to see someone to sort out her feelings and get past this. And dammit, he wanted to be here with her, holding her, sleeping in her bed. The thought of leaving her to deal with the fallout on her own was inconceivable.

The only reason he wasn't punching holes in her walls was because he had not brought this to her door. If he had, he would never be able to forgive himself. She had been an innocent victim in a crime she had nothing to do with. Luckily, Holden and the Holt Agency hadn't been involved either.

Holden knew part of the reason she didn't want to be in a relationship with him was because he could inadvertently bring home trouble. She wasn't wrong. It was a fear he had too. As far as he knew, he didn't have any loose ends anywhere that might cause someone to come after him for retribution, but it could happen in the future.

He would never be able to live with himself if anything happened to anyone he loved because of his job.

Loved. *Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.*

He held her tighter and kissed the top of her head. His chest was tight. How the fuck was he going to fix this situation? His feelings tonight were miles different from how he'd felt earlier in the day.

Walk away and let her have her life? Fuck, no.

It hadn't felt right as he'd driven down the highway away from her even before he'd gotten the bone-chilling call that she was being held hostage. Something had changed in that

very instant. He had no idea what he was going to do about it, but walking away was not on the list of choices.

It was one thing to know you loved someone. It was another thing to hear that person was being held hostage and handcuffed to a chair.

Larson stepped closer, meeting Holden's gaze over the top of her head. He had a look on his face, one that suggested he had something to say but wasn't going to say it in front of Melanie. Probably for the best. She didn't need to know any more details than necessary about this crime.

Holden lifted her face. "Why don't you go lie down? Try to get some sleep."

She hesitated a moment and then nodded. "K."

"I'll go up with her," Callie said. Callie was amazing. Granted, she worked for the CIA. She was no stranger to shitshows and danger. As a translator, she wasn't usually on the front line of anything serious, but it sometimes happened. It certainly had during the Panama Canal cruise where Grant and Holden had met Callie and Melanie.

Callie had stepped up to the plate and proven she could manage under pressure. She was badass.

She also knew that it was time for Melanie to leave the room. She reached for Mel's hand. "Come on. Let's go upstairs."

Mel inhaled slowly and rose. She looked back toward Holden before leaving. "Will you..."

"I'm not leaving."

She nodded and then left with Callie.

Holden's heart went up those stairs, and he watched until she was out of sight.

Finally, he turned back to face Larson. Grant and Heath had stepped closer too.

"They found Trent Faust's body," Grant stated.

Holden turned toward Larson. "Fuck. I'm sorry, man." Holden knew Larson and the FBI agent had been more than colleagues. They'd been friends. Professional friends, but still friends.

Larson ran a hand over his face. "I figured they would. Been calling him ever since he didn't show up. He wouldn't avoid my calls. Han confessed to killing him. His prints were all over the place. His prints match the prints all over Professor Yang's hotel room."

Holden shook his head. "My God. The man was such an amateur. How did he think he was going to get away with this?"

"He didn't need to. He had a ticket to Beijing for tonight. That's why he so desperately needed the file. He was hand delivering it to whoever he works for in China."

"He's a U.S. citizen," Grant stated.

Larson shrugged. "Guess they paid him enough to give that up."

"I assume you've spoken to Faust's boss?" Holden asked Larson.

"Yes. Hershel. He claims he had no clue about any of this. He had no idea Trent was a traitor. He's opening an internal investigation, of course. Top on the priority list is who was

Trent working with in the U.S. government? Who gave him the data?”

Holden rose, and they all moved back to the kitchen table. He was bone tired. But they had a lot of work to do before he could consider sleeping.

Callie descended the stairs.

“Is she asleep?” Holden asked as she entered the kitchen area.

Callie nodded. “Yeah. Finally. I gave her a sleeping pill.”

“Good.” She needed it. She’d been running on adrenaline for hours. When her body stopped wanting to continue, Holden had finally talked her into getting some rest. He hated that Callie had been the one to go lie down with her and help her relax, but her kitchen had been a crime scene for the first several hours and now it was mission central.

Grant, Larson, Heath, and Holden were using her table as a workspace. They had four computers open and had fielded dozens of phone calls in the time since the police had left.

Callie set her hands on Grant’s shoulders and leaned over him to kiss him. “I’m going to sleep in the guest room, if that’s okay?”

Grant turned to wrap his arms around her and kiss her properly. “Go. You’re exhausted.”

“You are too,” she pointed out.

He smiled. “Yeah, but I’m used to this sort of thing. Get some sleep.”

As soon as she ascended the stairs, Grant turned his attention back to the table.

“Holy shit,” Larson exclaimed, his gaze on his computer. “I just found an email from Faust.”

“That ought to be interesting,” Holden growled.

“Fuck,” Larson yelled loud enough for all of them to cringe. “You have to see this.”

Holden shoved from the table and rounded to Larson’s side to read over his shoulder. They all did.

*Larson Aldrich,*

*You’re receiving this email because my time is up. I know you’ll be furious with me as you read this, and I’m sorry for that.*

*Several months ago, I was compromised. Not going to go into the details, but I did something I’m not proud of, and I’ve been subject to blackmail ever since.*

*I’m the one who stole the file in question to turn it over to the Chinese. I only know my contact by the name of Han. I was supposed to drop the jump drive in his satchel at a café. Unfortunately, the man he was sitting with, Yang, had a similar case, and that’s where I dropped the drive.*

*When Han realized he didn’t have the jump drive in his bag, he went to Yang’s hotel room to get it. That meeting did not go well for Yang. And by then the drive had already been inadvertently handed over to Melanie Hurn.*

*I’m sure by now you know the collateral damage. It was sheer coincidence that Yang gave that drive to Ms.*

*Hurn. The fact that you're connected to her is nothing more than a deeper coincidence.*

*I'm responsible for flipping Ms. Hurn's townhouse. When the drive was not located, I watched for her to return so I could retrieve it from her. As you know, she was under your protection. I never saw her other than briefly at the café.*

*When you called to tell me you had the drive, I thought I was finally going to get out of this mess. But alas, that is not going to happen. My blackmailer is tired of waiting. My time is up. I'm sending you this knowing I'm a dead man.*

*I never meant to harm anyone. I was trying my best to pay my blackmail and get my life back on track. I have failed. My only consolation is knowing you will get that encrypted data to the proper authorities. It will not end up in the hands of the Chinese. Contact my boss, Stedman Hershel. He will know what to do. He has no idea I was compromised. He has nothing to do with my bad decisions.*

*I'm sorry, my friend. I wish it didn't have to end this way.*

*Trent Faust*

“Jesus, fuck,” Holden muttered.

“Well, that answers a lot of questions,” Grant added.

Larson was already pulling out his phone, undoubtedly to call Faust's boss, Hershel, to fill him in on this latest development. He stepped into the living room to do so.



Heath rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I'll call Ajax and Ryker." He stepped out onto the back patio.

Holden sat back in his chair. "I guess it will be up to the FBI to chase this down. Obviously Han wasn't working alone. Someone hired him to do the dirty work. In addition, someone gave that data to Faust. He wasn't working alone either."

Grant nodded. "What matters now is that Melanie is safe."

"I'm also grateful your honey-do list didn't allow you to fix the window in the laundry room." Holden snickered. "I'll have someone come fix it first thing tomorrow."

"You gonna stick around?" Grant asked.

Holden glanced toward the top of the stairs where Melanie was sleeping on the second floor. "Not likely."

Grant sighed. "I'm sorry. She's stubborn."

"She's not alone." Holden ran a hand through his hair. He wanted to go upstairs, climb into bed with his woman, and hold her all night long. Except she was not his.

"Please tell me you two are going to talk and come up with a compromise," Grant growled.

"There's nothing to compromise about," Holden responded. He tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling. The truth was he'd never been as scared in his entire life as he'd been that afternoon driving back to this house.

If anything had happened to Melanie...

His mind was racing. He wished he could come up with any way he might be able to fix the rift between them and have her in his life.

Today had been her worst nightmare. The night she'd come home to find her place ransacked had been bad, but nothing compared to her being held hostage by a madman.

This wasn't a life she wanted to be involved in. How could he blame her? No matter what, Holden came with baggage. A lot of baggage. She had every right to not want to get on the train he was on.

He'd somehow managed to walk out her front door earlier today. It had nearly brought him to his knees though. How was he going to do it again?

He didn't think he could.

Grant set his elbows on the table and leaned in. "Then turn in your resignation, man."

Holden didn't flinch at the suggestion. He met his friend's gaze and stared.

"I mean it. Do it. It's a fucking job. It's not worth it."

Grant was right. It might not be quite that simple, but for the first time in over two years, that idea didn't sound ludicrous.

Grant kept talking. "You have so many fucking skills. You can find another job doing something safe, something nine to five that doesn't send you out of town and doesn't scare the fuck out of your woman."

Holden took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. He knew one thing for sure—the path of his life had taken a one-hundred-eighty degree turn today. He didn't know what it would look like when the chips fell, but not like this.

## CHAPTER 16



A heavy hand was draped over Melanie's waist. For a moment, she panicked, and then she inhaled and recognized Holden's scent.

She took several deep breaths, glancing at the clock on the nightstand. Five-thirty. She wondered how long he'd been next to her. She'd never heard him come into the room.

Granted, she'd taken a sleeping pill last night. She'd been dead to the world. And that had probably been her best decision all day. She'd finally conked out and slept hard.

Trying not to disturb Holden, she rolled onto her back so she could see him. Spooning was nice, but she needed to look at him.

He didn't stir, and she had just enough light coming in from the partially open blinds to see that he looked peaceful.

How the fuck was he able to sleep after what they'd been through yesterday? There was no way she'd be able to relax. Except for the hours the sleeping pill had bought her, she doubted she'd be sleeping again anytime soon.

Damn, he was gorgeous. Why did he have to be so fucking sexy? It made it impossible to resist him, and right now, resisting him was the last thing on her mind. To hell with the

repercussions. She needed him inside her. She needed the life-affirming proof that she wasn't dead. The kind of proof that only mind-blowing sex could accomplish.

She'd held out for days in his presence. This was probably the worst decision she'd ever made, but she didn't give a fuck right now. Maybe it would hurt more later when he was truly gone, but was that really possible?

Remembering the pain she'd felt yesterday afternoon when he'd driven away, she pursed her lips to keep from crying. It had felt like her heart had been ripped out of her body as she'd climbed into this bed yesterday and cried herself to sleep.

So what if she had sex with him? She wouldn't feel worse afterward. That had been a joke. He would still be just as unattainable, but at least she'd be physically satisfied.

She needed his mouth on her. His hands all over her. His cock inside her. She needed those things more than her next breath. Damn the consequences.

The man was wearing nothing but boxers. No doubt he'd simply taken all his clothes off and dropped them next to her bed. It wasn't like he had other clothes in her townhouse. Hell, she hadn't taken the time yesterday to assess if *she* even had other clothes in her home.

She assumed whoever had come to put everything to rights had washed her clothes and stuck them in drawers, but she honestly hadn't looked. Last night when she'd gone to bed, she'd stripped down to her panties and accepted the tank top Callie had slid over her head.

It would be convenient if she could will those two items of clothing away right about now, but she didn't want to wake Holden up by squirming around pulling off her shirt and

panties. She wanted him to come awake to the feel of her mouth and her hands.

Rolling toward him, she simultaneously kissed his chest and slid her palm down his abs toward his boxer-covered cock. The moment she wrapped her hand around his erection, he moaned.

A second later, he stiffened, his arm around her gripping her hip. “Mel?”

She flicked her tongue over his nipple and eased her hand into his boxers. God, it felt good to hold his cock in her hand. It had been too long. She remembered the hardness and every ridge like it was yesterday.

“Mel...” That one word was moaned as he slid his hand under her tank top and over her bare skin. It spanned most of her back, his thumb grazing the edge of her breast.

He let her stroke him for about ten more seconds—which was honestly longer than she’d expected—and then he pounced, rolling her onto her back and taking control.

Her hand slid out of his boxers, and a second after that, he had his fingers around her wrist and was hauling her arm above her head. He leaned over her and met her gaze, searching.

“Please... Make love to me.”

He continued to look at her, his chest rising and falling rapidly. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “More than sure. Please. Don’t make me beg. I need you inside me.”

“You just suffered a trauma.”

She groaned. “Don’t.”

He swallowed.

“Don’t sully this by trying to pretend I can’t make sound decisions. I’ve never been clearer. Take your boxers off and fuck me. Preferably hard.”

He gave her a slow half smile. “Hard?”

She nodded, her face heating. She’d never been bossy with him in bed. The man was bossy enough for both of them. He could be a total gentleman outside of the bedroom, pulling out chairs, opening doors, bringing her drinks, rubbing sunscreen on her...

God, that last thought made her nipples stiffen. If only they could go back to that cruise. That cabin with the two twin mattresses that kept separating because they had such wild sex. One of them inevitably ended up sleeping with half their body in the crack.

Melanie arched her chest, squirming in his grip. Her other hand was trapped between their bodies, but a moment later, he came up onto his knees, straddling her. He grabbed her free hand to join them together above her head and leaned over her.

His face was inches from hers. “You’re sure?”

She nodded.

“You’re not dreaming or half asleep or delusional from sleeping pills?”

“Jesus, Holden. Do you always argue with women who ask you to fuck them?”

He smirked. “Babe, women don’t ask me to fuck them.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t even try to make me believe that.”

“There’s a reason I haven’t had sex since I was with you, Mel. I don’t even make eye contact with other women. I’ve had no interest.”

She swallowed hard. This was huge. She knew it was, but he was blatantly reminding her.

“If we have sex right now, you will not soon forget it.”

“Good.” She was counting on that.

“We’re not doing it once either.”

“Good.” She nodded, eager now.

“I have to leave here in a few hours and deal with wrapping up this case. You know that, right?”

She nodded again, but she wasn’t breathing. Of course he would be leaving. She knew that. Nothing had changed between them.

Except also, everything had changed. Did he feel it too? She was afraid to ask. She needed to keep her thoughts to herself, shut off her brain from wandering to “tomorrow,” and enjoy whatever he gave her.

He rose onto his knees, grabbed the hem of her tank top, and tugged it over her head. Replacing his hands on top of hers, he stared down at her chest. “You have the best fucking tits on earth.”

She bit her lip. She loved when he worshiped her body, especially with his words.

He bent to kiss her, taking her mouth insistently, demanding entrance with his tongue, controlling her already.

She moaned into his mouth as he teased her, his tongue sliding up and down hers, reminding her what he could do

with that tongue inside her pussy. When she squirmed, he released her lips to lower his face to her breasts.

He nuzzled between them first before dragging his tongue over to one, flicking it over the tip, and then sucking her nipple.

Melanie whimpered, arching her chest toward him wantonly. Desperation consumed her. Her panties were soaked, and her pussy was pulsing with need.

Holden inched down her body as he switched his attention from one breast to the other. He worshiped her. He always had. It was the reason why sex with him was out of this stratosphere.

Every flick of his tongue, every squeeze of his fingers around hers, every breath from his mouth, every little noise he made, every time he rubbed his erection against her mound...

God, the reminders were overwhelming. She'd thought about him nearly every day of her life for all this time, but being under him again was so much more powerful.

“Holden...”

“Mmm” was his only response. He slid farther down her body, straddling her thighs and then her knees. His mouth trailed between her breasts and then lower until he swirled his tongue in her belly button.

She bucked when he eased his tongue along the edge of her panties, and whimpered when he stopped to lift his face. “Look at me, Mel.” His voice was rough, sexy, desperate.

She met his gaze.

“Can you keep your hands here while I fuck you with my tongue?”



She swallowed and shook her head. “Probably not.”

He chuckled. “I guess my cock will be out of your reach anyway. If you touch me with those talented fingers, I’ll come in an instant.”

“You said yourself you intended to come more than once,” she reminded him.

He gave her a slow grin. “True, but I’d rather the first orgasm not be premature.”

“Mine’s going to be,” she pointed out needlessly.

His smile grew. “Ah, but you will be having twice as many orgasms as me.” He released her hands, moved farther down her body, and pulled her panties over her hips. When she was free of them, he tossed them aside, lifted her knees, and spread them high and wide.

She lowered her arms to her sides and fisted the sheets. “Holden...” The simple act of holding her open like this was enough to make her nearly self-combust.

“Two seconds and already your hands are no longer above your head,” he pointed out as he lowered his face and breathed against her pussy.

“*Fuck...*”

“In a minute, babe. I want to savor this,” he teased. He wasn’t just breathing on her, he was also inhaling her. It was heady and drove her wild. He hadn’t even touched her yet.

“God, I’ve missed this,” he murmured. “I can’t believe you kept your pussy bare.”

“You liked it,” she whispered.

“Mmm. Definitely.”

“I liked it too. I liked to lie in bed at night, stroking my folds, pretending my fingers were yours.”

He groaned. “You’re killing me.” He lowered his face and dragged his tongue along her slit.

She cried out at the contact, every nerve ending coming alive and reminding her how good they were together. A flood of emotions consumed her as he dropped lower to suck her pussy into his mouth.

She arched and bucked. It was almost too much. She was so fucking sensitive. But he had a firm grip on her legs, and his hands shifted to her inner thighs, giving him even more leverage to hold her down.

When his tongue snaked into her pussy, her eyes rolled back. Nothing in the world felt as good as his mouth on her.

Holden thrust his tongue in and out of her, his nose rubbing against her clit.

“Oh, God.” She arched her chest and stiffened as the waves of her orgasm consumed her.

Holden was prepared. He knew her body well. He’d known she wouldn’t last long. At the perfect moment, he eased his tongue out and dragged it over her clit. Slowly. Sensually. Not putting too much pressure at first while she recovered.

She was panting, trembling, climbing again.

Her clit pulsed against his tongue, the aftermath of her orgasm regrouping to build into another. It was something she’d never accomplished alone. Holden was the only man she’d ever met who could drag multiple orgasms out of her, and he could do it in record time too.

“Give me another one,” he murmured against her.

She shuddered. She was so sensitive, and it felt so fucking good.

When he started tormenting her clit, rapidly switching from flicking it to circling it to laving it, she started shaking. Her release was right on the edge. If only he would...

“Holden... Fuck me already. Please.”

He lifted his face and stared at her. “Not yet, babe.” His fingers slid down her inner thighs, closer to her pussy. He parted her lower lips and blew on her soaked sensitive skin. “Do you want my fingers, Mel?”

She groaned. “Yes.” The word was breathless. She really wanted his cock, but she’d take his fingers instead for now if he was offering. She felt empty without him inside her. His tongue had reminded her how damn good it felt to be filled, but it hadn’t been enough. She wanted more.

“Are you sure?” He slid his thumbs along her labia, teasing her entrance. “I don’t think you’re ready yet. You’re so tight, babe. I think you need me to take my time.”

She let her head roll back and forth. “No. God. Holden. Please.” One word at a time was all she could manage.

His thumbs stroked deeper, inside her folds, not giving her enough though.

She grabbed his shoulders and held on to him. “Holden...” she begged again. She was on fire as if she hadn’t had a release in decades instead of thirty seconds ago. “Fuck me already.”

He ignored her and eased his thumbs up to her clit, pulling the hood back and then trapping the swollen nub between both

digits.

She cried out in frustration. Her clit was throbbing. So was her pussy. “You’re killing me.”

“I don’t think you’ll die from drawn-out foreplay, babe.”

“What if I do? You’ll feel bad.” She loved that they could talk like this during sex. The banter was fun. She’d missed this. She’d missed everything.

She was going to be destroyed when the sun came up, but she couldn’t think about that now. She couldn’t bring herself to care. If this was the only night she ever got with him for the rest of her life, she wanted it to be so damn hot she could use it as fodder for her masturbation sessions for years.

Holden suddenly pressed one thumb against her tight nub and thrust the other into her channel.

“Ahhhhh...” *More. God, more.* The words were stuck. Only the guttural sound escaped.

He thrust his thumb in and out. It wasn’t deep enough. It wasn’t full enough.

“Jesus, your pussy is tight,” he murmured before pulling his thumb out and replacing it with one long finger.

She arched her head back, trembling with the need to orgasm. He was tormenting her. He knew it.

For long seconds, he eased that one finger in and out of her, curling it forward and dragging it over her G-spot every time.

She held her breath, willing the orgasm to take her, but she needed a bit more, and he knew it. Faster or harder or deeper. Something.

“Gonna add another finger, babe,” he announced unnecessarily as he added his middle finger to thrust into her alongside his pointer. “So fucking tight... I’m going to detonate the moment I enter this pussy.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and let herself feel on sensory overload. His thumb against her clit wasn’t innocent. It was moving, pressing, dragging, tapping.

He added a third finger, causing a strangled noise to leave her mouth. When he pushed them as deep as possible and curled them to press against the soft spongy area along the top wall of her vagina, she tipped over the edge.

“Oh, God.” She groaned and bucked her body in his grip. The fact that he didn’t release her or allow himself to be thrown off task by removing his fingers made her even hornier.

“So sexy,” he murmured. “So fucking sexy.” When he was seemingly satisfied to have milked every drop of her orgasm from her, he finally removed his fingers.

He watched her face as he sucked her juices off him so thoroughly she almost started drooling. Sucking her essence off his skin while he held her gaze was just plain hot.

She suddenly needed his cock in her mouth more than her next breath. “Please let me suck you.”

He shrugged. “Mmm.” As if he wasn’t sure it was a good idea and was trying to decide if he would grant her wish. “Hmm. Okay. Arms above your head, Mel.”

She released the sheets from her fists and jerked them over her head. The position made her shiver. It forced her to arch her chest, leaving her feeling oddly more exposed, vulnerable.

Holden released her legs and climbed up to straddle her body once more. He inched forward until his knees were on either side of her head. When he wrapped a hand around his girth and stroked, she thought she might faint. It was so erotic.

“You want this?” He slid his thumb over the tip, gathering the precome, and then released himself to paint his arousal on her lips. “You sure you’re ready for my cock in your mouth?”

What she was beyond certain of was that his chatter was making her hotter by the second. “Yes.”

He leaned over her, bracing himself with one hand on the mattress while the other returned to wrap around his cock. He guided it, tapping her lips with it. “Open.”

She parted her lips for him and flicked the tip of his cock with her tongue.

“Jesus, woman. That mouth.”

“More,” she begged.

He must have been too far gone to continue to tease because he let her have his length, gently guiding it into her mouth.

She wrapped her lips around him and sucked, hollowing her cheeks.

“Fuck, Mel. That’s so good.” He didn’t push her or rush her. Somehow he had the wherewithal to keep from thrusting too deep. He kept one hand wrapped around his cock and only gave her what she could take.

She moaned around his erection as soon as it was as deep as she could manage, and Holden moaned right behind her. “I’m going to come, babe. You want me to pull out?”

She shook her head. She wanted to swallow him. Every drop. She wanted his salty taste to fill her senses.

Holden gritted his teeth as he eased in and out two more times and then he groaned right before he came.

Mel was ready. She loved the look on his face when he orgasmed. His eyes rolled back and his lips parted as he let it all go.

She swallowed around his length, welcoming the taste of him.

When he finally pulled out, she licked her lips and smiled up at him as he held himself aloft over her.

“Damn, babe...”

“Mmm. That was nice.”

He lifted a brow. “Nice?” He grabbed her around the waist and tickled her before flipping her onto her stomach. “Nice?”

She giggled, loving his playfulness.

He swatted her ass. “How nice?”

“Very nice.” She squirmed, but he steadied her with a hand at the small of her back and spanked her three more times before reaching between her legs and thrusting two fingers into her.

Mel cried out at the sudden intrusion, her pussy clamping down on him so hard she nearly came again.

All too soon, his fingers were gone. He nudged her legs wider and kneeled between them before massaging her butt with both hands. “I missed this ass more than anything.”

“More than my tits?” She twisted her head around to look at him over her shoulder.

“Mmm. Maybe not. Close call though.” He slid his hands up her sides and reached under her to cup her breasts. “These are amazing.” He leaned over to kiss between her shoulder blades. “Firm.” Another kiss. “Sensitive.” A quick pinch to her nipples. “Gorgeous.” His tongue licked a line up her back, making her shudder.

Just like that, she was flying again, needy and trembling. She hadn't come in days, so she was more desperate than usual. And her arousal grew as he massaged her back and butt cheeks with his amazing hands.

Her pussy was open wide, and he started sliding his thumbs down between her legs to stroke her lower lips.

“You ready for my cock, babe?”

“Yes. Please.” Her words were barely audible. It was hard to think.

“You're so fucking tight it's going to stretch.”

All she could do was groan in response. When she lifted herself up by the knees in silent supplication, he swatted her ass again. “I'm not going to take you from behind, Mel.”

“Why not?” she whined. It seemed like a great idea. It was one of her favorite positions. She loved how deep he could get, and she loved how her breasts swayed, her nipples dragging over the sheets. It was the most erotic position, in her opinion.

He grabbed her hips and gently rolled her to her back. When he dropped closer with his hands at the sides of her head, he held her gaze. “I want to be able to see your eyes while I'm inside you, Mel.”

She swallowed. The intensity of his stare was enough to make her whimper. “Okay.”



Holden never released her gaze as he once again pushed her knees up high and wide, lined his cock up with her entrance, and eased into her about an inch.

She arched her chest. “God... That feels so good. I...”

He pulled out and lodged back in. “You what?” He slid in farther.

She moaned.

Holden stopped teasing and thrust all the way to the hilt.

Mel gasped.

“Tell me what you were going to say, babe.” He kissed her lips gently before threading their fingers together and planting their combined hands above her head.

She licked her lips. “I forgot how good it feels,” she whispered.

“It is *nice*, isn’t it,” he teased.

She dug her heels into the mattress and lifted her hips, trying to lodge him deeper. “Very...”

Suddenly, he changed the pace, thrusting faster, harder. He dropped his lips to her nipple and sucked deeply.

She whimpered, loving the feel of his mouth wrapped around her tender nipple. They were going to be sore. She didn’t care.

He switched nipples, treating her other breast to the same care and reverence. When he popped free, he met her gaze again. “I want you to look at me while you come.”

She nodded. She wanted him to be looking at her when he came too. She loved the way he was so focused. His expression determined. The subtle nuances she remembered

were still there. His mouth parted when he got close, and she thought he might orgasm at any second, but instead, he stopped himself and reached between them to find her clit.

Her breath hitched at the sensitivity. “Holden...”

“Give me another one, babe. I’m not coming until you do.” He circled the little nub and flicked it over and over while easing in and out of her tight channel.

Her ardor grew until she couldn’t contain it, and she came so hard it almost hurt. Her channel was too tight and it gripped him spasmodically. She couldn’t hold his gaze any longer as she moaned out her release, eyes closed, head tipped back.

Holden started thrusting harder as soon as her orgasm began, and moments later, he let himself come also, grinding the base of his cock against her pussy.

She was definitely going to be sore, especially if they did this again. And she had to assume they would. She wasn’t sated yet. She doubted he was either.

## CHAPTER 17



“You owe me cookies,” Mel mumbled two hours later.

Holden was on one elbow, staring down at her, enjoying every inch of her delectable body. He lifted a brow. “Cookies?”

“Yeah. You said yesterday you were picking up my dry cleaning and bringing me cookies. I don’t need the dry cleaning too soon. It’s summer, but the cookies...”

He chuckled. “You saying you wished I had stopped?”

She shook her head. “Not a chance. And I appreciated the heads up. I got your message. Thanks for letting me know you were already aware of my situation and you were nowhere near as far away as I suspected. It helped keep me sane knowing you wouldn’t be long.”

She reached up and cupped his face. God, she loved his jawline. The wrinkle above his right eye that was probably the result of stitches when he was a child. She threaded her fingers in his hair and pulled him down for a kiss.

He kissed her languidly as if they hadn’t already kissed a hundred times in the early morning light. “I’m sorry. For everything,” he murmured against her mouth.

She slid her hand into his hair. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“My team isn’t usually duped like that.”

“I know.”

He sighed. The war was still brewing behind his eyes.  
“The fucking FBI...”

“I know,” she repeated. “It’s over. I’m fine.”

He dropped his forehead to hers and kissed her again. “I need to go.”

She nodded, ignoring the knot forming in her throat.

“I won’t be able to rest until we’re certain everyone involved in this crime has been apprehended. I suspect that’s not going to be easy. At least a few players are probably pretty high up the food chain.”

She nodded again, staring into his eyes.

His brow was furrowed with concern. “Grant’s probably waiting on me downstairs.”

“Mm hmm.” Grant and Callie had stayed the night. The sun was barely up, but Mel wasn’t surprised Holden and Grant were taking off.

“Callie will stay here with you.”

“I’ll be fine,” she lied. She would never be fine. She kind of wished Callie weren’t there because part of her would like to curl into a ball and cry for two days. She didn’t really feel like being comforted or doted on.

“Can I call you later?” he asked in a barely audible voice.

She shook her head, fighting back the tears. “I’ll be fine,” she repeated. There was a lot unspoken between them, but they both knew how this was going to go. Rip off the Band-

Aid. Clean break. Their second break. There were no other options.

“Melanie...”

She swallowed over the lump. “Go catch the bad guys.” She shoved at him playfully, trying to seem lighter than she felt. In reality she was so heavy she felt like an anvil.

Holden watched her as he backed into the bathroom. She held her breath as the shower turned on. Her heart was racing as she listened to him moving around. Or maybe it was breaking.

In a perfect world he would get into that shower every morning before heading to work. But they didn’t live in that make-believe world. They lived in a fucked-up world in which Holden fought bad guys and Melanie taught at a university.

He was fast. Five minutes later, he was back, pulling his clothes on while he watched her. When he was done dressing, he grabbed his gun off the nightstand and tucked it in the back of his jeans.

Gun.

The man she’d just spent the night with had kept a gun on the nightstand while they’d slept. This was not the life for her. She’d never touched a gun. She had no interest in doing so either. Nor could she visualize a life with someone who knew how to use dozens of types of weapons and had done so on numerous occasions.

He sat on the edge of the bed and leaned on one hand on the other side of her body. He licked his lips. “Mel...”

She reached up and covered his mouth with her fingers. “Don’t. Thank you. For this morning. I’ll cherish it. Go do your job.”

He stared. She worried he might argue. After a few seconds, he took a deep breath, gave her a curt nod, and kissed her forehead. And then he was gone.

She listened to his footsteps on the stairs, male voices when he met up with Grant in the living room, the sound of the alarm being unarmed and reset, the front door closing.

Suddenly, she sat upright, gasping for air, shaking, wanting to run down the stairs and stop him. She wanted to tell him not to go, tell him she loved him, beg him to come back. She didn't even know what she wanted.

A strange sound filled the room before she realized it was coming from her. She was sobbing. Gasping. The world was spinning out of control, and she was going to fly off of it and careen away from earth because she couldn't find anything to grab on to in order to stay. Gravity felt elusive.

A light came on in the hallway, and then Callie was there, crawling onto the bed, pulling her into her arms. "Oh, hon, I'm so sorry."

She rocked her while she cried. It seemed like hours before the two of them reclined back onto the mattress. Callie kept her arms around Melanie, not saying a word, which meant the world to Mel.

What was there to say?

It was over. It never should have happened, but now it was really over. The finality was so heavy.

She wasn't sorry they'd had sex. She would cherish the last few hours forever. She wasn't even sorry she'd ever met him. Live and love and all that. It hurt like hell, but she would survive this. She'd done it before. She could do it again.

Hours passed. She dozed off and on, jolting awake when nightmares descended. That hadn't happened while Holden had been in bed with her, but after he'd left, she'd felt isolated and alone. Even with Callie there.

Callie brought her juice and later tea. Toast. As if she were sick. She kind of was. She had a broken heart.

She knew she would have to talk to Callie eventually if for no other reason than to get it all out, but she wasn't ready, and Callie didn't push. Somehow she managed to take the day off work and kept Mel together with just enough glue that she didn't get dehydrated.

She needed time. Lots of it. She would let herself wallow for this one day, but then she needed to get her shit together and move on.

Millions of people did this all the time. She could survive the loss of love too. She just needed willpower.

## CHAPTER 18



*One month later...*

“Have you spoken to her?” Larson asked.

“Nope.” Holden zipped up his bag and looked around the upstairs bedroom of the Holt farmhouse to make sure he had everything.

“So, you’re just going to show up? And what? Grovel?”

“Basically.”

Larson leaned back and crossed his arms. He was smirking. “You sure are confident.”

“Yep.” He was marginally confident. It wasn’t as if he knew nothing about Mel or what she’d been doing for the last month. He spoke to Grant every day. Often he also spoke to Callie.

He knew Mel had put on a brave front for the past month, though Callie refused to elaborate. Mostly when he spoke to her she reminded him he was an idiot. She hadn’t done that for the first two and a half years, but in the last month she’d gotten hostile.



Holden hadn't told Callie a single thing about his plans because he hadn't wanted her to tell Mel, nor had he wanted her to meddle.

Grant knew, but he would never tell a soul, not even his wife.

Holden left the bedroom and headed downstairs. He dropped his bags by the front door and headed toward the kitchen. He knew he would at least find the two people who were the rocks behind the entire Holt Agency.

Frank and Nancy Holt had been foster parents to a lot of kids. When Ajax and Ryker had decided to start the Holt Agency and use this amazing couple's name, no one had been surprised. Thank goodness the old farmhouse was as huge as it was because people were coming and going from here all the time.

Several of the men who worked for the agency had built homes and lives on the land. A few were married. A lot of the guys came and went, staying in the numerous bedrooms upstairs.

Holden had been here for the better part of the past month, helping tie up all the loose ends from the stolen government data. It hadn't been easy. Two senators and a few high-level judges had been involved in the scandal.

Holden wanted the entire thing wrapped up with a tidy bow before he could rest easy. After all, as long as a piece of that chain was still out there, someone might harbor ill will toward Melanie even though her involvement had been accidental and involuntary. To say the least.

The very day he'd walked away from Melanie, he'd come into the office and informed everyone he would be resigning

as soon as this assignment was over. It had been the easiest decision of his life.

He had no idea why he'd waited so long. He'd known this job was a mistake for over two years, but something about that phone call informing him his woman was being held hostage by a madman had snapped him out of his long-term insanity. His mind had been made up. He'd never wavered since.

Surprisingly, no one had been shocked. Not even Frank Holt. Ajax and Ryker had simply nodded as if the information was as plain as the noses on their faces.

Holden was startled to find nearly everyone who was currently living in the main house or one of the surrounding houses standing in the kitchen. He shouldn't have been. They had all gathered to nonchalantly wish him good luck. Besides Nancy and Frank, the kitchen was packed. Ryker and Ajax of course, but also Keene, Heath, Larson, and Kenner. They all seemed to be hanging around waiting to say goodbye.

"I'm heading out," he told the room at large.

Frank came over to pat him on the back. "So, this job you've lined up... It's doing what again?"

Holden chuckled. "Installing security systems."

Frank laughed too. They'd had this conversation several times already. The man liked to get another chuckle out of it.

Nancy groaned and rolled her eyes as she wrapped her arms around Holden and hugged him tight. "Stay safe. Take care. Bring that sweet woman around to meet everyone when you get a chance."

"Like after she stops throwing things at you," Heath joked.

“Or even lets him in the front door,” Larson added. “That alarm system of hers is pretty tight and the window in the laundry room has been fixed. You aren’t getting in unless she lets you in.”

“You can always come back here if she doesn’t let you in the door,” Keene joked.

Kenner set his coffee mug down on the counter and nodded toward Holden. “Don’t forget to upsell those security systems, man. You’ll make at least ten or twenty extra bucks per call if you get them to add on a few extra window sensors or a motion detector.”

Nancy groaned again. “You boys cut it out. You all know he isn’t working for a company that installs small single-family home systems. Stop it.”

Holden didn’t give a fuck how much they harassed him. No one was going to dampen his mood. He was grinning and intended to remain that way.

The truth was he was beyond overqualified for just about any job he could apply to. He really didn’t give a fuck. The money he and the rest of the guys who’d been held hostage in Ethiopia had been awarded by the government for wrongdoing was enough to set them all up for life. Having a job was something he needed to keep busy.

Nancy was correct. The company he’d be working for mainly serviced businesses and high-end clients. They needed his expertise, not his installation skills. He would be visiting sites to make recommendations. He would not be carrying a screwdriver.

The job didn’t start for another month because those were his terms. He wanted to spend the rest of Melanie’s summer

vacation with her. He knew through the grapevine she'd resumed working on her research but also didn't intend to finish it by September.

In addition, he would not be working fulltime. He would be consulting, called in when they needed him for a job.

"You sure you have everything?" Nancy asked.

"I think so. If not, I'll get a new one." He smiled at her.

"We're gonna miss you," Ajax said, all kidding aside.

"He's right. But we understand. Some things are more important than a job," Ryker agreed.

"Stay in touch, son," Frank encouraged.

Holden took a deep breath and nodded toward everyone. He wasn't ordinarily an emotional guy, but leaving these people who were essentially his family was tough. Not because of the job. He didn't give a fuck about the job anymore. But he would miss his family. He and Melanie could visit, of course.

Hell, he hadn't been to his own house in a month either. He knew Melanie had enjoyed the view, so he figured they'd probably keep it as a vacation home, but he doubted she'd ever want to live there. She was a city girl with a job.

Someone could have taken him to the airport. They'd all offered. But he'd opted to use a driver so he could be alone with his thoughts and regroup. He still had no idea exactly what he might say to grovel when he arrived.



"Where are you?" Grant asked.

“Rental car about ten minutes from Melanie’s.”

“K. Warning. Something’s up with her.”

Holden stiffened. “Up how?”

“Don’t know. Callie says she thinks she was crying this morning when she called, and she’s tried to call her a few other times today, and Mel won’t take her calls.”

*Fuck.* Holden drew in a breath. “Well, I’ll be there shortly, and I’ll get to the bottom of it.”

In less than half an hour he expected to convince this woman she was his and start his perfect life. He realized she might need some convincing, but he didn’t intend to take no for an answer. He was sleeping in her bed tonight, not in a hotel or over at Grant and Callie’s place.

“You’re whipped,” Grant said.

Holden could hear the snicker in his voice. “Yep.” No sense denying it.

“Good luck.”

“Thanks. Talk to you later.” Holden needed the last few minutes to fortify himself and go over what he intended to say.

When he finally pulled into her driveway, he rubbed his palms on his jeans and climbed out of his car. He couldn’t know if she was watching him approach or not, so he wasn’t going to waste time.

He left his belongings in the car and headed for the front door. After ringing the doorbell, he faced the camera so she could clearly see who was outside before she answered. He certainly hoped she would never open the door to a stranger again.

Nothing. No answer.

He rang again. Maybe she was out back or in the shower. He could hear the doorbell from outside, so he knew it was working, and no one could possibly not hear it.

Ten seconds. Twenty. He was trying to decide what to do next when suddenly the door opened.

“Holden?” Her voice cracked and she looked like she’d been crying. “What are you doing here?”

“May I come in?”

She pursed her lips and stared at him for several seconds. He was starting to think she might not easily grant him permission to enter. Finally, she stepped back.

“I’m not...”

He stepped inside, shut the door, and pulled her into his arms. He didn’t feel like playing some silly game where he eased into her world, sat on her couch, drank a glass of iced tea maybe.

Nope. He was going all in. Now.

She didn’t return the hug, but she didn’t shove him away either.

He held her tight, rubbing her back. It felt good to have her in his arms even if she was out of sorts and obviously upset about something.

When he finally leaned back enough to meet her gaze, he didn’t release her. “Can you tell me why you’re crying, babe?”

“No. Why are you here?” she asked again.

“This is where I belong.”

Her eyes widened. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m sorry it took me a while to wrap things up, but I’m done. I quit my job. I left the Holt Agency. I have three large suitcases in the rental car.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out the ring he’d been carrying for three weeks, and held it up. “Got you a ring too.”

She gasped and stared at him blankly.

Still holding her close, he tucked her against his side so he could hold the small ring box with one hand and extricate the giant diamond with the other hand. He lifted her left hand and slid it into place.

She shifted her attention to her finger and the sparkling diamond that fit her perfectly. “What the hell?”

He lifted her chin and smiled at her. “This is where I belong,” he repeated. “Here. With you.”

“But your job...”

“Don’t give a fuck about my job. I promise I won’t be unemployed for long. I got something lined up starting in September.”

“Where?”

“Here, Mel. Less than ten minutes away. It’s a consulting job, so I won’t work fulltime, and I’ll be here for dinner every night.”

She swallowed. Her face was pale, and now that he looked closer, there were dark circles under her eyes, and she looked like she’d lost weight. Whatever was upsetting her hadn’t started today.

“You quit your job?” It was taking her a bit to grasp everything. Not to mention she was sluggish. That wasn’t

helping. She didn't look like she'd slept. She glanced around his face. "You grew a beard."

He chuckled before leading her over to the couch so he could sit, pull her down next to him, and keep her close. "Tell me why you're crying?" He was growing worried now. She didn't look like someone who was upset because her research wasn't going well. She couldn't possibly be crying over him. If she'd been despondent for the entire month, Grant would have told him.

"No. You talk some more."

He cupped her face and kissed her gently before lifting her hand and bringing her fingers to his lips. He kissed the tips and held the ring out to look at it. "I want you to marry me, Melanie."

"Are you going to ask me?" She was frowning.

"Sure. Later. After you tell me what's going on."

"Life, Holden. Life has gone on while you were catching the bad guys. It happens." Her voice was a bit sarcastic and even angry.

"I'm so sorry. I wish I could have been here sooner. I did not want any aspect of that case to follow you around and possibly bite you in the ass. I wanted every damn person involved behind bars before I could rest easy."

"And you succeeded?"

"Yes."

Her eyes widened. "Does this have anything to do with the arrest of two senators and a few other high-profile government officials?"

"Yes. They are all toast."



“I should be relieved.”

“You’re safe.”

She flinched and pushed back from him. A second later she was on her feet, putting some distance between them. “What the hell, Holden?” She ran a hand over her hair. It was a mess of curls.

Now that he was really looking at her with two feet between them, he could see she was wearing black yoga pants and a loose T-shirt. It looked comfortable. Not designed for style. Not that he cared. She looked good in anything and nothing. But she didn’t often lie around the house so casually.

“Are you sick?”

She let out a cackle that made the hairs on his arms stand up. And then she turned and started pacing. “I can’t believe you’re here. Did Grant or Callie talk you into this?”

“No, Melanie. They have nothing to do with me being here. I’m here because I love you so much it hurts. I’m here because I never want to spend another night without you in my arms.”

She stopped pacing to look at him, tears running down her face.

Maybe he needed to put a period on this even though she was clearly distraught. He slid off the couch and got on one knee. “Melanie Hurn—”

“No.” She took another step back, making his heart seize.

“Mel...” She was going to turn him down?

She left him kneeling there and stomped over to the kitchen table. A moment later she was back, holding something in her hand.

He couldn't see what it was. She had it wrapped in her palm. "You need to know something first."

Now she was scaring the fuck out of him.

She lifted her hand out for him to take the item. "We didn't use condoms that morning."

Seconds ticked by. Loud ones. His ears were ringing as he processed what she'd said and what she'd set in his palm.

*A pregnancy test.* He stared at the two lines of confirmation for a few seconds and then couldn't stop the huge smile that spread across his face. He lifted his gaze. "You're pregnant?"

Tears were falling down her cheeks again. She nodded as she continued to step back. "Apparently."

"Mel..."

She pulled the ring off her finger, took two strides toward him, and held it out. "You should hold on to this. Let things sink in," she whispered.

He shook his head. "No." He grabbed it from her, tugged her hand toward him, and slid it back on. "Don't take it off again," he insisted. He needed to make it absolutely clear how he felt.

"Holden..."

He held her closer, set her palm on his cheek, and met her gaze from his kneeled position. "Melanie Hurn, will you marry me?"

She swiped at the tears, but they kept falling. "I'm pregnant."

“People get married when they’re pregnant, babe. It happens.” He tried to sound lighter. “Let’s do it tomorrow.”

She gasped. “You can’t be serious. I haven’t even wrapped my head around this...” She waved her hand in front of her belly as if saying it out loud again would be unacceptable. “You’re being too calm.”

He set his other knee on the floor, pulled her closer, wrapped his arms around her waist, and kissed her stomach. “I’m still processing, but I’m elated, Melanie. The only reason I’m not fist pumping and handing out cigars is because you’re crying, so I’m trying to contain myself.”

More tears fell and she sobbed. “Holden...”

“I love you, Melanie. I know you love me too. I’m here. For good. I love this baby too.” He kissed her stomach again.

“I can’t have a baby right now,” she shrieked.

“Why not?”

“I’m in the middle of my career. How the hell would I take care of it? Do you have any idea what daycare costs?”

He chuckled. It was impossible not to.

“It’s not funny, Holden. I can’t raise a child by myself. I...” She stopped and stared at the ring he’d put on her finger. “You want to get married?”

“Yep. And we can afford daycare if that’s what you want, or I’ll quit the job I haven’t started and stay home if you prefer.” He hugged her closer. “We’ve got this.”

“There wasn’t even a we until like five minutes ago. I’m struggling to catch up,” she pointed out.

“I’m sorry. I wanted to surprise you. Probably not my best plan.”

She finally wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him back. “You’re here.” She rubbed his face. “You grew a beard,” she repeated.

“Yes.” He rose, sliding his hands up her body and then sitting on the couch again, this time pulling her onto his lap. He held her hand in his and tapped the ring. “We’re getting married and we’re having a baby.”

She was still crying but finally there was a small smile on her face. “Am I awake?”

He jiggled her hand. “Does your finger feel heavier?”

That gave him a bigger smile but then it fell. “I never wanted you to leave your career.”

“It wasn’t a task, Mel. You mean more to me than anything in the world. Once I got my head out of my ass, I realized there was only one option. There has only ever been the one option.”

“What if you miss it?”

“I won’t. It’s done. I’m done.”

“Doesn’t it feel a bit unbalanced that you quit your career for me? I didn’t do it for you,” she argued.

“This was never about careers, babe. I know that. It was about you worrying and being scared all the time. Your job doesn’t cause sleepless nights. Mine did. Your job doesn’t tear us apart six months out of the year. Mine did. It was a no-brainer.”

“You brought your things?”

“Everything I had with me. Most of my belongings are at my house in the mountains, of course, but I have clothes. Think you might let me have a drawer?”

She smiled again, wiping away tears. “Might as well empty them and take all of them. Nothing is going to fit me soon anyway.”

He stroked her cheek and rubbed under her eye. “Have you been sick?”

“Every fucking day for two weeks. I was in denial. I finally bought the stupid pregnancy test a few days ago, but I didn’t take it out of the box until this morning. I’m disgusting, Holden. All I’ve done so far today is sip tea and vomit. I haven’t had the energy to get dressed. I must look like I’m in a refugee camp.”

“You’re beautiful, and you’ll be beautiful every step of the way. Have you told anyone?”

She shook her head. “I couldn’t. I couldn’t even face it myself. I’ve only definitively known for about four hours. Most of that time I paced the house trying to imagine how the hell I was going to take care of a baby. Callie called like five times, but I put her off.”

“I spoke to Grant. They’re worried. We should call them.”

“Can we just have a few more minutes just the two of us first? They’ll end up driving over here, and then it will be this big thing and I’m still processing.” She leaned into him.

He rubbed her back, kissing the side of her face before angling her so he could kiss her mouth. “Take all the time you need. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Finally. The words he wanted to hear. The most beautiful words in the English language.

“You’re here,” she reiterated.

“You’re pregnant.” He grinned again and set his hand on her stomach. “We made a human.”

“We forgot to use a condom.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I mean, well, now I’m not really feeling so sorry.” He leaned her back so she was lying on the sofa and crawled over her, pushing her shirt up so he could kiss her stomach. “Hello, small person. This is your dad. I can’t wait to meet you.”

She threaded her hands in his hair, finally smiling for real.

“Do you hate the beard?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No. I like it.”

He rubbed his cheek against her stomach. “Then I’ll keep it.”

When he tipped his head back, she said, “Yes.”

He lifted a brow. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, I’ll marry you.”

That was all he needed to hear. Everything in his world clicked into place. A peace washed over him. He was right where he was meant to be. He set his cheek on her stomach and closed his eyes.

He was one very lucky man.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I hope you're enjoying the Holt Agency series. KaLyn Cooper and I are so excited to give all the rescued SEALs from our Shadow SEALs books their own stories. Are you ready for more?

### **Holt Agency:**

Rescued by Becca Jameson

Unchained by KaLyn Cooper

Protected by Becca Jameson

Liberated by KaLyn Cooper

Defended by Becca Jameson

Unrestrained by KaLyn Cooper

## ALSO BY BECCA JAMESON

### **Roses and Thorns:**

Marigold

Oleander

Jasmine

Tulip

Daffodil

Lily

### **Shadowridge Guardians:**

Steele by Pepper North

Kade by Kate Oliver

Atlas by Becca Jameson

### **Blossom Ridge:**

Starting Over

Finding Peace

Building Trust

Feeling Brave

Embracing Joy

Accepting Love

Blossom Ridge Box Set One

Blossom Ridge Box Set Two

### **The Wanderers:**

Sanctuary

Refuge

Harbor

Shelter

Hideout

Haven



**Surrender:**

Raising Lucy

Teaching Abby

Leaving Roman

Choosing Kellen

Pleasing Josie

Honoring Hudson

Nurturing Britney

Charming Colton

Convincing Leah

Rewarding Avery

Surrender Box Set One

Surrender Box Set Two

Surrender Box Set Three

**Open Skies:**

Layover

Redeye

Nonstop

Standby

Takeoff

Jetway

Open Skies Box Set One

Open Skies Box Set Two

**Shadow SEALs:**

Shadow in the Desert

Shadow in the Darkness

**Holt Agency:**

Rescued by Becca Jameson

Unchained by KaLyn Cooper

Protected by Becca Jameson

Liberated by KaLyn Cooper

Defended by Becca Jameson

Unrestrained by KaLyn Cooper

**Delta Team Three (Special Forces: Operation Alpha):**

Destiny's Delta

**Canyon Springs:**

Caleb's Mate

Hunter's Mate

**Corked and Tapped:**

Volume One: Friday Night

Volume Two: Company Party

Volume Three: The Holidays

**Project DEEP:**

Reviving Emily

Reviving Trish

Reviving Dade

Reviving Zeke

Reviving Graham

Reviving Bianca

Reviving Olivia

Project DEEP Box Set One

Project DEEP Box Set Two

**SEALs in Paradise:**

Hot SEAL, Red Wine

Hot SEAL, Australian Nights

Hot SEAL, Cold Feet

Hot SEAL, April's Fool  
Hot SEAL, Brown-Eyed Girl

**Dark Falls:**

Dark Nightmares

**Club Zodiac:**

Training Sasha

Obeying Rowen

Collaring Brooke

Mastering Rayne

Trusting Aaron

Claiming London

Sharing Charlotte

Taming Rex

Tempting Elizabeth

Club Zodiac Box Set One

Club Zodiac Box Set Two

Club Zodiac Box Set Three

**The Art of Kink:**

Pose

Paint

Sculpt

**Arcadian Bears:**

Grizzly Mountain

Grizzly Beginning

Grizzly Secret

Grizzly Promise

Grizzly Survival

Grizzly Perfection

Arcadian Bears Box Set One

Arcadian Bears Box Set Two

**Sleeper SEALs:**

Saving Zola

**Spring Training:**

Catching Zia

Catching Lily

Catching Ava

Spring Training Box Set

**The Underground series:**

Force

Clinch

Guard

Submit

Thrust

Torque

The Underground Box Set One

The Underground Box Set Two

**Wolf Masters series:**

Kara's Wolves

Lindsey's Wolves

Jessica's Wolves

Alyssa's Wolves

Tessa's Wolf

Rebecca's Wolves

Melinda's Wolves

Laurie's Wolves

Amanda's Wolves

Sharon's Wolves

Wolf Masters Box Set One

Wolf Masters Box Set Two

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The Game

The Prize

Claiming Her Box Set

**Emergence series:**

Bound to be Taken

Bound to be Tamed

Bound to be Tested

Bound to be Tempted

Emergence Box Set

**The Fight Club series:**

Come

Perv

Need

Hers

Want

Lust

The Fight Club Box Set One

The Fight Club Box Set Two

**Wolf Gatherings series:**

Tarnished

Dominated

Completed

Redeemed

Abandoned

Betrayed

Wolf Gatherings Box Set One

Wolf Gathering Box Set Two

**Durham Wolves series:**

Rescue in the Smokies

Fire in the Smokies

Freedom in the Smokies

Durham Wolves Box Set

**Stand Alone Books:**

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Guarding the Truth

Out of the Smoke

Abducting His Mate

Wolf Trinity

Frostbitten

A Princess for Cale/A Princess for Cain

Severed Dreams

Where Alphas Dominate

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Becca Jameson is a USA Today best-selling author of over 125 books. She is well-known for her Wolf Masters series, her Fight Club series, and her Surrender series. She currently lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband and her Goldendoodle. Two grown kids pop in every once in a while too! She is loving this journey and has dabbled in a variety of genres, including paranormal, sports romance, military, and BDSM.

A total night owl, Becca writes late at night, sequestering herself in her office with a glass of red wine and a bar of dark chocolate, her fingers flying across the keyboard as her characters weave their own stories.

During the day—which never starts before ten in the morning!—she can be found jogging, running errands, or reading in her favorite hammock chair!

*...where Alphas dominate...*

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